



Around the World

in more than

80 SF-Stories

*Saphir im Stahl*

BookRix

*Erik Schreiber (Hrsg)*

# *Around the World in more than 80 SF- Stories*

Vorspann

*Around the World*

*in more than  
80  
SF Stories*

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*I hope, I never forget someone*

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*Liebe Science Fiction Freunde,*

*es freut mich sehr, euch heute das internationale e-book Around the World in more than 80 SF-Stories überreichen zu dürfen. Ich möchte mich bei Euch allen für die Zusammenarbeit herzlich bedanken. Ohne Euch wäre dieses Projekt nicht möglich geworden.*

*Als ich 2013 das Projekt startete, hätte ich nicht gedacht, dass es mir gelingen würde. Ich lese seit Jahrzehnten phantastische Literatur mit Schwerpunkt Kurzgeschichten. Dabei war ich immer ein wenig enttäuscht, dass hauptsächlich englischsprachige Erzählungen übersetzt und veröffentlicht wurden. Nur selten kam etwas aus dem europäischen Ausland oder gar von anderen Kontinenten in Deutschland an.*

*Als ich 2010 meinen Verlag Saphir im Stahl gründete, wollte ich vor allem die Bücher und Erzählungen veröffentlichen, die mir am Herzen lagen. Doch erst im Jahr 2013 nahm ich die Idee wieder auf, einen internationalen Kurzgeschichtenband zu veröffentlichen. Die Idee war schnell geboren, die Umsetzung hingegen war gar nicht so einfach, trotz Internet. Ich meldete mich in den unterschiedlichsten Gruppen der sozialen Netzwerke an um so interessierte Autoren zu finden. Über Netzzeitungen versuchte ich die Leser aus den verschiedenen Ländern für die Idee zu gewinnen, doch die entsprechenden Redakteure brachten nur in den seltensten Fällen meinen Aufruf oder berichteten über das Projekt. Auch die vielen Science Fiction Clubs, die ich im Internet fand, reagierten zurückhaltend. Webseiten die sich der Phantastik verschrieben haben, fanden meine Idee toll und halfen in der Verbreitung. Ganz anders war es bei den Autoren und SF-Interessierten, die ich direkt ansprechen konnte. Eurer Begeisterung und Hilfe ist es zu verdanken, dass meine Idee nun Wirklichkeit wird. Ich kann nicht in Worten ausdrücken, wie stolz ich auf das Projekt und Euch bin. Vielen Dank dafür.*

*Aus diesem Projekt heraus werde ich verschiedene Romane und Kurzgeschichten als Buch herausgeben. Die Romane und Novellen sind bereits übersetzt und werden in der nächsten Zeit veröffentlicht. Damit kommt meine zweite Idee, den deutschen Lesern auch SF aus anderen Ländern vorzustellen, auf Papier.*

*Dear friends of science fiction literature*

*I am very pleased to present you today the international e-book Around the world in more than eighty SF-stories. I want to say thanks to all of you for your contributions. Without you this project would not exist.*

*The time 2013 I started the project I did not really belief in a success. I am reading since more than twenty years fantasy literature, centering on short stories. I felt always disappointed by the fact, that mainly english spoken stories are translated and published. Only seldom arrived something from the europaen sector or even from other continents in Germany.*

*The time 2010 I started my publishing company Saphir im Stahl my intention was to edit first of all books and stories I like. In the year 2013 I picked up again the idea to*

publish a international collection of short stories. The idea appeared fast, but the realization was not easy at all, even with the help of internet. I contacted a lot of different groups in the social networks in order to find authors interested in such a project. With the help of Webjournals I tried to find interested readers willing to invest in this idea, but the involved editors followed very seldom my request or reported about the project. Also the reaction of the lot of science fiction clubs I found in the internet was disappointing. But with good luck there was quite a difference with the websites concerning fantasia, there reaction quite positive and they helped me in cover ground. It was also different with the authors and science fiction fans I was able to contact directly. It is the enthusiasm and support of you all which makes my idea real. I cannot express my feelings, how proud I am of you and the project. All my thanks to you.

Based on this project I intend to publish several novels and short stories as books. The novels are already translated and will be published in short time. This brings me to my second idea, to introduce the germen readers also with science fiction of other countries, also as books.

Queridos aficionados de la ciencia-ficción:

Con mucho placer os entrego hoy el libro electrónico internacional *Around the World in more than 80 SF-Stories*. De todo corazón, quiero dar las gracias a todos los que con su colaboración hicieron posible que este proyecto se realizara.

A decir verdad, al iniciar el proyecto, en el año 2013, no estaba convencido de que pudiera llevarlo a término. Desde hace décadas suelo leer literatura fantástica, sobre todo en formato de cuentos cortos, pero siempre me sentí decepcionado por el hecho de que la mayoría de ellos habían sido publicados o traducidos del inglés. En muy raras ocasiones nos llegaban a Alemania algunos relatos europeos, y aún menos de otros continentes.

Al fundar mi editorial *Saphir im Stahl* en el año 2010 tenía la intención original de publicar libros y cuentos que me resultaran personalmente importantes. Pero en 2013 empecé a pensar en la posibilidad de publicar un volumen con cuentos internacionales. La idea se abrió paso de golpe, pero llevarla a destino no resultó tan fácil, a pesar de internet. Me registré en diversos grupos de redes sociales para encontrar autores interesados. Por medio de los periódicos electrónicos trataba de interesar en la idea del proyecto a los lectores de países diferentes, pero los redactores apenas publicaron mi convocatoria ni informaban mucho sobre el proyecto. Incluso muchas asociaciones de ciencia-ficción que encontré en internet parecían guardar reservas. Algunas páginas web dedicadas a la literatura fantástica apreciaron mi idea y me ayudaron a esparcirla. Las cosas fueron diferentes con los autores y aficionados a la ciencia-ficción que logré contactar en persona. El hecho de que mi idea inicial finalmente se haya hecho realidad se debe a vuestro entusiasmo y apoyo. No puedo expresar lo orgulloso que me siento con el proyecto y con vosotros. ¡Muchísimas gracias!

De este proyecto surgirán diversas novelas y relatos en papel. Ya están traducidos y se

*publicarán en breve. Con ello realizaré otro deseo: presentarle a los lectores alemanes más textos de ciencia-ficción de países extranjeros, en libros análogos.*

**1.**

# Germany

## Achim Mehnert Der Klang der Stille

Stille blieb hinter Jakob zurück, und Stille erwartete ihn. Nachdem er die Straße überquert hatte, bog er in einen schmalen Pfad ein, der an beiden Seiten von Nussbäumen und Kastanien gesäumt war und an einem verwaisten Kinderspielplatz vorbeiführte. Kiesel knirschten unter seinen Füßen. Ein wohltuendes Geräusch, ebenso wie das sanfte Säuseln des Windes im Schilfgras, das diese Uferseite des Weihers überwuchert hatte.

Die Stille war nicht vollkommen. Diese Feststellung war immer wieder tröstlich. Sie triumphierte nicht über ihn. Auch nicht über die Stadt. Sie war wie ein machtvolles, dämonisches Wesen, aber weit davon entfernt, unwiderruflich oder gar endgültig zu sein.

Jakob hielt inne. Am Fuß der Rutsche lag ein blaues Plastikeimerchen, das eine Handbreit mit Sand gefüllt war. Eine Schaufel steckte darin, so knatschrot, dass sie ihm jeden Tag aufs Neue ins Auge stach. Manchmal kam sie ihm vor wie eine rote Ampel vergangener Zeiten, vor der er einfach stehen bleiben musste, ob er wollte oder nicht. Einmal war er versucht gewesen, sie an sich zu nehmen, doch er hatte davor zurückgeschreckt. Sie gehörte einem Kind. Hatte einem Kind gehört. Hob er sie auf, war das fast wie Diebstahl. Er brachte es nicht über sich, obwohl er genau wusste, dass niemals wieder ein Kind herkommen würde, das dieses für kleine Hände gemachte Schäufelchen mitnahm. Dieses Spielzeug aus Plastik, das längst jeden Zweck verloren hatte.

Plastik verrottet nicht, schoss es Jakob durch den Kopf. Welch ein Segen für die Menschheit.

Für die Menschheit. Das war gut. Jakob lächelte gequält. Die Menschheit ging der Stadt am Arsch vorbei, und nicht nur der, sondern der ganzen Welt. Ihm ebenfalls, wenn er ehrlich war. Den Drang nach Gesellschaft wurde er trotzdem nicht los. Hin und wieder nur Gesichter sehen, Münder, die Worte formten. Züge, in denen ein Lächeln lag, das ihm galt. Diese Sehnsucht schien unvergänglich zu sein.

Er hielt inne und schloss die Augen, um seine visuelle Wahrnehmung auszuschalten. Manchmal gelang es ihm, die Stimmen der Kinder zu hören, ihr Geschrei und Gezanke. Ihr Lachen und all die Fröhlichkeit, die den Spielplatz einst erfüllt hatte. Dazu die mahnenden Worte der Eltern, sich nicht mit den Nachbarkindern zu streiten. Die Wünsche nach einem Eis aus dem kleinen Lieferwagen, der bei Sonnenschein mit bimmelnder Glocke vorfuhr, welche wiederum die Enten auf dem Weiher zu heftigem Schnattern animierte. Heute vernahm Jakob nur das Rauschen in seinem Kopf, das schon früher zuweilen aufgetreten war, als es noch einen Arzt gegeben hatte, den er konsultieren konnte. Er schlug die Augen auf und mahnte sich zur Eile. Er war nicht wegen des Spielplatzes hergekommen oder gar wegen des knatschroten Schäufelchens, sondern um der Aufführung im Biergarten beizuwohnen.

Jakob ging weiter und beschleunigte seine Schritte. Das Schnarren der Kiesel blieb hinter ihm zurück, zumindest auf dem asphaltierten Wegstück zwischen den von Laub bedeckten Blumenrabatten und der verwilderten Anlegestelle. Ein halbes Dutzend Tretboote waren an der Pier angebunden, die ein paar Meter weit in den Weiher



hineinreichte. Sie funktionierten, ausnahmslos. Jakob hatte sie ausprobiert, eins nach dem anderen. Er hatte ein paar Runden gedreht und sie wieder angebunden. Zwar hätte er sie treiben lassen können, doch ihre Verfügbarkeit am Verleih vermittelte ihm den Eindruck, dass sie auf Kundschaft warteten. Ein gutes Gefühl, wenn auch ein trügerisches.

So wie der aufgeplatzte und von der Sonne gebleichte Asphalt trügerisch war. Die Risse, manche von Moos kaschiert, waren gefährliche Stolpersteine, besonders wenn man wie Jakob nicht allzu sicher auf den Beinen war. Wenige Meter weiter setzte sich der Kieselbelag fort. Der war ihm lieber, weil er ihn an den Schrebergarten erinnerte, den er besessen hatte, als die Stadt noch Leben trug. Die Kiesel reichten bis in den Biergarten hinein. Sie kamen Jakob vor wie ein Teppich, auf dem er nicht ging, sondern schwebte. Hingetragen zu dem kleinen Tisch gleich am Wasser, der immer für ihn reserviert war. Er kam keinen Moment zu früh, stellte er fest, kaum dass er sich niedergelassen hatte. Fanfarenstöße setzten ein, sphärische Musik erklang.

Etwa ein Drittel der Tische war besetzt. Jakob ließ den Blick über die Besucher wandern, die daran saßen. Die meisten erwartungsvoll und mit der gleichen Vorfreude wie er. Andere gleichgültig. Ein paar sogar überrascht, so als hätten sie der Aufführung noch nie zuvor beigewohnt. Dabei saßen sie täglich hier, genau wie er. Er kannte jeden einzelnen von ihnen, auch die Sitzverteilung, die sich niemals änderte. Jakob brauchte nicht hinzusehen, um zu wissen, wer wo welchen Platz innehatte.

Da war die alte, ausgemergelte Dame mit dem Gehstock, die ihren Blick keine Sekunde von den Tanzenden nehmen konnte. Der beliebte Schnauzbarträger mit der schwarzen Lederhose und den Tätowierungen auf beiden Unterarmen, die einem schon lange nicht mehr existierenden Fußballverein unverbrüchliche Treue schworen. Die Gruppe miteinander scherzender Studenten, die in gespannte, fast fixierte Aufmerksamkeit verfielen, sobald das Schauspiel begann. Das verliebte, junge Paar, das nur Augen füreinander hatte und Jakob immer wie ein Fremdkörper in dieser Runde vorgekommen war. Er glaubte nicht, dass er sich jemals mit ihnen würde anfreunden können.

Er nickte der alten Dame zu, doch sie ignorierte ihn. So wie sie es immer tat. Tagein, tagaus, ohne auch nur ein einziges Mal von ihm Kenntnis genommen zu haben. Er bekam mit, wie der Schnauzbärtige sich zu den Verliebten umdrehte und ihnen durch ein Zischen zu verstehen gab, sie mögen sich dem Anlass entsprechend zurückhalten. Jakob konnte dem Dicken nur zustimmen, weil die Künstler wie aus dem Nichts in das blumengeschmückte Rondell gelaufen kamen und der Tanz begann. Für eine Minute schwieg das junge Paar, vermutlich aus Angst vor dem tätowierten Altrocker, dann hatte es die Warnung vergessen und kehrte zurück zu seiner Flirterei. So wie gestern. Und vorgestern. Und wie jeden Tag davor.

Bis heute hatte Jakob nicht herausgefunden, was für Musik gespielt wurde. Das Sphärische erinnerte ihn ein wenig an die Meisterwerke von Pink Floyd, die progressiven Elemente noch stärker an die frühen Genesis oder an Marillion. Beides war dazu angetan, ihn mitzunehmen und in die Vergangenheit zu entführen. Jakob legte den Kopf in den Nacken, schloss die Augen und ließ sich von der Musik tragen.

Die Sekunden wurden zu Minuten, und er spürte nicht, wie die Zeit verging. Er war dem Alltag entrissen, dem Trott und der Trostlosigkeit, die jeden einzelnen Tag bestimmten. Diese Art von Befreiung war nicht weniger wertvoll als der Genuss der Musik, deren Klangteppich Jakob schweben ließ. Zumindest bis das ungenierte Kichern der

Liebenden einsetzte. Jakob öffnete die Augen. Die Studenten ließen sich von dem Getuschel nicht stören, und die alte Dame war der Welt entrückt. Der Schnauzbartrträger zeigte sich weniger duldsam. Er warf dem jungen Paar einen Blick zu, der beide auf der Stelle umgebracht hätte, würde der alte Spruch einen Funken Wahrheitsgehalt besitzen.

Wenn Blicke töten könnten.

Die Tänzer setzten ihre Darbietung fort, ohne sich von den Störenfrieden ablenken zu lassen. Ihr Tanz ging weiter, wurde rasanter, leidenschaftlicher und strebte dem Höhepunkt entgegen. Sie gerieten in schiere Ekstase, während Jakob versuchte, sich wieder auf die Musik zu konzentrieren. Es gelang ihm nicht. Er rückte seinen Stuhl zurecht und produzierte dabei ein Schleifen, dessen Disharmonie jedes andere Geräusch übertönte. Die Tänzer zeigten sich auch davon unbeeindruckt. Jakob winkte dem jungen Paar zu.

»Könnt ihr nicht endlich eure Klappe halten?«

Die Liebenden reagierten nicht auf seine Verärgerung. Das taten sie nie. Sie benahmen sich so unverschämt, als seien sie allein. Der Junge begann zu flimmern, dann das Mädchen. Jakob zuckte zusammen, als sie gleich darauf durchscheinend wurden und sich zu verflüchtigen begannen. Zu früh, schoss es ihm durch den Kopf. Es geschah viel zu früh. Die Vorstellung war noch nicht zu Ende. Jakob schaute hierhin und dorthin, hektisch und verständnislos. Ungläubig. Denn die plötzliche Veränderung war umfassend.

Das Lächeln auf dem Gesicht der alten Dame verwehte und nahm die ausgemergelte Gestalt und ihren Gehstock mit. Von dem Schnauzbartrträger mit der Lederhose blieb nicht mehr übrig als ein Vornüberbeugen, das mitten in der Bewegung endete. Sonst erhob er sich, mächtig und theatralisch, mit wedelndem Zeigefinger, um die Verliebten mit Nachdruck zur Ruhe zu mahnen. Heute nicht, denn er war fort. Ebenso fort wie die Studenten, die leere Stühle zurückließen und den schalen Geschmack einer Veränderung, die Jakob entsetzte.

Schlimmer jedoch war die Auflösung der Tänzer. Ihr eben noch lebendiges Spiel erstarrte zu Regungslosigkeit. Zu Nichtsein. Für ein paar quälende Augenblicke hielten sich ihre Silhouetten in der Wirklichkeit wie Anker, die sie an diesen Ort binden wollten. Jakob hegte die verwegene Hoffnung, sie mögen sich wieder stabilisieren, doch sie verflüchtigten sich zu diffusen Schemen bar jeglicher Substanz, die schließlich vollends vergingen. Die Musik hatte geendet. Kein Ton erklang mehr, nur Stille blieb zurück. Stille um ihn herum und Stille in seinem Kopf.

Jakob erhob sich. Er fühlte sich um Jahre gealtert und bekam kaum mit, dass der Stuhl umkippte. Er wusste nicht, wie oft er die Darbietung angeschaut und sie genossen hatte. Sie war nie vorzeitig abgebrochen, hatte stets den Höhepunkt der Frivolität erreicht und schließlich erst unter dem Applaus der Zuschauer geendet. Jakob stand regungslos da und starrte auf das Rondell, in dessen Inneres die Projektion geworfen wurde. Seit Jahr und Tag, immer zur selben Stunde, einst für lebende Menschen wie Jakob, denen es möglich gewesen war, mit den Hologrammen zu interagieren. Dieses Zusammenspiel funktionierte längst nicht mehr, doch auf den Tanz der formarrangierten Lichtphotonen war Verlass gewesen.

Bis heute.

Jakob sah den Beginn einer Tragödie voraus. Er ahnte, was geschah. Die Energiereserven der Batterien neigten sich dem Ende entgegen. Ein paar Mal noch würde

das Schauspiel beginnen, möglicherweise von Aufführung zu Aufführung kürzer geraten. Nur um eines nicht fernen Tages ganz auszubleiben. Auf einmal kam ihm das Rondell trostlos vor, einem unnützen Museumsstück gleich, wie es auch die Stadt war. Die schmückenden Blumenrabatten ähnelten unversehens Unkraut und dem Wildwuchs in den Straßen.

»Hallo?«, rief er, wohl wissend, dass niemand da war, der ihn hören konnte. Der Klang des Wortes verwehte wie jener der Musik. Jakob lauschte ihm nach, als längst nichts mehr zu hören war außer dem Säuseln des Windes.

Jakob schlurfte auf den Weg hinaus, das Schnarren der Kiesel ignorierend, die in ihrer eigenen Sprache zu ihm sprechen wollten. Er hatte keinen Blick übrig für das sich wiegende Schilfgras, auch nicht für den Kinderspielplatz mit der Rutsche. Nicht einmal für das blaue Plastikeimerchen und das knatschrote Schüffelchen. Er ging achtlos an ihnen vorbei, passierte Nussbäume und Kastanien und fand sich auf der Straße wieder.

Die Fenster der verwitterten Häuserfronten stierten ihn an wie tote, düstere Augen. Verrostende Autowracks, aus denen Gestrüpp wuchs, säumten den Bordstein. Jakob drehte sich nach links, wandte sich nach rechts. Die Stadt sah überall gleich aus. Er blieb mitten auf der Straße stehen und schloss die Augen. Mit bebenden Lippen versuchte er das Lied anzustimmen, zu dem die Tänzer ihre Darbietung begannen. Obwohl tausendmal gehört, wollte es ihm nicht gelingen.

Frank Lauenroth Touch down

Richard Miske war ein echter Nerd. Insofern erschien ihm ein Job bei der ESA die richtige Wahl. Richard war ein überaus schlauer Kopf, Programmierer auf höchster Ebene, schnell in der Ausführung, fehlerfrei im Code. Er wäre ein regelrecht konformer Mensch gewesen – doch da war noch sein Gewissen.

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Es geschah – natürlich – während der Wochenendschicht. Wenn irgendwas in seiner Abteilung geschah, dann am Wochenende. Sein Team betreute die achtzehn Galileo-Satelliten, die das

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europäische Konkurrenzsystem zum amerikanischen GPS ausmachten. Die Satelliten waren eigentlich auf friedlichen Bahnen unterwegs. Doch nach dem Zusatzbeschluss des Europäischen Parlaments von 2008 durften auch sie im Rahmen der europäischen Sicherheits- und Verteidigungspolitik zu Überwachungszwecken herangezogen werden. Besuch von Seiten der Militärs war Richard nicht fremd. Er hatte eine grundsätzliche Verschwiegenheitsklausel in seinem Vertrag. Was diese Institutionen jedoch nicht davon abhielt, ihn bei jeder sich bietenden Gelegenheit ein neues seitenlanges Pamphlet unterschreiben zu lassen.

Der Alarm ging los. Laut. So laut, dass Richard sofort die Assoziation blutender Ohren hatte. Es dauerte unerträgliche fünf Sekunden, bis jemand den erlösenden Knopf

betätigte.

„Was ist los?“ rief Richards Schichtleiter Dieter Koslowski, der sich immerhin die Mühe machte, dafür seinen Hintern anzuheben und den Gang hinunter zu schauen. Richard hob abweisend die Hand. Die Software, die die Bilder automatisch auswertete, hatte für den Alarm gesorgt. Er überprüfte, welche Bilder den Alarm ausgelöst hatten und fand die Ursache unerwartet leicht. Doresa, einer der Galileo-Satelliten, erfasste Bilder von einem Meteor, der in Sibirien niedergegangen war.

Ein Glück dachte Richard, mitten im Nirgendwo!

Er berichtete Dieter davon. Der untersetzte Mann in den späten Vierzigern hatte fast sein ganzes Leben bei der ESA verbracht. Mittlerweile gehörte er zum lebenden Inventar.

„Ich geb' das gleich mal an die Abteilung für seismische Aktivitäten.“ Dieter griff zum Telefonhörer. „Die sollen das bestätigen.“

„Warum hat uns niemand vor dem Meteoriten gewarnt?“, fragte Richard mehr sich selbst als Dieter. Auf der Suche nach weiteren Hinweisen überprüfte er die anderen Satelliten. Zwei von ihnen bewegten sich auf ähnlichen Bahnen wie Doresa. Doch als er deren Aufzeichnungen über demselben Gebiet sichtete, fand er keine Hinweise auf einen Einschlag. Er spulte vor und zurück, verglich die Koordinaten. Nichts!

Dieter hatte derweil sein Telefonat beendet. „Es gibt keine seismischen Besonderheiten in diesem Gebiet. Bist du sicher, dass die Kamera richtig funktioniert?“

Richard griff zur Tastatur und startete die Prozeduren, um Doresa einem Statuscheck zu unterziehen. Er hatte sie selbst programmiert und hoch geladen. Die Programme von Galileo waren ohnehin ein Verbrechen. Da schossen die Multimillionen-Euro-Geräte in den Himmel und gaben ihnen die Software eines Toasters mit!

Als Sekunden später das Ergebnis vorlag, waren sie genauso schlau wie zuvor. Es funktionierte alles, wie es sollte. Plötzlich fiel Richard das Flackern auf. Es tauchte nur am Rand auf. Rund zwei Minuten blieb es verschwunden. Dann war es wieder da.

„Hast du das gesehen?“

Dieter verneinte. Richard zoomte dichter heran. Zurück zu dem vermeintlichen Einschlag. Er sah riesige Flächen umgeknickter Bäume. Niedergedrückt von einer mächtigen Explosion. Ohne Kronen. Ohne Blätter.

„Das Bild hab ich schon mal gesehen. Nicht aus diesem Winkel, aber irgendwie erinnert es mich an ein Foto, das ich vor gar nicht langer Zeit ...“

Er drehte sich zu einem zweiten Bildschirm und rief die gesammelten Impact-Unterlagen ab. „Da ist es! Der 30. Juni 1908, der Tunguska-Meteor.“

Dieter verglich die Bilder. „Könnte passen! Aber das ist mehr als hundert Jahre her.“

„Ich verstehe das auch nicht.“

„Es muss eine andere Erklärung geben“, blieb Dieter skeptisch. „Irgendetwas, woran wir noch nicht gedacht haben.“

„Aber wenn es heute passiert wäre, hätten die von der seismischen Abteilung ...“

„Du hast Recht“, stimmte Dieter zu. „Dann haben wir da oben ein Fenster zur Vergangenheit!“

Richard nickte. Plötzlich kam Leben in seinen Vorgesetzten. „Offensichtlich dokumentiert die Kamera die Welt vor mehr als einhundert Jahren. Das ist eine Sensation! Wo ist der Satellit jetzt?“

„Über Europa“, sagte Richard resignierend. Er wusste leider zu genau, was gleich

unweigerlich passierenwürde.

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Es dauerte keine zwanzig Minuten, dann saßen ihm die Typen vom Militär quasi auf dem Schoß.

„Richten Sie das Planck-Teleskop neu aus!“, kommandierte einer der Uniformträger sofort.

„Das ist eigentlich nicht unser Zuständigkeitsbereich“, wandte Dieter Koslowski ein.

„Wir haben alle Codes dabei. Wir sind zuständig. Sie da ...“ Der Offizier wies auf Richard. „Fühlen Sie sich imstande, das Planck-Teleskop zu bedienen, wenn ich Ihnen den Zugriff gewähre?“

Das war der Mount Everest für Programmierer. Natürlich fühlte sich Richard dazu imstande!

Es war pures Glück, dass sich das Weltraumteleskop und der Satellit gerade auf derselben Seite der Erde befanden. Nach wenigen Minuten hatte das Teleskop Doresa direkt vor der Linse.

„So. Ich will das volle Programm! Spektralanalyse. Scannen Sie alle Phasen rund um den Satelliten. Was auch immer dafür verantwortlich ist ... ich will wissen, wie es dazu kommen konnte!“

Richard übermittelte Daten an die Programme der Auswertungsmonitore. Die Interpreten pressten die Ergebnisse in lesbare Kurven und schließlich kamen die Fachleute zu dem unvermeidlichen Schluss:

„Die Werte rund um den Satelliten sind ähnlich denen, wie wir sie bei einem schwarzen Loch vermuten würden“, sagte der erste schlaue Mann.

„Wahrscheinlich chronometrische Wirbel“, gab der nächste dazu.

Dieter zuckte die Schultern und schaute zu Richard herüber. Mittlerweile befanden sich ungefähr zehn Uniformierte und ebenso viele Wissenschaftler in ihrem Überwachungsraum.

„Wäre es möglich, diesen Effekt zu isolieren, einzufangen, wiederherzustellen?“, fragte plötzlich der ranghöchste Offizier. Richard schaute auf die Schulterstücke. Ein General!

„Vielleicht, wenn wir ganz nah dran wären“, meinte einer der Wissenschaftler.

Der General winkte einen seiner Gefolgsleute heran. Sie wechselten flüsternd einige Worte.

„Okay. So machen wir's! Wir schicken eine Ariane hoch.“

„Die müsste bemannt sein, Herr General! Die ESA hat noch nie ...“

„Seit dem Columbus-Modul für die ISS verfügen wir über die Technik. Wir können es. Also machen wir es!“, unterbrach der General schroff.

„Die Amerikaner ...“, wagte noch einer der Offiziere einen Einwand.

„Scheiß auf die Amerikaner. Jetzt sind wir am Ball!“

Richard griff zur Tastatur, mit der er Doresa überprüft hatte und drückte zum ersten Mal ‚Escape‘.

„Was haben Sie da eben gemacht?“, fragte ihn einer der Gefolgsleute.

„Das ist ein verschlüsselter Befehl für das Videoprogramm des Satelliten. Ungefähr alle zwei Minuten gibt es ein Flackern am Rand des Bildes. Das ist ein Hinweis, dass der

Kontakt abbrechen könnte. Das ‚Escape‘ rekaliert die Videosoftware.“

Der Mann nickte, doch Richard hatte seine Zweifel, ob er es wirklich verstand.

„Die Steuerung des Satelliten untersteht ab jetzt dem Militär! Entfernen Sie diesen Zivilisten“, tönte der General mit Blick auf Richard.

„Junger Mann, erheben Sie sich bitte und lassen Sie unsere Fachleute auf Ihren Platz!“, sagte einer der anderen Offiziere etwas moderater zu Richard. Dieter Koslowski versuchte zu retten, was zu retten war: „Miske ist unser bester Mann für die Steuerung des Satelliten.“

„Wir haben unsere eigenen Männer“, kam unmissverständlich zurück.

Richard erhob sich Schulter zuckend und machte seinem Nachfolger Platz. Schon kam einer der Anzugträger auf Dieter und Richard zugelaufen und wedelte mit dem obligatorischen Zwanzig-Seiten-Wisch, den sie wieder zu unterzeichnen hätten. „Hier unterschreiben. Sie kennen das sicherlich. Sie haben nichts gesehen. Nichts gehört. Sie haben doch sicherlich Überstunden. Nehmen Sie sich ein paar Tage frei. Gönnen Sie sich eine Auszeit vom harten Arbeitsalltag.“

Richard nickte abwesend.

„Eines noch, Miske!“, kam dann noch einmal von dem Mann, der meinte, Richards Job übernehmen zu können. „Irgendwas, das wir noch wissen sollten?“

Richard schüttelte den Kopf. „Eigentlich nicht ... Nur, falls das Bild wieder flackert, drücken Sie einfach ‚Escape‘. Dann stabilisiert sich das Videosignal wieder.“

„Alles klar. Danke. Und nichts für ungut!“, sagte der Mann.

„Und jetzt raus mit ihm“, polterte der General ungeduldig, „Ich will, dass das hier streng nach Vorschrift abläuft und dass ...“

In dem Moment schloss sich die Tür hinter Richard Miske und Dieter Koslowski.

Richard schaute kurz auf die Uhr.

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Überstunden! Er musste grinsen. Die hatte er tatsächlich zuhauf. Endlose Nächte hatte er an den Programmen für die Satelliten gefeilt. Sie verbessert, sie optimiert. Sicherlich hatte er nicht vorhersehen können, dass den Militärs irgendwann einmal die Bauteile für eine Zeitmaschine in den Schoss fallen würden. Doch Richard hatte geahnt, dass der Tag kommen würde, an dem es von Vorteil war, vorbereitet zu sein. Die Militärs, das wusste er, neigten dazu, dummen Ideen noch dümmere Taten folgen zu lassen.

Zum Glück hatte sich ein folgsamer Mann auf seinen Platz gesetzt. Der würde das Videosignal von Doresa wie ein Fuchs im Auge behalten und fleißig ‚Escape‘ drücken, um diese wertvolle Übertragung nicht zu verlieren.

Beim zehnten Mal ‚Escape‘ würde sich der Satellit abschalten. Komplet. Niemand würde ihn neu starten können. Auch die Militärs nicht. Kein Zugangscode der Welt könnte Doresa wieder zum Leben erwecken. Er würde auf die Erde zufallen und in der Atmosphäre verglühen.

Zehnmahl!

Richard sah auf seine Uhr und grinste erneut.

Neun Mal hatte der Depp vom Militär sicherlich bereits gedrückt.

Wir leben in einer Zeit, in der wir verlernt haben, bewusst wahrzunehmen. Unsere Sinne werden überlastet, überfordert, ja – übergangen. Unsere Wahrnehmung ist zur Wahrgebung verkommen. Wir müssen das hinnehmen, was uns von Medien, Ärzten, Wissenschaftlern und Freunden hingeworfen wird. Geschmacksfetzen. Duftbrocken. Fressen und speien, fressen und speien, im metaphorischsten Sinne. Wie Zombies fristen wir unser mentales Schattendasein in den von uns selbst entworfenen Käfigen: Büros, Werkzeugschuppen, Baustellen. Oft genug Baustellen des Menschseins. Denn leider umbaut der Kapitalismus die ultimative Wahrheit mit schönsten Fassaden, die als Ausrede für unsere Unfähigkeit dienen sollen, uns selbst zu erkennen und auszuleben. Meistens atmen wir nur noch aus Gewohnheit mit und nicht mehr, weil unsere Wohnung so schön nach Teppich oder Holz duftet. Und wenn wir einmal richtig riechen können, meckern wir noch darüber, wie staubig die Luft ist. Unsere sieben Sinne wurden auf dreieinhalb reduziert, die Konten gefüllt, Säuglinge gestillt – dabei hätten sie uns doch so viel zu sagen! Oder wollen sie uns bloß anschreien? Nach dem Motto: "Wach auf, bevor alles zu spät ist"! Warum sonst ringen sie nach Luft, weinen, verlangen nach Aufmerksamkeit mit ihren noch relativ unbeschädigten Körpern? Ach, wenn wir nur diejenigen ausreden lassen könnten, die noch mindestens zu 60 Prozent in der Realität leben! So aber verstellen wir uns den Weg zurück zu einem vollkommeneren Bewusstsein, den Weg in eine bessere Gesellschaft.

Ich verfasse diesen Bericht im Auftrag des Ministeriums für Gesundheit und Katastrophenschutz künftiger Generationen. Nicht ohne Grund, denn unser Land steht kurz vor dem zweiten Bankrott, weil uns die Arbeitnehmer einfach so wegsterben. Eine unbekannte Seuche hat von ihnen Besitz ergriffen und ich fürchte, die Seuche heißt Realität. Nach und nach erkennen die Menschen, was sie mit ihrem rücksichtslosen Lebensstil verloren haben, werden wahnsinnig oder Opfer einer der vielen unheilbaren Krankheiten, die unser Land seit einigen Jahrzehnten in die Mangel nehmen. „Pest for the best“ habe ich neulich an einer deutsch-englischen Hauswand gelesen und es trifft die Situation peinlich genau. Die hochbezahlten Führungskräfte sterben weg wie die Fliegen. Als wenn sie jemand oder etwas wegrationalisiert hätte. Was haben sie falsch gemacht? Einfache Arbeiter und Lebenskünstler dagegen sind weitestgehend immun. Neue Sekten haben sich formiert, um gegen die Allmacht der Ohnmacht vorzugehen. Spirituelle Führer kritisieren den Zeitgeist, der alles und jeden mit Tabletten behandeln will, mit schönen Worten und Seelenmassagen. Auch ich habe mich deshalb entschieden, nicht nach den vorgegebenen Kriterien der Medizin zu argumentieren, denn das würde nur zu weiterem Chaos und Unverständnis führen. Was sagen die Gurus, denen wir so lange misstraut haben? Man hätte jahrhundertlang nur egoistische Wahrheiten postuliert, hätte keine andere Meinung zugelassen als die eigene. Diese Wahrheiten hätten sich nun größtenteils als Trug herausgestellt und ihre Postulierer tatsächlich als das enttarnt was sie schon immer waren: bessere Steinzeitmenschen mit übelriechenden, neolithischen Ansichten.

Man könnte dafürhalten, dass es ohne den nachgewiesenen Nutzen pflanzlicher und chemischer Wirkstoffe schon längst nicht mehr jene Vielfalt an Nutzpflanzen ans Tageslicht sprießen würde, wie es momentan der Fall ist. Ein ganz ähnliches Prinzip wie beim Verzehr von Schweinefleisch, der ja bekanntermaßen die Ausrottung von Schweinen verhindert hat. Dadurch, dass wir etwas als nutzbringend erkennen, stellen wir es automatisch unter unseren „Schutz“ (der zugegebenermaßen per se eine Art Ausbeutung ist). Eine sehr zynische Ansicht, ich weiß. Aber nur zu realistisch. Denn nachdem wir nun wissen, dass unsere Medikamente nur wenig taugen, dass sie neben ihrem bitteren Geschmack auch eine bittere Wahrheit enthalten, nämlich dass wir langsam, aber sicher von Insekten, Käfern und Würmern zerfressen werden und das nicht einmal bemerken, beweist sie unsere Ohnmacht nur allzu deutlich. Wir verbluten Stück für Stück und bezeichnen das dann auch noch als lebenswichtige „Durchblutung“. Unser Kreislauf ist eine einzige Wunde, die sich langsam durch unseren Körper frisst und den wahren Grund für unsere Schmerzen erkennen wir erst nach dem Tod. Dann, wenn sowieso schon alles zu spät ist. Genauso hat es sich mit unserer Gesellschaft verhalten. Die Insekten und Parasiten, die seit jeher unsere Körper befallen, haben erkannt, dass sie im Vorteil sind. Denn wenn sie erst einmal unser Bewusstsein kontrollieren, indem sie uns von Geburt an unserer Sinne und unserer Zeit berauben, können sie Katz und Maus mit uns spielen. Schmerzen verursachen, wieder nehmen und Heilung versprechen. Nach diesem Prinzip funktioniert unsere Welt. Einem Menschen, der nicht weiß, was seine Schmerzen verursacht, kann man jede beliebige Lüge aufhängen, die er dankbar akzeptiert, denn das heißt, dass er für eine kurze Zeit die Wahrheit nicht akzeptieren braucht – jene Wahrheit, dass er nämlich nur ein Spielball der Launen der Natur ist. Das hatten schon die ersten Siedler in der „Neuen Welt“ erkannt, als sie die Keime und Bakterien aus Europa in eine intakte Umwelt importierten und den Vorteil ihrer „Immunität“ für sich ausnutzten. Ursprünglich, in der Steinzeit etwa, mag das alles ja auch seinen Sinn und Zweck gehabt haben. In kälteren Jahreszeiten war es zum Beispiel gut, wenn man mit Eigenblut durchströmt wird, um nicht zu erfrieren. Aber machen wir uns nichts vor: In Zeiten moderner Heizsysteme ist das doch alles längst schon längst überflüssig geworden! Auch unsere Verdauung ist eigentlich nur die Illusion eines Perpetuum Mobile, das uns immer weiter wachsen und altern lässt – eine Illusion, die in dem Zeitpunkt erlischt, in dem wir unseren letzten Atemzug tun.

*Sic transit gloria mundi!*

Angefangen hat alles, als Menschen immer schlimmere Kopfschmerzen bekamen, obwohl sie die entsprechenden Pillen geschluckt hatten. Die „empirischen Studien“ wurden infrage gestellt, das System aus Arroganz, Ignoranz und Abhängigkeit kam ins Wanken. Aus Kopfschmerzen wurden Krankheiten, aus Krankheiten Gewissheiten. Der Mensch wurde sich seiner Ohnmacht bewusst. Pharmakonzerne gingen Pleite, die Wirtschaft taumelte. Man glaubte der Obrigkeit immer weniger, kaufte ihr nicht mehr ab, dass sie aufrichtig um das Wohl der Menschen sorgte, sondern nur um ihr eigenes. Zunächst handelte es sich nur um belanglose Krankheiten wie Migräne oder Gliederschmerzen. Bald aber kamen andere Symptome hinzu, die immer unheilbarer wurden. Die Wahrscheinlichkeit, dass aus einfachen Rückenschmerzen Gicht wurde oder gar Schlimmeres, stieg rapide an.



Es gab immer weniger Heilmethoden. Die Ärzte kapitulierten schon nach wenigen Jahrzehnten und verfassten schließlich ein Dekret, in dem gegen Schmerzen häufiges Trinken empfohlen wurde, vor allem Alkohol. Eine Kapitulation des Status Quo! Durch die neuen alten Krankheiten wurden immer mehr Menschen arbeitsunfähig, andere Branchen konnten den Totalausfall der Pharmaindustrie nicht kompensieren, und so kam, was kommen musste: der Staat wurde ärmer, soziale Leistungen fielen weg und die Städte verslumpten. Viele flohen aus den Städten, weil sie zu Recht vermuteten, daß sie den Insekten hier hilfloser ausgeliefert wären als auf dem Land, wo man sich noch bewegen musste, um seine Pizza abzuholen.

Die bereits skizzierten Gurus predigten die Rückkehr traditioneller Werte wie Familie, Mitleid und Nächstenliebe. Neben ihnen bekamen auch die Kirchen wieder großen Zulauf. Während Vater Kapitalismus, trunken von seiner ungestillten Raffgier, immer weiter ins Wanken geriet, nahmen die Weltreligionen Fahrt auf. Einige prophezeiten sogar die Zeit des Endes. Und gewissermaßen war es auch eine Apokalypse, denn selbstverständlich stürzten nicht nur wir in eine große Krise, sondern auch andere Staaten. Im Zuge dieser Bewusstwerdung kam vieles ins Straucheln. Die Menschen fürchteten sich vor allem und jedem. Hinzu kam, dass die neuen spirituellen Führer immer beunruhigendere Wahrheiten postulierten. Wahrheiten, die dazu führten, dass man sich in nichts mehr sicher sein konnte. Zum Beispiel wurde entdeckt, dass Fürze gar nicht stinken, sondern nur Babybienen im Hintern sind, die verzweifelt einen Ausgang suchen. Der Geruch kommt laut ihrer Meinung lediglich daher, dass wir nach dieser Attacke unseren Verdauungstrakt bewusster wahrnehmen und unsere eigenen Verdauungsrückstände olfaktorisch bemerken. Solche und noch abstrusere Entdeckungen führten schließlich dazu, dass alles ins Chaos geriet: Menschen, die fürchteten, dass ihre Zeit bald zu Ende sei, stürmten die Straßen, plünderten, veranstalteten blutige Demos, bei denen vieles in Brand geriet, vor allem aber die gute Seele.

Mittlerweile hat sich wieder einiges stabilisiert, denn man ist der Auffassung, „dass es ja weitergehen muss“, aber Zweifel und Misstrauen gegenüber der Wissenschaft sind so resistent wie Fußpilz. Denn natürlich ist nicht alles, was die Wissenschaft entdeckt hat, Humbug. Es sind nur wenige Fehlschlüsse, die zu all dem geführt haben, sowie die Tatsache, dass die Menschen kränker wurden. Woanders tat man es als Zivilisationskrankheiten ab, fuhr die Pharmaindustrie langsam, aber kontrolliert herunter und versprach den Bürgern andere Möglichkeiten und neue Ziele. Es war schließlich alles eine Sache der richtigen Kommunikation. Hierzulande hatte man diese Entwicklung aber leider verpasst. Insofern wirken wir gerade wie eine ansteckende Krankheit für die Restwelt. Denn auch in anderen Ländern wird nun nach und nach erkannt, was wir hier schon längst diagnostiziert haben. Aber natürlich führt es zu weniger Unheil, denn die Staaten haben schon vorgesorgt ...

## Schlussbemerkung

Was bleibt mir noch zu sagen? Vielleicht, dass bei allem Leid und Chaos doch auch ein wenig Hoffnung durchschimmert. Denn wir müssen nun lernen, mit einigen unbestreitbaren Realitäten umzugehen und haben hierin einen Vorteil gegenüber anderen Staaten und Systemen. Wer weiß, womit er es zu tun hat, kann es auch besser

bekämpfen, beziehungsweise lernt, damit zu leben. Das haben die Menschen der Steinzeit schon gekonnt. Warum sollten wir es nicht ebenfalls schaffen?

Winston Schleyheck, Sozialwissenschaftler

PS: Ich hoffe, dass diese Botschaft alle Planeten in unserer nächsten Umgebung rechtzeitig erreicht, mit denen wir in den letzten dreihundertdreißig Jahren Handel getrieben haben. Möge man uns unsere Unwissenheit verzeihen, wenn man entdeckt, dass die neuen Krankheiten, denen man dort zum Opfer fällt, ihren Ursprung auf diesem Planeten haben!

Michael Schmidt Transformation

Hoang Vu blickte auf den Panoramabildschirm. Ein tiefes Blau, durchzogen von grünen Schlieren: so präsentierte sich Palma: sehr heimisch, der Erde überraschend ähnlich. So etwas gab es selten. Zumeist waren die Planeten rau, mit extremen Bedingungen, alles andere als paradiesische Welten.

Hoang gehörte jetzt schon seit dreizehn Jahren zur Raumflotte. In dieser Zeit inspizierte er insgesamt neun Planeten und fünf Monde. Sie alle hatten ihr ganz eigenes Aussehen, ihr spezielles Flair. Palma war anders. Es war der erste Planet, der mit der Erde vergleichbar schien.

Palmas Oberfläche bestand zu neunzig Prozent aus Wasser, besaß in etwa 1,8fachen Erddurchmesser, aber durch seine wesentlich geringere Dichte nur eine geringfügig höhere Schwerkraft als die Erde. Die Durchschnittstemperatur betrug 28°C – und das bei recht konstantem Klima und geringen Schwankungen – und die Landmassen verteilten sich in Form vieler kleiner Inseln über die Planetenoberfläche.

Alles in Allem war Palma ein Paradies – und dies nur achtzehn Lichtjahre von der Heimat entfernt.

Es war Hoangs fünfzehnter Einsatz. Er galt als hervorragender Fachmann auf seinem Gebiet. Er arbeitete als Späher. Und dies durfte er in solch einem Paradies unter Beweis stellen. Die Vorschriften der Flotte verboten eine Landung auf einem bewohnten Planeten, bevor ein Kundschafter vorab die physikalischen Gegebenheiten sowie die kulturellen Gewohnheiten der heimischen Spezies überprüft hatte. Seine Vorfreude stieg.

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Der Spähgleiter war auf der größten Insel gelandet. Hoang stieg aus und sog die frische, stark nach Fisch riechende Luft ein. Die Unbedenklichkeitsfreigabe der Raumflotte war dank unbemannter Sonden erteilt, auch wenn der Geruch gewöhnungsbedürftig war.

Das Luftgemisch ähnelte dem der Erde, ein erhöhter Edelgasanteil und Spuren eines unbekanntes Gases störten das Bild, wurden aber als gesundheitlich irrelevant eingestuft.

Das Begrüßungskomitee bestand aus einem weiblichen und einem männlichen Palmaner. Die Eingeborenen hatten vier Beine, zwei Arme – mittig am Bauch platziert, und besaßen ansonsten humanoides Aussehen. Ihre Hautfarbe leuchtete in einem blauen

Ton, ihre Haut selbst bestand aus kräftigen, beweglichen Schuppen. Sie wurden in der Regel nicht größer als anderthalb Meter, ein Umstand, den Hoang begrüßte, denn mit seinen 1,72 war er selbst recht klein.

"Seid gegrüßt, edler Hoang!"

Das Übersetzermodul gab der palmanischen Begrüßung einen singenden Unterton, Hoang fühlte sich fast wie zuhause im fernen Vietnam.

"Seid gegrüßt, edle Taro Ming, edler Tao Kong."

Selbst ihre Namen klangen heimatlich für den Späher. Hoang erfüllte ein tiefgehendes Gefühl von Harmonie. Beinahe hätte er wohligh geseufzt.

Beide hatten schmale längliche Gesichter, die ihm ein wenig ausdruckslos vorkamen. Unwillkürlich musste er an Porzellanpuppen denken.

Ihre Mundpartie deutete im Ruhezustand ein Lächeln an. Ein sehr sympathischer Zug. Soweit Hoang das beurteilen konnte, waren die Palmaner unbekleidet. Den Unterschied der Geschlechter konnte man nur anhand der Extremitäten erkennen; der weibliche Arm war schmaler und länger. Ansonsten sahen sie sich zum Verwechseln ähnlich.

Wie wohl der Sex der Palmaner aussah? Ob die Arme etwas damit zu tun hatten? Bei diesem Gedanken grinste er unwillkürlich.

"Wir hoffen, Sie hatten eine angenehme Reise, edler Hoang. Wenn Sie uns bitte folgen wollen."

Hoang warf einen Blick auf das Meer. Die Brandung war sanft, ein warmer, angenehmer Wind wehte herüber. Der Drang, sich in die kühlen Fluten zu stürzen, überkam ihn, doch Hoang beherrschte sich. Er war ein Profi. Ein letzter sehnsüchtiger Blick, dann folgte er den Palmanern.

Hoang kam in einen riesigen Saal. Dreieckige Luftpolstersessel bildeten lange Reihen. Vor jedem Sessel stand eine sternförmige Blume, die wohl als Tisch diente.

"Bitte nehmen Sie Platz. Gleich werden Speis und Trank serviert."

Hoang ließ sich vorsichtig in die Sitzgelegenheit sinken. Weich und warm formte sie seine Konturen nach, umschmiegte ihn und massierte seine Muskeln. Sanfte Stromstöße liefen in Nackenhöhe und massierten seine Glieder. Behaglich entspannte er, döste fast weg.

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Und krache unsanft zu Boden. Ein glühender Schmerz explodiert in meinem Nacken, als ich auf die Keramikbox falle, pflanzt sich in Beinen und Armen fort.

Was ist los? Wo bin ich? Wo ist der Saal? Wo sind die Palmaner?

Die Schlieren vor meinen Augen verlieren an Dichte, meine zurückkehrende Sehschärfe bildet Konturen, die Erinnerung kehrt zurück. Die Realität. Eine bittere Realität.

Der kleine, von Unrat übersäte Raum sorgt für ein beengendes Gefühl. Die nackten, plastikverkleideten Wände starren in ihrer verkommenen, verwitterten Gestalt. Wo vorher leuchtende Farben gewesen sind, treten jetzt blasse, schon farblos zu nennende Töne zutage.

In der Luft liegt ein penetranter Gestank nach Schweiß, kaltem Rauch und abgestandener Luft.

Stöhnend erhebe ich mich aus dem Unrat, mit Mühe wuchte ich meinen schlaffen

Körper in die Höhe. Fehlende Bewegung, schlechte Luft und das nährstoffarme Essen sind für mein wabbeliges Fleisch verantwortlich. Ein Blick in den Spiegel würde eine graue Gesichtsfarbe zeigen, doch ich habe keinen Spiegel. Alles was ich besitze, ist ein kleiner Raum, eine Gemeinschaftsnasszelle und die Utensilien, die mir den täglichen, halbstündigen Netzaufenthalt ermöglichen.

Über Datenbuchse. Eine halbstündige Ekstase, die Flucht vor der Wirklichkeit. Die Flucht in die Weiten des Alls, auf wichtige Missionen, wenn auch nur virtuell.

Jetzt sitze ich hier, mein Heim besteht aus acht Quadratmetern. Manchmal verlasse ich es. Doch ist das Draußen ebenso schrecklich, nein, schrecklicher. Die Schadstoffbelastung der Luft erreichte schon vor Jahren ein solches Übermaß, die es nicht ratsam machte, das Freie aufzusuchen. Einmal pro Woche, manchmal auch seltener, gehe ich nach draußen, stets den Atemfilter aufgesetzt. Doch immer schwerer wird es, sich dorthin zu begeben, in eine sterbende Welt. Bäume und Sträucher sind selten geworden. Die wenigen grünen Oasen sind Ausflugsziele, kostspielige Reisen, die ich mir nie leisten werden kann. Der Preis ist höher als mein Jahresgehalt.

So vegetiere ich vor mich hin. Erledige meinen Job, kontrolliere tagein tagaus endlose Zahlenkolonnen und verdiene gerade so viel, um mir meine Bude und Essen leisten zu können. Aber es sind keine leuchtenden Orangen, keine frische Kiwi oder ein zartes Filet. Nährstoffe in Tablettenform, denen künstliche Vitamine und Mineralien beigemischt sind. Einmal die Woche ein Stück Fleisch mit pappigem Reis. Immer wieder ein Hochgenuss, wären da nicht die virtuell gedeckten Tische. Ich verbringe immer mehr Zeit in der künstlichen Welt, fast schaffe ich es kaum, meinem Broterwerb nachzugehen, die erforderliche Selbstdisziplin grenzt an Selbstkasteiung.

Die Rückkehr wird immer schlimmer, das Leben danach nimmt an Trostlosigkeit zu, von Tag zu Tag mehr. Schon immer ist der Unterschied zwischen Realität und Traum groß gewesen. Doch nie so groß wie heute.

2087 n.Chr.

Keine richtige Arbeit. Kaum Geld. Keine Visionen. Was bleibt da neben der Flucht in den virtuellen Raum? Wie sieht meine Zukunft aus? Wo sind die positiven Aspekte?

Ich will nicht mehr.

Ich hasse meinen Körper, meine schlaffen Muskeln, mein trostloses Heim. Ich hasse mein Leben. Mit jeder Faser meines Denkens.

Die Rückkehr in die Wirklichkeit ist dieses Mal besonders brutal gewesen. Zu brutal. Nicht der körperliche Schmerz, als ich zu Boden krachte. Nein, der Schmerz in meinem Kopf. In meinem Innern. Diese Trostlosigkeit. Diese Hoffnungslosigkeit.

Ich kann nicht mehr. Und ich will nicht mehr. So geht es nicht weiter.

Schon Jahre habe ich es vor mir her geschoben. Auf Besserung gehofft, doch blieb sie aus. Die Arbeitsstellen blieben knapp. Die Umweltverschmutzung nahm eher zu. Die Sterblichkeit auch.

Es wird Zeit, mein Leben in die Hand zu nehmen und es zu ändern. Die Ära des Abwartens ist vorbei. Ich habe mich entschieden.

In der Schublade liegt die Erlösung.

GIN. Geist im Netz.

In Tablettenform. Die neuste Droge, die neueste Hoffnung, erstanden von meinem letzten Ersparten. Die letzte Chance. Und die einzige Chance. Ich bin mir sicher. Jetzt oder nie.

GIN.

Eine Reise ohne Wiederkehr. Es gibt kein Rückfahrtticket. Kein Ausklinken. Kein Zurück zur Wirklichkeit. Keine Körperlichkeit mehr.

GIN sorgt für die Umwandlung der Körperchemie. Ich klinke mich per Buchse ein, wie gewöhnlich. Nehme GIN und gebe die Befehlskette in den virtuellen Raum.

Mein Körper löst sich auf. Wandelt sich mittels GIN in virtuelle Materie. Statt eines Zellverbundes bin ich ein Haufen energetischer Impulse, der sich ins Netz einspeist.

Irgendwie zusammenbleibend, lebe ich als virtuelles Bewusstsein. Ich habe keinen blassen Schimmer, wie es funktioniert.

Die Möglichkeiten sind unbegrenzt. Aber nie wieder einen Körper. Nie wieder urtümlichen, physikalischen Sex. Nie mehr den Windhauch in meinen Haaren, sanfte Berührungen von weicher Haut. Nie wieder sehe ich die wirkliche Sonne untergehen. Rot, als verblute sie im Untergang, ein Farbenspiel der Sonderklasse.

Ich zögere, zittere. Furcht ergreift Besitz von mir. Ich sehe mich um. Langsam. Saug Detail für Detail in mich auf.

Furcht?

Zu spät. Ich gebe die letzten Befehle ein. Dann ist es unumstößlich, die Rückumwandlung unmöglich. Ich habe es geschafft. Ein neues Leben, ein lebenswertes, der ewigen Ekstase nahe, verlasse ich die Wirklichkeit und begeben mich in die virtuelle Unendlichkeit.

Ein Späher, für immer. Palma, ich komme.

Ich habe viel zu lange gezögert. Scheiß doch auf die Körperlichkeit. Wahres Leben, ich komme.

Peggy Weber Start und Ziel

Der Bereich des heute beobachtbaren Universums weist keine messbare Raumkrümmung auf und für den Fall einer inflationären Expansion wäre die ersichtliche Flachheit des Raumes eine Folge seiner ungeheuren Ausdehnung. Demzufolge würde das für uns erkennbare Universum nur einen winzigen Ausschnitt eines für die Menschheit nicht überschaubaren gigantischen Weltalls repräsentieren. Die allgemein gängige Theorie besagt, dass Weltall ist kugelförmig, endlich aber ohne Grenze. 2113 stellte der führende Astrophysiker und Mathematiker, Professor Canagari, die Hypothese auf, ein irdischer Beobachter mit einem (noch) fiktivem Teleskop unendlicher Reichweite würde, so der Blick der Raumkrümmung folgt, als Ergebnis dieser Annahmen, sich selbst von Hinten betrachten. Dies gilt für alle Richtungen und unabhängig vom Standort des Beobachters. Doch was wäre, wenn man an sich selber vorbeischaun könnte? Eine unendliche visuelle Umkreisung des Kosmos und wo führe dies hin?

Die Spannung an Bord des Kopernikus-Astrorbit-Raumkrafters (KAR) knisterte wortwörtlich. Kommandant Ferdinand von Tecken fing den nervös fragenden Blick des Professors auf und gab über Helmvoice an alle die Beruhigung aus, es handle sich lediglich um statische Entladungen der Außenhülle des Komplexes, Venusfeuer, das kosmische Pendant zum irdischen St.Elmsfeuer.

Canagaris Augen hingen sodann wieder am rückwärts laufenden Countdown, bis zur gewaltigsten, je von Menschen hervorgerufenen Energiefreisetzung, welche das vom Professor vorausgesagte Wurmloch öffnen und den Schritt in den eigenen 'Rücken' ermöglichen würde, eine Reise die keine wäre, da man sich diese ja ersparte. Ein Paradoxon, hatte der Professor erklärt. Die vom Menschen nicht zu überbrückende Entfernung vom Auge des fiktiven Beobachters in dessen Rückteil könne man ja absolvieren, indem sich der Beobachter nur einfach umdrehe und man würde den gleichen Effekt erzielen. Von Tecken hatte mit dem Kopf geschüttelt und erklärt, das wäre so, als ob jemand auf dem Nordpol steht, sich einmal um die eigene Achse dreht und behauptet, er habe die Welt umrundet.

So ungefähr, hatte Canagari geantwortet, so ungefähr. Wozu bräuchte es dann einer solch fliegenden Monsterkiste wie der Kopernikus, wenn man doch an Ort und Stelle verbliebe?

Der von Menschenhand erzeugte Gammablitz traf das KAR zielgenau für die Winzigkeit einer Yoctosekunde. Von Tecken fühlte sich in ein sehr tiefes Loch fallen, aber eigentlich auch wieder nicht, es war etwas anderes. Ein Pendeln zwischen Existenz und Nichtexistenz, selbst der Tod schien irdischer als der momentane Zustand. Und dann durchfuhr ihn dieser Schock, er glaubte ertrinken zu müssen, sein Körper straffte sich in den Gurten, sein Mund stand weit offen und das Innere seines Schädels schien selbigen verlassen zu wollen.

Das Bild war wieder da. Unverändert. Erde, Mond, Sonne, Planeten, Sternbilder, alles da. „Systemcheck“, krächzte Von Tecken in das Mikro im Helm, etwas hatte seine Stimmbänder belegt.

„Ist doch gar nichts passiert, oder?“, fragte Dr. Boggermann, die Expertin für Xenophilie und Exotismus. Sie schien es nicht zu Glauben.

„Wiederhole: Systemcheck.“ Der Hals brannte und Von Tecken sehnte etwas zu Trinken herbei. Er deutete mit dem rechten Zeigefinger auf den Optischen. „Unsere Position ist genau gegenüber der Stelle von vor dem Sprung. Sozusagen spiegelverkehrt.“

„Die Strecke die wir real zurückgelegt haben beträgt 76.000 Kilometer durchs Wurmloch,“ jubelte Canagari, „aber jetzt schaut mal hier!“, ein Moment Stille, dann flüsterte er: „Das gibt's doch nicht...32158 Milliarden Lichtjahre?“

Alle Drei umringten den Monitor der Technischen Systeme.

„Unmöglich!“, rief Von Tecken im Brustton der Überzeugung und stellte mit einem entschiedenen Knopfdruck die Funkverbindung durch das Loch zur Erde her.

„Hier Kopernikus, hört ihr uns?“

„Ja, hier Space-Center Hildesheim, laut und deutlich! Alles roger? Wir sehen euch nämlich nicht!“, tönte es über den Brückenfunk.

Die Xenologin schaute aufgeregt zur Decke, als säße dort im Dach der Sprecher. „Sind wir überhaupt gesprungen?“, bohrte sie nach.

„Ja klar doch,“ lachte die Stimme von der Erde, „Ihr habt mehr Energie verbraucht als die Sonne in einer Million Jahren freisetzt. Wir sehen Euch übrigens noch immer nicht! Wo steckt ihr denn?“

„Na hier,“ von Tecken breitete die Arme aus, als wolle er den Planeten unter sich umarmen, „seid ihr blind? Wir schweben gerade exakt zweitausend und äh, 769 Kilometer über Westafrika. Ich schalte jetzt um auf Direktfunk zu Euch.“ Sein Blick

wechselte kurz zu den Micromonitoren der Instrumente. „Moment noch.“ Dann kappte der Kommandant die Verbindung durch das Wurmloch und der Bordcomputer der Kopernikus funkte direkt an das Space-Center in Hildesheim. „Kopernikus hier, hört ihr uns?“

In den Lautsprechern knackte es laut und vernehmlich, dann herrschte wieder eine summende Stille.

„Kopernikus hier, „ wiederholte Von Tecken mit den Lippen direkt am stationären Mikro klebend und dehnte jeden Buchstaben vernehmlich im Mund, „Kopernikus hier, hallo?“ Die Erde schwieg. Canagari und der Kommandant sahen sich ratlos an und dann genauso ratlos gemeinsam zur Xenologin.

Wortlos schaltete Von Tecken um auf Wurmlochkontakt. „Was ist denn da los bei euch?“, brüllte er ins Mikro.

„Hier Space-Center, was soll denn los sein? Die Leitung war auf einmal tot. Warum schaltet ihr nicht auf direkt?“

„Stimmt was nicht?“, piepste Dr. Boggermann und lächelte ängstlich.

„Bei Direktkontakt kommt nix, Herrgottnochmal! Probiert mal, ob ihr uns kriegt!“, von Teckens Hände konnten ein leichtes Zittern nicht verbergen.

Angestrengt lauschten die drei in die Stille der Kopernikus hinein. „Jetzt hab ich aber genug!“, fluchte Von Tecken und öffnete mit fahrigen Bewegungen seinen Skaphander. Sein Gesicht war gerötet.

Im Lautsprecher knackte es. „Hier Space-center, das wird wohl nix. Irgendwie kommt keine Verbindung zustande. Und sehen tun wir euch immer noch nicht!“ Im Hintergrund war ein gewaltiges Stimmengemurmel zu hören, Telefone klingelten und Geräte surrten arbeitsam.

Canagari ließ sich in seinen Sessel fallen und grübelte mit der Hand an der faltigen Stirn. Geistesabwesend brummelte er vor sich hin. „32158 Milliarden Lichtjahre Entfernung zur Erde und auch wieder nicht. Wenn nun...“

„Was ist wenn? Bitte etwas lauter, Professor!“, fuhr Von Tecken ungehobelt dazwischen. Die Xenologin schien inzwischen auf mausgröße geschrumpft und versuchte sich in ihrem Skaphander zu verstecken. Sie schaute skeptisch auf den Kommandanten, der keineswegs mehr souverän wirkte.

„Schalten Sie den großen Optischen bitte auf die Außenkameras und zoomen Sie auf die Erde.“, sagte Canagari, und da Von Tecken mit der Justierung der Kameras beschäftigt war, sprach er schnell, als fürchte er seine Gedanken nicht bei sich halten zu können, zur Xenologin: „Also es gibt nur eine Erklärung für das Phänomen. Ich bin mir nicht sicher, aber...“

Von Tecken fuhr herum: „Ich höre!“, und stemmte die Arme in die Hüften.

„Es ist so, „spann der Professor weiter,“ ,durch das Wurmloch sind wir mit der Erde und unserem Sonnensystem über eine Distanz von ein paar tausend Kilometer verbunden. Keine Probleme. Aber richten wir die Antennen auf die blaue Kugel unter uns, dann sehen wir zwar auch die Erde, aber aus einer Entfernung von 32158 Milliarden Lichtjahren. Ihr Funkspruch, Kommandant,“ Canagarie schaute ernst drein, als verkünde er einem Kranken eine schlimme Diagnose, „erreicht die Erde in 32158 Milliarden Jahren!“

Nun war es an Von Tecken und der Xenologin, sich verständnislos anzusehen. „Augenblick mal, Professor,“ ,warf Von Tecken mit erhobenem Zeigefinger ein und stieß mit eben Diesem sodann auf den Optischen, auf dem die Erde sich in wolkenweiß getupftem

Azurblau sich drehte,“ und was ist das hier, ha? Bis zur Oberfläche sind es gerade mal 3000 Kilometer! Klar und deutlich! Und da,“ von Tecken steuerte mit dem Joystick die Kameras, „der gute alte Mond und was sie gerade so blendet nennt man Sonne!“

„Seh ich genauso.“ ließ sich die Xenologin zaghaft vernehmen und und zog ein erschrockenes Gesicht.

Der Professor erhob sich aus seinem Sitz, legte die Handflächen wie Scheuklappen an seine Gesichtshälften und lief hin und her, dabei laut vor sich hin dozierend. „Verstehen Sie nicht, es ist wie ein Spiegel. Nur sind wir, die Kopernikus und wir mit ihr, hinter der Oberfläche des Spiegels, als wären wir jetzt in dem Raum, den wir vorher im Spiegel gesehen haben!“

„Wie sind wir denn dahin geraten?“ entfuhr es der Xenologin in weinerlichem Tonfall.

„Durch den Sprung natürlich!“ wies Von Tecken sie mit unwirscher Gestik zurecht und klang genervt.

„Das heißt also, wir schweben über der Erde und sind trotzdem zweiunddreißigtausend Milliarden Lichtjahre entfernt?“ sie wirkte irritiert und stieß ein: „Das darf doch nicht wahr sein!“ hinterher.

„Ich kann es selbst nicht genau erklären,“, jammerte der Professor,“ man kann es sich nicht vorstellen. Wir sind auf der Rückseite des Universums. In einer anderen Dimension eventuell.“

„Oder in einem anderen Universum! Gott steh uns bei!“ schluchzte Dr. Boggermann und begann in Gedanken eine Liste ihrer Liebsten von daheim zu erstellen. Nur für alle Fälle, wie sie sich einredete.

Von Tecken verschränkte die Arme vor der Brust, fauchte: „Eventuell, eventuell!“ und musterte den Optischen mit einem Blick, der in noch viel weiteren Fernen etwas sah. Stärke lag in seiner Haltung. „Space-Center, haben sie alles mit angehört?“

„Yes, Kommandant, Sir, wie ist es denn da so in Zweiunddreißigtausend Milliarden Billionen warum jetzt Billionen und nicht mehr Milliarden? Lichtjahren?“ Irgendwoher aus dem Hintergrund drang so etwas wie eine verzweifelte Heiterkeit unter den Anwesenden im Tower durch.

„Space-Center, bereiten sie unseren Rücksprung vor. Das ist uns zu unheimlich hier.“ Von Tecken nahm die übergeschwappte Stimmungsnuance auf und lehnte sich betont gelassen über das Mikro.

„Warten Sie,“ rief Canagari aufgelöst dazwischen, „wie funktioniert der Rücksprung? Gut möglich, wir drehen noch eine Runde und sind dann 65000 Milliarden Lichtjahre entfernt! Und dann drehen wir noch eine..und noch eine..“

Die Xenologin wirkte wächsern im Gesicht und Von Tecken sagte in einem Tonfall, der nichts Gutes ahnen ließ: „Erde, wir haben hier ein Problem.“

### Sascha Vennemann Initiation

Ich habe die anderen Mitglieder der Gruppe schon einmal gesehen. Es sind Jugendliche aus dem Dorf, die fünf- und sechsjährigen Shunts, die normalerweise noch in den Hütten ihrer Eltern wohnen. Sie scheinen nicht halb so verwirrt oder beunruhigt zu sein wie ich. Wahrscheinlich wissen sie, was es zu bedeuten hat. Was es heißt, dass wir uns um den mannshohen Haufen getrockneter Kraak-Hölzer versammelt haben und darauf zu



warten scheinen, dass etwas Besonderes passiert. Insgesamt sind wir dreiundzwanzig - und ich bin der einzige Mensch unter ihnen.

Seit vier Monaten bin ich jetzt auf diesem Planeten. Diese Welt gehört zu denen, die erst vor Kurzem kolonialisiert wurden, auch und vor allem, weil sie bereits eine intelligente Spezies beherbergte und man nicht wusste, ob sie Neuankömmlinge willkommen heißen würden. Die Angst vor einem drohenden Konflikt stellte sich als unbegründet heraus. Die Shunts sind friedlich und faszinierend. In ihrer bedächtigen und ruhigen Art scheinen sie in sich ruhen, auch wenn sie eher martialisch aussehen. Ihre gedehnten Körper von etwa drei Metern Länge sind hager und knochig. Zwar sind sie im Grunde genommen humanoid, doch das Exo-Skelett und die kaum vorhandenen Augenpartien lassen sie beunruhigend fremdartig wirken.

Die ersten Siedler nannten sie Shunts, weil sie über die Eigenart einer dreistufigen Verdauung verfügen. Die Spezies teilt sich in drei verschiedene Geschlechter auf, die gemeinsam ihre Nahrung verwerten, und zwar hintereinander. Hat Geschlecht 1 die Nahrung verdaut, bildet es durch Körperkontakt mit Geschlecht 2 Gefäßverbindungen aus - ähnlich dem medizinischen Prinzip des Shunts -, um die restliche Nahrung in dessen Körper zu übertragen. Dafür bekommt es von diesem Geschlecht Nährstoffe, die sein Körper benötigt, aber nicht selbst herstellen kann. Dasselbe lässt sich im Hinblick auf Geschlecht 2 und 3 beschreiben. Die von Geschlecht 3 erzeugten Nährstoffe werden von Geschlecht 2 ebenfalls auf Geschlecht 1 übertragen. Erst Geschlecht 3 scheidet unverdauliche Nahrungsreste endgültig aus.

Es ist faszinierend, diese Art des Stoffwechsels zu beobachten und systematisch zu erfassen. Als Student der Xeno-Anthropologie habe ich mir diesen Planeten nicht zufällig ausgesucht. Es ist eine dankbare Aufgabe für das Praxisjahr meiner Ausbildung, es hier verbringen zu dürfen, sie beobachten und unter ihnen leben zu können.

Als ich mein Zelt am Rande ihres Hüttendorfes aufbaute, wurde ich zwar neugierig bei jeder meiner Aktionen beobachtet, aber man ließ mich einfach in Ruhe. Als ich nach zwei Monaten immer noch da war und mich täglich bei ihnen auf dem Gemeinschaftsplatz in der Mitte des Dorfes aufhielt, kam eines Tages ein Exemplar von Geschlecht 2 auf mich zu und bedeutete mir, mitzukommen.

Die Shunts hatten mir eine eigene Hütte gebaut. Es war eine rührende Geste, und sie erwarteten keine Gegenleistung, wollten nur, dass ich die selbe Sicherheit gegen Hitze und tropische Stürme wie sie fand.

Das war vor sechs Monaten. Zwei Drittel meiner Zeit hier sind inzwischen vorbei. Ich habe viele Beobachtungen und Aufzeichnungen machen können, viel über dieses Volk herausgefunden. Aber was das hier zu bedeuten hat, davon habe ich keinen blassen Schimmer.

Wir stehen im Kreis um den großen Haufen getrockneten Holzes, das die Shunts oft für den Hüttenbau verwenden. Die Kraak-Pflanzen bilden Luftwurzeln aus, die regelmäßig abgeerntet werden. Das Material wird auch als Brennholz für Kochfeuer verwendet. Ist es das, was hier passieren soll? Ein Feuer?

Wir stehen lange dort, umringt von den Eltern-Trios, bis es langsam dämmt. Eine Art Gesang hebt an. Die zweiundzwanzig anderen, die mich gemeinsam von meiner Hütte abgeholt haben, stehen aufrecht und haben die Köpfe dem Holzstoß zugewandt.

Ich rieche das Feuer, bevor ich es sehe. Wie von selbst frisst es sich aus der Mitte des

Holzhaufens hervor. Die Luftwurzeln knacken in der Hitze. Die letzten Tage waren sehr heiß, das Material ist knochentrocken.

Der Gesang wird lauter. Auch die jungen Shunts stimmen jetzt in die Silbenfolge ein. Ich frage mich, was passiert, sollte ich es ebenfalls versuchen. Nach einer Weile fühle ich mich sicher genug und probiere es. Mein Gesang passt sich harmonisch an den der Shunts an. Niemand scheint sich daran zu stören, im Gegenteil. Meine beiden direkten Nachbarn im Kreis der Beobachter strecken zustimmend die jeweils vier Finger ihrer knöchigen Hände. Eine Geste, die einem menschlichen Kopfnicken gleichzusetzen ist.

Wind kommt auf. Der zusätzliche Sauerstoff lässt den Brand für einen Moment noch stärker aufleuchten. Die Sonne ist inzwischen untergegangen. Der flackernde Schein taucht alle Anwesenden in ein dunkelgelbes Licht.

Unmerklich beginnt sich der Qualm, der von dem großen Feuer aufsteigt, zu verdichten. Was seltsam ist, denn der Wind lässt nicht nach. Eigentlich müsste er die Schwaden zerfasern, aber diese scheinen den Umwelteinflüssen zu trotzen. Fasziniert beobachte ich das Schauspiel. Weitere gesummte Töne verlassen meinen geöffneten Mund.

Eine Silhouette schält sich aus dem Rauch über den Flammen. Ich erkenne, es ist eine Hand, eine Shunt-Hand. Zunächst sind die vier Finger noch geschlossen, aber dann strecken sich die Finger einzeln aus. Vor uns in der Nacht schwebt ein nebliges, großes JA über den Flammen.

Der Gesang verändert sich. Wie von selbst weiß ich plötzlich, was ich singen muss. Die Tonfolgen wirken natürlich, völlig intuitiv. Ich muss gar nicht darüber nachdenken.

Die Finger der Rauchhand schließen sich wieder. Sie scheint sich in der Luft zu drehen. Dann streckt sie einen Finger aus und zeigt auf einen der Shunts im Kreis.

Dieser versteift sich vor Anspannung. Seine eigenen Hände spreizen die Finger immer wieder zu einem JA, als wüsste er sich etwas. Und tatsächlich: Die Hand über dem Feuer deutet erneut die zustimmende Geste an!

Der Shunt hebt stolz die Arme und präsentiert der versammelten Menge zwei JA-Hände. Alle anderen tun es ihm gleich, auch ich. Der Gesang wird von jubelnden Silben unterbrochen, setzt dann aber gleich wieder ein.

Der Shunt dreht sich um und nimmt von seinem Eltern-Trio eine Kraak-Wurzel entgegen. Bedächtig geht er nahe an das Feuer heran und wirft sie hinein. Vielleicht eine Art Brandopfer, denke ich. So langsam habe ich eine Ahnung, was dieses Ritual zu bedeuten haben könnte, aber was ich nicht verstehe ist, warum ich an ihm teilnehme. Wenn dies so etwas wie ein Initiationsritus ist, was soll ich dann hier? Ich bin kein Shunt, sondern ein Mensch. Zudem bin ich Wissenschaftler und etwas verwirrt darüber, dass hier Dinge vorgehen, die sich kaum auf natürliche Ursachen zurückführen lassen.

Eine Hand aus Rauch? Vielleicht gibt es für alles eine Erklärung, die nicht auf das Wirken höherer Mächte hinausläuft, aber ich kann es nicht ausschließen. Ich sehe, was ich sehe. Das muss ich akzeptieren.

Nacheinander zeigt die Hand auf die jungen Shunts. Nicht alle von ihnen bekommen ein JA von der Erscheinung attestiert. Diejenigen, die es nicht schaffen, trotten mit hängenden Köpfen zurück zu ihrem Elterntrio und zerbrechen den Ast, der für den Fall einer positiven Antwort bereitgehalten wird.

Schließlich sind nur noch mein linker Nachbar und ich übrig. Es ist ein Mitglied des

Geschlechts 3. Die Hand schließt sich - und klappt dann die Finger hinab auf die Handfläche - ein NEIN. Die Menge seufzt mitfühlend. Wortlos dreht sich der Shunt um und verlässt den Kreis.

Nun stehe ich alleine da. Bei all meinen Forschungen bin ich noch nie auf Hinweise zu diesem Ritual gestoßen. Das Symbol der Hand spielt im Alltag der Shunts eine große Rolle, aber ich hatte nicht geahnt, dass es eine religiöse Konnotation besitzt.

Die Hand deutet auf mich - und öffnet die Finger. Nur am Rande bemerke ich, dass die Hand jetzt eine menschliche ist - mit fünf Fingern. Der Daumen ist deutlich erkennbar.

Der Gesang verstummt. Ich stehe wie erstarrt auf meinem Platz. Dann, weil ich nicht weiß, was ich sonst tun soll, hebe ich die Arme und spreize meine Finger.

Niemand jubelt. Damit, dass die Hand mir ein JA gibt, hat offenbar keiner gerechnet. Am wenigsten ich selbst. Ratlos sehe ich mich um. Mein Blick fällt auf den leeren Platz hinter mir. Dort steht kein Eltern-Trio bereit. Meine Eltern sind weit weg, nicht auf diesem Planeten. Was hat sich die Hand nur dabei gedacht?

Da sehe ich, wie mein linker Nachbar, der zuvor abgelehnt wurde, sich von seiner Familie löst. In den Händen hält er die Kraak-Wurzel, die für den Fall seiner positiven Prüfung bereitgelegt hat. Wortlos reicht er sie mir. Ich ergreife sie dankbar.

Ich nähere mich dem Feuer und werfe die Wurzel hinein. Dann gehe ich zurück an meinen Platz.

Die Rauchhand dreht sich ein letztes Mal mit gespreizten Fingern im Kreis. Alle Anwesenden heben die Arme und erwidern die Geste. Dann zerfasert die Erscheinung in kleine Rauchschwaden und das Feuer erlischt schlagartig.

Der Platz in der Dorfmitte ist plötzlich kalt und dunkel. Im Schein der schwelenden Glut sehe ich, wie sich die Auserwählten versammeln, während die Abgelehnten mit ihren Eltern-Trios zurück zu ihren Hütten gehen.

Mein Herz klopft mir bis zum Hals, als ich auf sie zugehe. Und ich weiß, dass diese Nacht noch lange nicht vorbei ist.

Initiationsriten umfassen meist mehrere Prüfungen.

Das hier war erst der Anfang.

Arnold H. Bucher Die Schwäche

Thomas wusste sofort, was sich zwischen den Möhren im Gemüsegarten zu verbergen suchte: Ein Alien. Genauer gesagt: Ein Möhrendieb von einem fremden Planeten.

Thomas konnte man so leicht nichts vormachen. Er war ein neugieriger Schüler, der über vieles Bescheid wusste.

Ganz genau sah Thomas das rote Stück, das aus dem Mund des Diebes ragte, und wie der es hastig runterzuschlucken suchte.

„Meine Mutter wird dir die Ohren langziehen, wenn ich ihr sage, dass du ihre Möhren zupfst.“

Für einen Moment überlegte sich Thomas, dass das Alien gar keine Ohren hatte. Auch sonst war an seinem haarlosen, grauen Schädel nichts, was man hätte langziehen können. Aber es verstand sicher, was er meinte. Die meisten Aliens sprachen deutsch. Das wusste Thomas genau.

„Deine Mutter wird noch vor mir winseln und kriechen ...“, drohte das Alien mit gepresster Stimme.

„... wenn eure Invasion stattgefunden hast, meinst du?“, ergänzte Thomas. Fast alle Aliens planten fiese Invasionen der Erde. Das wusste Thomas genau. Es gab zwar auch andere, aber das Alien vor ihm sah aus wie ein typischer Eroberer.

„Und dann werdet ihr alle Menschen als Sklaven auf fremde Planeten entführen und die Erde vernichten!“

Natürlich hatte Thomas Angst. Er wusste nicht, ob er nur Kanonenfutter war, ein erstes Opfer, das mit dem Laser zerstrahlt wurde, um die bösartige Gefährlichkeit der Aliens zu demonstrieren, oder ob er die Hauptfigur dieser beginnenden Geschichte verkörperte. Doch das konnte er selber nicht beeinflussen, also stellte er sich trotzig der Situation.

Das Alien schwieg, schaute ihn nur mit großen, grauen Augen an. Die Augen wurden immer größer, begannen zu rotieren, wurden zu farbigen Schlieren, zogen Thomas unweigerlich in ihren Bann. Er wusste, was jetzt kommen würde. Ihm wurde schwarz vor Augen.

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„Warum weißt du so viel über uns? Wer hat dir das alles verraten? Mit wem stehst du in Kontakt? Sprich schon!“

Das graue Alien, das nun einen grauen Arztkittel trug, beugte sich über ihn. Eines seiner drei Augen wurde durch eine Lupe grotesk vergrößert.

Thomas lag festgezurret auf einer harten Untersuchungs-liege. Aus den Augenwinkeln blickte er sich um: Der Raum sah genau so aus, wie er es erwartet hatte. Alles grau, rund, ohne Kanten. Von der Decke hing allerlei Gerät an beweglichen Armen herunter. Nadeln und Spritzen, Zangen, Hirnscanner, vermutete Folterinstrumente.

„Das übliche Instrumentarium auf einem fiesem Alienschiff. Was Originelleres habt ihr nicht anzubieten?“ Mulmig war ihm zwar schon zu Mute, gelinde gesagt. Aber irgendwie war das auch einfach langweilig, immer dieselben Geschichten, alles war wie in den Filmen und tausend Mal gesehen.

„Dir wird das Spotten noch vergehen“, drohte das Alien.

„Du bist hier der Psychologe“, entgegnete Thomas. Die Situation lag auf der Hand. „Du darfst mich untersuchen und mit mir machen, was du willst. Du wirst mich quälen, um alles Wissen aus mir rauszupressen.“

„So ist es. Das hohe Oberkommando will umfassend informiert werden. Wir sind professionelle Invasoren, keine dilettantischen Anfänger!“

„Böse Aliens sind immer übermenschlich mächtig und auch hinterlistig schlau, zumindest zu Beginn. Also gehörst du zur Vorhut, die sich heimlich auf der Erde umschaut, um alles auszuspionieren.“

„Aber sicher. Wenn du unsere gigantische transgalaktische Flotte sehen würdest, dann wärst du weniger vorlaut.“

„Die unsichtbar über der Erde schwebt? Und nur darauf wartet, sich über den wichtigsten Hauptstädten der Erde zu enttarnen und ihren langen Schatten zu werfen?“

„So ist es. Du weißt viel. Aber auch das wird dir nicht helfen.“

„Den mit den Möhren kenne ich übrigens nicht. Warum hast du sie gestohlen?“

„Um meinen internen Spektralanalysator zu füttern. Wir erforschen eure Nahrung.“

„Ich verstehe. Damit wir auf dem langen Gefangenentransport zum Sklavenmarkt auf Beteigeuze XIII nicht verhungern. Sonst sind wir nix mehr wert und die Invasion war für die Füchse.“

„Bilde dir nur nicht ein, das werde erstklassige Nahrung sein, mit der wir euch auf dem Flug stopfen.“

„Du tust so siegessicher. Du weißt aber nicht, dass ich etwas weiß, was niemand wissen darf!“

„So, was weißt du denn? Unser Plan ist perfekt durchdacht!“

„Mit einem simplen Trick werden alle scheinbar unbesiegbaren Aliens zu Hanswürsten. Ihr habt alle eine dumme Schwäche! So stark und doch so schwach. Das ist das Geheimnis.“

„So, so. Schöne Worte. Nur glaube ich nicht, dass du diesen Schwachpunkt kennst.“

„Ha, wetten schon! Alles längst gesehen im Fernsehen. So viele Möglichkeiten gibt's da nicht. Nein, es sind nicht die Bakterien der Erde, die euch krank machen. Es ist keine Schallplatte, die euer Hirn in tödliche Schwingung versetzt. Es ist kein Schlaf-Befehl, der euch erschlaffen lässt.“

Thomas zählte weiter auf und erkannte dabei, dass er ein Problem hatte: Er wusste genau, dass es eine solche Schwäche gab. Es konnte gar nicht anders sein. Doch die Schwäche dieser Fremden kannte er beim besten Willen nicht. Es blieb nur wenig Zeit. Für ihn selber. Für die ganze Menschheit.

Das Alien zog unbeeindruckt mit seinen diversen Armen von der Decke her Instrumente in Position. Diese zielten nun auf Thomas' Kopf, Bauch und Arme.

„Na, dann wollen wir mal“, meinte es, „wenn du nichts Wesentliches mehr einzuwenden hast.“

Thomas schluckte leer. „Gleich ist es soweit, gleich seid ihr erledigt, gleich werde ich

alles aufdecken.“

„Nur zu, ich bin gespannt. In der Zwischenzeit werden wir mal ein wenig aufdecken, was in dir steckt.“

In Thomas' Hirn herrschte abgrundtiefe Leere.

Zeit schinden war angesagt: „Moment, Herr Alien, kennt ihr folgenden Witz schon: Drei Raumfahrer treffen sich auf Station 42. Der erste hat ein künstliches Auge, der zweite ein künstliches Bein, der dritte ein künstliches Hirn.“

Mit einem gewaltigen Satz rückwärts sprang das Alien aus Thomas' Nähe. Ein Teil der Instrumente, an Federn gehalten, schnellte mit hydraulischem Zischen an die Decke zurück.

„Hör auf, hör auf! Willst du mein ganzes Labor versauen?“, presste das Alien tonlos heraus.

Thomas fiel es wie Schuppen von den Augen. Mit einem Schlag durchschaute er triumphierend das ganze Geheimnis. Nun hatte er, nun hatte die Menschheit nichts mehr zu befürchten: „Und ich sage dir: Weil ihr so humorlos seid, ertragt ihr es nicht, wenn man in eurer Gegenwart Witze erzählt. Das überfordert euer Hirn maßlos. Nach spätestens vierzehn Sekunden zerreißt es euch von innen heraus. Übrig bleibt nur grün-grauer Glibber, der überall an den Wänden klebt.“

Während Thomas sprach, wurde das Alien immer bleicher. Seine Hautfarbe veränderte sich am ganzen Körper von grau nach weiß. Sogar der Arztkittel passte sich dem an.

„Jetzt ist es definitiv zu viel. Woher weißt du Bescheid? Sprich oder stirb!“

„Locker bleiben, denk an die Witze.“ Thomas war gar nicht locker zumute. „Im Fernsehen kommen so viele Filme über böse Aliens, da lässt sich leicht zusammenreimen, wie man euch bekämpfen kann.“

„Wer außer dir weiß noch Bescheid?“

„Du kannst gerne ausrechnen, wie viele Menschen auf der Erde einen Fernseher haben und wie viele davon Science-Fiction-Filme schauen.“

„So ne verdammte Antriebsschlacke!“, schrie das Alien. „Da steckt sicher wieder die Interstellar Peace Brigade dahinter! Du warst mit denen in Kontakt. Sie haben euch instruiert und mit Abwehrmaßnahmen gestählt. Die machen sich auf dem hinterletzten hinterwäldlerischen Isolationsplaneten breit!“

Während diesen Worten verfärbte sich der böse Fremde erneut, diesmal von weiß auf rot, und begann, mit seinen diversen Armen und Beinen um sich zu schlagen. Rücksichtslos drosch er auf Mobiliar und Geräte ein, schien sich dabei aber eher selbst zu verletzen, als etwas zu beschädigen. Dazu schrie er in seiner fremden, gutturalen Sprache.

Dann hielt er plötzlich inne, wandte sich Thomas zu und kam bedrohlich näher.

Der nahm all seinen Mut zusammen: „Wenn du mich nicht sofort losbindest und zur Erde zurückschaffst, erzähle ich dir einen Witz samt Pointe. Und eins sei dir gesagt: Ich habe genügend davon auf Lager, um mit deiner ganzen Flotte fertig zu werden.“

„Wartet nur, wir finden schon noch ein Sonnensystem, wo die Interstellar Peace Brigade noch nicht aktiv war. Die Invasion findet statt!“

„Schickst du mich jetzt zurück, bitte? Zum Ansporn hier schon mal ein Anfang: Zwei alte Roboter treiben in einem schwarzen Loch. Funkt der eine zum anderen ...“

„Nein, bei allen explodierten Gravitationsmulden!“

„O. k., o. k.. Aber unsere Möhren hätte ich auch gerne wieder, sonst wird meine Mutter böse. Und das möchtest du nicht erleben, dagegen sind meine Witze ein Klacks.“

„Wir sind weg. Ihr könnt uns den Kittel runterrutschen und eure Witze jemand anderem antun. Die Möhren sind übrigens holzig.“

Unvermittelt und ohne Übergang fand sich Thomas im Gemüsegarten wieder. Allein. Ein sehr billiger Beam-Effekt, wie er fand. Vor ihm lag das zur Hälfte geplünderte Möhrenbeet. Keine einzige hatte das Alien zurückgegeben. Von wegen holzig. Wie er das seiner Mutter erklären würde? Die hielt leider gar nichts von Science-Fiction-Geschichten. Das wusste Thomas genau.

1.

Lukás Herma Červená Karkulka

Noc byla temná. Ne kvůli mrakům, ale černý uhelný dým z tisíců továrních komínů stoupal k nebi a zakrýval měsíc i hvězdy. Zpátky na zem potom padal jemný popílek smíchaný s kapkami deště, který úplně všechno v tomhle obrovském městě, domy, stromy, řeku i lidi barvil do stejné uniformní tmavé šedi. Z továren vycházelo prakticky cokoli. Ocelové lokomotivy lesknoucí se mastnotou, vzducholodi i zbraně, parní stroje připravené k osazení do lodí, všechno co si kdo jen dokázal představit. Oheň nikdy nevyhasínal, stroje se nezastavovaly, zástupy dělníků se střídaly na směnách jako živé nástroje přispívající svou troškou k rozvoji tohoto úžasného věku oceli a páry.

A přestože byly linky dokonalé, materiály čisté, pocházející z hlubokých dolů i šachet táhnoucích se celé desítky kilometrů pod samotným městem, a preciznost, se kterou se složité programy dávající duše komplikovaným mechanismům leptaly kyselinou do měděných děrných štítků téměř neuvěřitelná, stávalo se, že vznikaly zmetky. Stroje a mechaničtí tvorové, kteří nedokázali sloužit svému účelu kvůli různým chybám a defektům, co se vyhazovaly na obrovskou skládku do míst, kde kdysi za barbarských dob býval veliký park, tam pomalu rezivěly na velikých haldách zakrývajících záhony zarostlé plevelem, aby byly po určité době, pokryté korozí, vzaty a přetaveny v něco úplně jiného.

A tu chladnou podzimní noc, kdy z nebe padaly kapky špinavého kyselého deště, vítr se proháněl po skládce, opíral se do hromad šrotu a hrál na ně jako na nějaké obrovské varhany doplňované hučivým chórem strojů z obrovských továren, se jeden z tisíců zdánlivě mrtvých strojů najednou probudil. Ležel tu už celé roky. Ale oheň dřímající v jeho nitru nikdy docela nevyhasl, i když byl pokryt rzí a vystaven nepřízni drsného počasí ve společnosti svých opuštěných tlejících bratří.

Probral se do života a zavětil. Ozubená kolečka se s vrzáním a námahou rozeběhla, vnitřní mechanismy probraly k životu, jak jim dodával energii dosud dýmající plamen, který se rozhořel s mnohem větší intenzitou. Voda se měnila v páru a ta probíhala systémem postaveným zručným rukama zkušených řemeslníků. Levé oko rozzářilo do tmy červeným světlem, pravé viselo zplihle na kusu drátu vyražené z ocelového důlku, když se začal prodírat na povrch skrz okolní šrot. Poškozený a nedokonalý. Zmrzačený. Rezavý a unavený.

Dívka utíkala, klopýtala. Oděná do špinavé kombinézy, umazaná od oleje. Utekla z jedné z továren. Od nekonečného kolotoče. Toužila vidět slunce s hvězdy, slyšet zpěv ptáků, o kterých se psalo v zakázaných obrázkových knížkách se zažloutlými a umaštěnými stránkami, které mezi nimi kolovaly a za svitu téměř vyhaslých svíček si je po nocích navzájem předčítaly a vyprávěly si o tom, že jednou utečou. Protože i děti mají své legendy a sny, o které přicházejí až jako dospělí, když zapadnou do nekonečného kolotoče směn, kdy jejich jediným cílem zůstává dodržet plán, uživit rodinu, nezemřít na vyčerpání dřívě, než se o sebe děti dokážou samy postarat.

Bála se takového života, večer se protáhla úzkým oknem vedoucím ven, podhrabala



se pod plotem a utíkala pryč. Cítila psy, co jsou po její stopě. Supěla a prodírala se skrz hromady rezavého kovu, rozřezávala si dlaně a v křečovitých záchvatech kašle způsobeného agresivním dýmem a popelem vykašlávala vlastní krev. A zatímco se její tělo barvilo do červena krví vytékající z desítek mělkých ran, štěkot mechanických pronásledovatelů utíkajících za uprchlicí se přibližoval, skočil najednou před ní stroj, který kdysi dávno musel být vlkem. Třásla se a pozorovala ho, jak nejistě našlapuje na rezavé končetiny a pozoruje ji jediným zdravým okem, kdy z jeho chůze se vytratila ladnost, a tělo měl pokryté rzí. Pouhá hromada šrotu, co najednou ožila. S údivem poznávala svou vlastní práci, jednu z první věcí, s jejichž výrobou pomáhala, o které ani netušila, že kdy skončila zde, do které vložila část vlastních snů.

„Dobrý den, Červená Karkulko,“ řekl vlk najednou chraptivě, skoro nesrozumitelně, s mluvídky poškozenými na hraně snesitelnosti, a ona upírala pohled do jeho zářícího oka. Zněl...osaměle. Bez účelu. A jí se vybavila odpověď, jako ze snů.

„Dobrý den, vlku,“ zašeptala, zatímco se k ní stroj lísal a ona ho hladila po chladné struktuře zarezavělého kovu a sledovala, jak pára stoupá ze dvou mosazných výfuků po stranách hřbetu. Najednou jí ruka zajela skrz místo, kde se koroze prožrala kovovou schránkou až do samého žhnoucího nitra stroje a dotkla se schránky s děrnými štítky. A zatímco se štěkot mechanických psů přibližoval, ona dostala nápad.

„Kampak tak časně? Karkulko,“ zeptal se opět vlk, zatímco soupeřila se zatuhlými drobnými šroubky skrývajícími mozek stroje a otáčela s nimi ničím víc, než vlastními olámanými nehty.

„K babičce,“ zasykla, když se závity zcela proti své vůli pomalu otáčely a ona se pokoušela pracovat co nejrychleji, zatímco se poškozený stroj odmítal zastavit a stále se pohyboval.

„A copak to neseš v zástěrce?“ zasýpal opět vlk jako rozbitý stroj, měděným čumákem jí šťouchl do ruky a otevřel tlamu plnou ocelových zubů.

„Koláč a víno, včera jsme pekli nemocné a zesláblé babičce na posilněnou,“ zašeptala opět dívka, čelo se jí orosilo námahou, když konečně sundala víčko a odhalila krabičku s děrnými štítky, seřazenými podle dávno nepoužívaného vzoru, které četlo několik ostrých jehel.

„Kdepak bydlí babička, Karkulko?“ zeptal se opět vlk. Zatímco si její šikovné prsty hrály s jeho samotným centrem bytí a pokoušely se změnit naprogramování. Štěkot pronásledovatelů byl opět o něco blíž.

„Inu, ještě tak čtvrt hodiny cesty v lese, její chaloupka stojí mezi třemi velkými duby, kolem je lískové ořeší, určitě to tam musíš znát, citovala dívka svou oblíbenou pohádku. Zatímco nepřestávala zírat na děsné štítky a měnit jejich pořadí. Najednou vlk zmlkl. A zhroutil se jako rozbitá hračka. Dívka vykřikla zoufalstvím, zaklela, když se na hromadě šrotu ukázali její dva pronásledovatelé, štíhlé mechanické siluety připravené ji roztrhat na kusy za opovážlivost.

Ustupovala před nimi a zírala do zářících mechanických očí, věděla, že je mrtvá, že nemá smysl utíkat. Když najednou vlk, její vlk, opět ožil. Zdravým okem se podíval nejprve na ni, potom na její pronásledovatele. A přímo cítila, jak jehly v jeho nitru s námahou chroupou nové série dat. Napřímil se. Otočil směrem k nim a zavrčel.

„Červená Karkulko,“ řekl konečně, „koukej na ty krásné květiny, které tu rostou všude kolem, pročpak se trochu nerozhlédneš? Myslím, že jsi ještě neslyšela ptáčky, kteří by

zpívali tak líbezně. Ty si tu vykračuješ, jako kdybys šla do školy, a přitom je tu v lese tak krásně! Utíkej pryč. A já je tu zadržím.“

A dívka, Karkulka, uposlechla. Utíkala, zatímco za ní bojoval poničený vlk svou poslední bitvu. Běžela za svobodou. Za svým snem. Bojovala za šanci, kterou jí dala náhoda a jedna pohádka ze zažloutlé knížky. A snad doufala, že se se svým zachráncem jednou potká v lese, kde místo železného šrotu a rzi porostou pravé stromy a květiny a nad hlavou jim budou zpívat ptáci.

Lukás Herma Little Red Riding Hood

It was a dark night, not because of clouds, only the coal smoke from thousands smokestacks was rising to the sky, veiling all, moon and stars. Mixxed with raindrops, the fine ash had been falling back to the ground, dyeing everything in this huge city, houses, trees, river, even the humans to the same shade og tiresome grey. In factories locomotives of fine steel were made, airships and weapons, steam engines for mighty battleships, anything, limited just by imagination of the man himself. The fire never burned out, machines never stopped, legions of workers were taking never ending turns as breathing tools creating this great age of steel and steam.

Althought assembly lines were impeccable, processed raw materials pure, comming from many miles deep mines and pits under the city and level of precision, with which complexed programs giving souls to the complicated mechanism were etched to the copper punch card, almost unbeleivable, sometimes scraps were made. Machines and mechanical beings, unable to serve its purpose due to various mistakes and defects. Those were thrown out to the giant dump, where in barbaric times great park had been. And there they were rusting on the huge heaps, just to be taken after years and melted to the something else.

And that cold autumn night when dirty drops of acid rain were falling from the sky, the wind had been blowing through the landfill, leaning into piles of scrap and playing them as a huge organ supplemented by humming chorus of facotry machines that never slept, one of the thousands of apparently dead mechanical being suddenly woke up. He lay there for years. But the fire within him never quite burned out, although the skeleton was covered with rust and exposed to the harsh weather in the company of his brothers abandoned rotting.

He came back to life and sniffed. Gears ran with creaking and effort, internal mechanisms awakened, as they were supplied with energy by still smoldering flame, that suddently blazed with much greater intensity. The water was changed into steam and ran the system built by knacky hands of skilled craftsmen. The left eye glowed in the dark with red light, right hung limply on a piece of wire, hen machine began to make its way to the surface through the surrounding scrap. Damaged and incomplete. Crippled. Rusty and tired.

The girl ran. Dressed in dirty overalls, stained with oil, she stumbled through the darkness. Fleeing from one of the factories. From the endless roundabouts. She wanted to see the sun and stars, hear the birds singing, see miracles which were written in forbidden picture books with yellowed and greassy pages that circulated among them, and by the light of a nearly extinct candles were readed to each other at nights, while

they were dreaming about running away. Because children have their own desires and dreams, which they lose as adults when they fit into the endless roundabout shifts, when their sole objective remains to satisfy the plan and to feed the family, not to die for fatigue before the children themselves can take care of themselves.

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She was very afraid of such fate, so, one evening, she stretched through narrow window leading out, dug under the fence and ran away. She felt the dogs going after her trail. She struggled and panted through the piles of rusty metal, cutting her hands, coughing her own blood in convulsive fits of coughing due to aggressive smoke and ash. And while her body dyed in red blood flowing from dozens of shallow wounds, mechanical barking for refugees fleeing pursuers approached. Suddenly he jumped in front of her machine, which long ago had to be a wolf. She shivered and watched him uncertainly stepping on a rusty leg and looking at her with his one good eye. His walk faded elegance. His body was covered with rust. It was just a pile of scrap, what suddenly came alive. With amazement she recognized her own work, one of the first things with which production had helped, and to put that part of your dreams, and you did not even know that it ended here.

„Good day to you, Little Red Cap,“ said the wolf suddenly hoarsely, almost unintelligibly, with speech organs damaged on the verge of acceptability, and she stared into his one glowing eye. It sounded ... lonely. Without a purpose. And she remembered the answer, the answer like a dream.

„Thank you, wolf,“ she whispered as the machine nuzzled at her. She patted the cold rusty metal structure of its body and watched the steam rising from two brass exhausts on its sides. Suddenly, her hand slid through the place where the corrosion ate through the metal box to the very glowing interior of the machine and touched the box with copper punch cards. And while mechanical barking dogs approached, an idea occurred to her.

„Where are you going so early, Little Red Cap?“ asked the wolf again, while she fought with small stiff screws hiding machines brain and turning them with nothing more than her own broken nails.

„To grandmother's,“ she hissed when the turns completely against their will slowly twisted, and she was trying to work as quickly as possible, because the damaged machine refused to stop for a moment and still moved.

„And what are you carrying under your apron?“ gasped again broken wolf, copper nose nudged her hand and opened its mouth full of steel fangs.

„Grandmother is sick and weak, and I am taking her some cake and wine. We baked yesterday, and they should give her strength,“ whispered the girl again. Her forehead beaded with struggle when she finally removed the cover, revealing a box of punch cards lined up by long unused pattern that had been read by several sharp needles made of steel.

„Little Red Cap, just where does your grandmother live?“ wolf asked again, while little girl's clever fingers were playing with its center of being alone, tried to change programming, and barking pursuers were again a little closer.

„Her house is a good quarter hour from here in the woods, under the three large oak trees. There's a hedge of hazel bushes there. You must know the place,“ she said, quoting her favorite fairy tale. And even at this moment, peering at the terrible labels and changing their order. Suddenly the wolf fell silent. He stopped and collapsed like a broken toy. The girl cried out in despair, cursed as to the scrap heap showed her two pursuers, mechanical slender silhouettes ready to tear to pieces for arrogance.

She retreated before them, staring at the glowing mechanical eyes, knew that she was dead, there was no sense in running anymore. When suddenly a wolf, her wolf, came back to life again. Good eye looked first at her, then at her pursuers, and she felt as the needle in his heart struggled to munch on a new series of data. He straightened, turned toward them and growled.

„Listen, Little Red Cap,“ it said suddenly, „haven't you seen the beautiful flowers that are blossoming in the woods? Why don't you go and take a look? And I don't believe you can hear how beautifully the birds are singing. You are walking along as though you were on your way to school in the village. It is very beautiful in the woods. Run away. I will slow them down.“

And the girl, Hood, obeyed. While damaged wolf fought his last battle for her, she ran. She ran to freedom. Her dream. She fought for the chance given her by fortune and one tale from old book. And perhaps hoping that she will meet her savior again one day, in the woods, where instead of scrap iron and rust will grow true trees and flowers and where will birds be singing overhead.

Julie Novakova *The Bodhisattva*

Where there is form, already there is emptiness. Where there is emptiness, already there is form.

– Kumarajiva

Sorn stood hesitantly on the square in front of The Enlightened One's statue and wiped a few beads of sweat from his brow. The sun was beating down mercilessly and the wide paved space was almost deserted. It didn't calm him very much, but he kept pretending he was a pilgrim who came here to contemplate. He came closer to the statue and bowed his head a little. He let his gaze wander from behind his shades.

You will notice me at first sight, he recalled the words. He kept looking around stealthily, but no one seemed too conspicuous. An old man was walking slowly through the square, carrying a small cart with his goods. In his ragged clothes, he looked rather inappropriate in this open, clean, sunny place. However, such appearance was nothing unusual in Krung Thep, on the contrary.

Two foreigners, probably Indians, were standing under a hovering parasol. They were attracting a lot of attention, but he said he'd be alone.

A woman in a long red dress was sitting on the stairs to the elevated part of the square. Her amber skin was glistening in the sun and black curls were falling to her shoulders. Sorn couldn't see her face but suspected it beautiful and symmetric, probably too much to be true.

She wouldn't be the one he was expecting either.

For a moment, he closed his eyes and submerged in his thoughts but he let his senses alert. He still wasn't sure. It could be a trap, a betrayal. He might think in trance about his conversations with Karuna whole days but he could never be sure. He had to take the risk. A thought of death appeared from deep subconsciousness. It did not unsettle him; he would just join the ranks of so many before him. Others would follow. Someone would eventually achieve his goal.

His hearing alerted him. Silent, soft steps. Someone was coming; most probably barefoot.

Sorn opened his eyes and looked into a face of a bhikku. The monk was dressed in a traditional yellow kasaya and held a small bowl for alms. There was nothing special about him. He would not be Karuna either –

The monk blinked and Sorn nearly gasped.

An abysmal darkness was staring at him from the monk's eyes as if it led to a whole other dimension. In fact, it could be perceived like that. Sorn forced himself to avert his gaze and look down.

There was a tiny object in the bhikku's bowl; a chip, the one he needed. Sorn reached into his pocket for some small change and put them in the bowl, taking the object. The monk blinked again and then normal tired dark-brown eyes were looking calmly at him. The bhikku thankfully bowed a little and continued walking.

Sorn stayed next to the statue for a little while before heading back.

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The sun set and life poured back into the city's veins. It didn't risk getting exhausted and weakened in the merciless beams; it spread into a hot, humid, calming darkness. It was time when many years ago, the streets came to life too and many foreigners sought houses in which they could find cheap pleasure. These times were long gone and most of the houses abandoned. Some didn't even exist anymore. Other ones were occupied by rogues and fugitives, usually soon caught or expelled during police raids; the only permanent residents of these infamous buildings were rats.

The door creaked as Sorn slipped inside. Wet mug squelched under his feet. It never dried, not even during the hottest days, hidden in the sweaty duskiness in shade of the derelict building. He listened for a while but registered nothing but usual sounds of the house. He walked up silently to his temporary home.

He plugged his laptop into a cable led from the local electric network. Sorn guessed it would take a few more days until someone notices the illegal power consumption. That was enough; he would leave tonight.

He sat next to the damp wall in the siddhasana posture; he discovered long ago that it helped him to concentrate. He closed his eyes slowly and submerged; filtered away almost everything. His breath and pulse rate slowed enormously. He felt nothing, as if he was floating in an endless void.

A rapid jolt would unnerve him so many times before, make him lose concentration and disrupt the connection, but he got used to it well by now. He was inside.

If he was to describe that world fully awake, he wouldn't be able to do it; he would hardly recall anything from there. Normal concepts didn't make any sense in this place.

He couldn't even describe the ways he used to communicate, move, find and identify his fellows. It was actually quite intuitive; for some rare people. For the others, it would seem ungraspable and mysterious and they would think up tales of nearly mythical proportions about it. Sorn would just laugh at these stories. If only they knew...

He felt another mind approaching him. He recognized it and lowered the barriers. "Sanghamitta," he said. "I have met Karuna today. Thank you."

"Karuna was arrested today, Mahinda. The bhavacakrists took him! You must disappear."

"When did it happen and how do you know?"

"He was here when it happened, about an hour ago. I felt his presence and then a sudden shriek and an emptiness, then a weak echo of what occurred."

He touched her mind and felt her recent memory. She was right.

"It's too dangerous to seek a bodhisattva now," she continued. "Just vanish, hide for a few weeks and then return cautiously. I'll do the same."

"As will I."

"Promise," she requested.

"I promise," he replied without hesitation.

He could feel her relief. She didn't question his answer. After all, it was too hard to lie in virtuality, where they could easily feel each other's emotions.

It was very hard indeed, but he had mastered it eventually.

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The streets of Krung Thep welcomed a new shadow in their cloak of dusk and dampness. What Sorn saw were just other shadows in narrow alleys; not people, but shadows, without recognizable faces and identities, just like him.

He loved this place.

Long ago, before he had been born, the city used to be full of tourists from the whole world. Times changed; nowadays, the Siam Union opened up to foreigners only reluctantly.

One would say that cautiousness was a good trait.

Since the first bodhisattva appeared, a lot has changed. Sorn could vaguely remember his early childhood in a land filled with floods, droughts, diseases and famine, one regime replacing another like on a crazy carousel ride. His first clear memory was about hope.

We'll be better. They will pull us out of this sludge. They are neither dead, neither alive. They reached enlightenment but stayed in contact with us, helping the world of the suffering.

No wonder people started calling them bodhisattvas.

Rumors were going on about them. Tales full of both adventure and lessons; legends and modern myths about miracles and bold deeds accomplished right under the noses of the bhavacakrists, who didn't mean to let the virtual world be occupied by loose entities.

As soon as people cease to be bound by rules of their physical shells, it only leads to bad things, they would say. Destroying sites and whole databases, stealing information, chaos...

But the people would object: Boddhisatvas didn't have any motivation to harm. Anyone who could reach this state must have a clear, calm and kind mind. If any trouble occurred, it surely had good reasons.

After all, most people approved of taking from the rich and giving to the poor. Most people belonged to the poor.

The boddhisatvas used to be too. Poor but ingenious, absorbed by the virtuality, idealists. Who else would willingly die in his physical form, cease to exist officially?

Sorn would just smile quietly. Very little people could actually understand it.

He kept making his way through the streets, both familiar and strange. The air was full of suspicion and alertness; everyone was a stranger here, even those who lived here their whole life. Everyone had to get to know not to surpass the unwritten rules and stay well within the limits. If you didn't, you had to know more; notice things, listen to the whispers of the city, feel the approaching danger before it destroyed you.

Then you could become one of them. Outside the rules. People would secretly admire you, but would never know who you were even if you lived just next to them. It was a small price. You'd know that this life meant nothing. True life only began where the barriers fell apart.

After becoming familiar with the other world, showing talent, calm and patience, you'd become an aharant. And if you were truly special, you might just become a new boddhisatva.

Sorn entered a small dank alley and overcame a fence to a garbage-covered yard. At the end was a small house made mostly of wood, surrounded by the yard from three sides and leaning to a narrow canal on the remaining one. Above the canal, there was a futuristic arcade of chaotically routed cables.

This was what he loved most about the city; it was so unbound and disorderly. Things that shouldn't work in theory by all means worked here despite the odds. Local people had to be resourceful. Krung Thep was full of life and ideas; it truly never slept. Sorn got to know foreign cities at least through the virtuality and they seemed beautiful and shiny like the central districts of Krung Thep but also lifeless and voiceless like them. He was longing to actually see them, walk through their streets, meet their people, but he would never consider them so alive as this city.

He entered the deserted building. In one such house long time ago, he spent a week half-unconscious and in terrible pain, locked inside a small chamber, miraculously aseptic. Then the street butcher dealing with cheap illegal implants let him into the streets. Sorn had an awful headache, almost couldn't walk, saw a neon-colored aura piercing his eyes around everything and every noise sounded like a gunshot to him. He crawled in his temporary home, took a triple dose of strong painkillers – enough to ease the pain very little and not to kill him – and slowly fell asleep. After he woke up, he wasn't feeling as if he balanced on the edge of a very nasty death anymore. He tried to connect.

And he made it.

Today, entering the virtuality was no trouble for him. It seemed as natural as breathing.

Now, after Karuna was arrested, he had to find the boddhisatva alone.

He dove into the darkness. His illegal implants provided no user-friendly interface, no

easy navigation. He had to learn everything himself – but when he succeeded, it gave him an almost boundless power inside the environment.

Sanghamitta was not present; good. He set on trying to find the boddhisatva named Vasubandhu. The chip from Karuna contained detailed information on history of this entity; no longer a man. He usually used any excess memory available at public networks he easily hacked; fluctuated between Krung Thep, Battambang, Vang Viang and other large cities of the Siam Union, however, sometimes he entered much better protected company servers too. He never spent anywhere so long to be isolated and deleted by the bhavacakrists. Karuna couldn't confirm how many copies there were, if Vasubandhu's own philosophy didn't prevent him from making some.

Sorn couldn't find him anywhere in Krung Thep, but the last traces he was able to recover went to Banlung, a smaller city in the Cambodia province more than five hundred miles far from here. A negligible distance for a boddhisatva, nevertheless, very hard to overcome for an aharant, a creature with a physical body guiding him through his connection with a computer.

He wouldn't risk death or catatonia while attempting to reach there; he had to get closer.

The third class of interstate trains in the Siam Union did not resemble the same class of international lines; passengers were crowded on the hard benches and in the corridors. Animals were often present; chickens in wicker baskets, birds in too small cages, fat dogs carried to big markets. Men and women in worn-out shirts and saris, respectively, were writing on their phones or laptops. There were no miniature devices behind ears or in bracelets, no super-thin convertible pads.

Sorn watched his surroundings with a strange calm. This is enough for us. We can always manage.

After nearly two hundred miles, they crossed the border of Siam and Cambodia provinces. Cambodia constituted the least important member of the Union; it was Siam which marked its origins a few decades ago. The third member, Laos, was trying hard to even with Siam, but was still far behind the economic prosperity of the main province. Nevertheless, the Union remained stable; with the totalitarian Burma on the west, fiercely ambitious Malaysia on the south, hungry China on the north and newly impoverished Vietnam on the east, it did not have much of an option. It had to devote all its forces to compete with China.

Upon a long ride in the feverish heat in a crowded coupe, Sorn got out in Banlung.

The town was a hole. Long ago, it served as a tourist base thanks to the nearby Ratanakiri airport and several national parks. The period of bloom was very short and only a few reconstructed buildings, hotels and restaurants marked it now. The rest of the city remained essentially the same for many decades and consisted of simple one-storey houses in various stages of decay, two asphalts, the rest being dusty roads lined with old garbage. Children with friendly grubby faces played on the roads; cars seemed rare here, but there was an old motorcycle or a moped in front of almost every house, no matter how poor-looking.

Sorn reached the eye-stinging line between the former modern center and the suburbs, disappeared in a soothingly familiar narrow corridor and started searching for



a local optic cable. It didn't take him very long to find it and connect himself. He had no power for his laptop, but it should hold for at least nine more hours. He never spent so long in the virtuality.

He checked the connection carefully. Once he lost it during his stay and he would never repeat it. He felt like blind, deaf, paralyzed and in agony of pain at the same time. At first he panicked, then gathered his control back. Gradually he found he was still in his body, alive and healthy, but he would wait a long time before coming back to the other world. His head hurt badly and his senses were recovering for several days.

But this time, it seemed quite safe.

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Vasubandhu, Sorn thought and let the faint, concealed idea flow to the whole Ratanakiri. It would be hardly perceptible for any bhavacakrist; however, unmistakable for a boddhisatva, if he was nearby. That wasn't sure; Sorn had heard stories of boddhisatvas moving or copying themselves to London, Washington, Moscow and other great cities. But Vasubandhu seemed to care to stay in the Union. And if the boddhisatva was as wise as said, he should have known about Sorn at least for weeks – but it was another matter if he would answer. Contacting a boddhisatva was not easy; but Sorn had no choice. He couldn't continue his journey alone.

You're a tathagata; a teacher of the unaware; an enlightened, who can help us improve. You can show us the way of light.

Sorn filtered away his other thoughts. There was no time, just a calming constant flow of ones and zeros. He entered a deep meditation. That was when he heard it, a voice like from another world, as if the ancient ideal of transcendental teachers-demigods was real: If you are prepared to undergo a journey of suffering to let go of worldly things and feelings, I can help you. However, I need to see a proof of your commitment and faith.

Anything, master, Sorn replied without hesitation.

Prove concentration above any unaware. Enter the local police station's network and copy all data from this year.

All data. Banlung was a hole, but that didn't mean it was a hole without quite a high amount of crime. Despite that, it seemed like a rather easy task. Sorn guessed there would be minimum multimedia files. Actually, it seemed almost too easy.

I will prove it, master.

Penetrating the system really was quite simple. Only when he tried to copy the data, something suddenly attacked him – but surely not work of Banlung police. Sorn realized what it was; the waiting software must had been installed there by Vasunbandhu, who expected him and prepared a test.

Sorn kept a cool head. He used practices that helped him before against similar threats. He tried to find weak spots and use them in his advantage – and then the attack stopped as unexpectedly as it begun.

And Sorn heard the words he'd been praying for past years.

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*“You proved the ability of extraordinary concentration and calm,” sounded in his head, as if he could actually listen to the boddhisatva’s voice. “I will lead you on your journey to enlightenment.”*

*“Thank you, master. I will follow you faithfully.”*

*As soon as Sorn emerged and opened his eyes, his heart started pounding quickly. Up to this moment, he controlled his emotions carefully and let none get to the surface of his mind. Now he let the barriers down and was overwhelmed with joy, pride, satisfaction, but beneath it also something a little darker.*

*\*\*\**

*The next few weeks, Sorn spent almost more time in the virtual world than the actual. He was exhausted, but never hesitated. He longed nothing more than what awaited him soon. And Vasubandhu was an excellent teacher. Sorn almost stopped communicating with Sanghamitta – but just almost. He told her nothing about Vasubandhu, but she probably understood anyway.*

*One day after an especially difficult training Vasubandhu spoke: “Do not forget that all this is just preparing for a final test, which can be passed only by those of exceptional purity. Those who do not succeed can lose their life attempting.”*

*“I’m aware of that, master, and I’m prepared to undergo the test. Have you decided yet what it would be? I had an idea where to prove I’m worthy. The most secure network in this country belongs to Prajuk Thnakhar.”*

*An ordinary person would never notice the short delay before Vasubandhu reacted, but Sorn registered it.*

*“You’re a wise apprentice, Mahinda. Let Prajuk be your final test. But you need to be patient; there are still many more before you.”*

*\*\*\**

*“You’re improving each day, my good apprentice. You will soon be ready to reach nirvana.”*

*Sorn could not stop thinking about these Vasubandhu’s words. It was just two months since he had begun learning from the boddhisatva. He trained the arts of invisibility among normal software, running on more servers at the same time and copying even into very secured systems. He could suppress his emotions to a minimum, concentrate perfectly – and according to Vasubandhu, he mastered all the arts so well that a time for the final part of his journey came. He had to leave his limiting physical shell behind.*

*Time for the final test approached.*

*Sorn exhaled. Sweat was running from his brow. It was raining outside – persistent, severe and pervasive monsoon rains had come. Indian businessmen and tourists left Krung Thep and the city entered a period of a strange laziness.*

*There were large pools of water on the floor of this flat; but it was better than nothing. He should be able to steal electricity and high-speed connection for a few more*

days before the need to move elsewhere. Some time ago, he mentioned to Sanghamitta that times could change soon – and maybe they wouldn't need to hide anymore. He knew that she had understood him right.

He felt nervous and hungry, but that would go away after a while of meditation. He was so close. There was no space for mistakes now.

Sorn produced a blissful smile.

I will be ready, master. Tomorrow, we will enter the system of Prajuk Thnakhar.

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There was no one in the Siam Union who wouldn't know Prajuk Thnakhar. It was rumored that the bank supported the revolution and establishment of the Union – and that it catapulted it from a local bank to a mammoth company.

Sorn never doubted it.

Father; mother; sister. They will pay today.

He suppressed his feelings, though he found it more complicated now than usually, and prepared to submerge into the virtuality.

“Mahinda,” Vasubandhu greeted him.

“Master.”

Almost all virtual financial streams ran into one huge data river of Prajuk Thnakhar. Its servers had the top security standards; after all, the Union depended a lot on this company.

However, the boddhisatva and his apprentice managed to overcome its firewalls and traps step by step. And maybe just too easily.

Sorn switched to another data stream as soon as they entered. Vasubandhu did not – and he immediately had to face attack from several bhavacakrists who fought ferociously. Only one of them went after the aharant. Sorn recognized this mind; he had encountered it many times before, only now it seemed all distorted and cold: Sanghamitta.

They must have been waiting for them here all along.

Just as Sorn presumed.

Mahinda! He heard Vasubandhu's weakening calls.

I'm sorry, my master.

He knew that Vasubandhu did not understand. How could anyone like him grasp the idea that Sorn never sought to become a boddhisatva like him, give up his physical shell and its limits? And that he would betray such an entity because of the lowest human impulses – hatred and revenge?

I'm sorry, Sorn repeated. He gave the boddhisatva one last thought before moving all his forces to shattering the barriers of Prajuk subroutines, destroying every single backup he could reach, and avoiding Sanghamitta's continuing attacks. She was the only one focused on him; the rest concentrated on the boddhisatva, a more difficult target.

Sorn needed a boddhisatva to get here mainly because of this purpose. He'd never gain enough time to succeed alone.

When he's done, foundations Siam's economics would be seriously shaken. The mighty and the rich would be hit hardest; those people who destroyed his whole family

and many others; those, who closed the founding states of the Union to the outside world and raised their own twisted justice.

He could see it so clearly as if it had happened just yesterday. They came at night, dressed in black police overalls and masks. Father and mother had no time to fight back. He resisted – kicked, bit... but it was for nothing. He and little Bway were moved to an orphanage. He never saw their parents again. They might have died during questioning; have been executed; have died slowly because of some of the illnesses so abundant in prisons; and they might still be alive somewhere, abject Karens, who had disliked their discrimination and protested too loudly; hardly humans for pure-blood Thais and Laos.

Darkness again. Escaping from the orphanage. Bway was too slow; he never saw her after that night too.

Then the burning hatred. If he could set fires with it, all Siam would be ashes now. And suddenly it was just gone.

Sorn found himself completely without hatred which led him through most of his life. For a moment, he was so confused that he almost forgot to keep building new barriers around himself.

It's over, he realized, I cannot do anything else.

He destroyed everything he could here. Most of the systems would be soon restored from offline backups, but the wound would heal only slowly. A lot of the money ended up transferred to rebels against the Union through so many financial channels that bhavacakrists would never get it all back.

He wanted to retreat but found that Sanghamitta cut off his stream back. No data were running from Sorn lying in the leaking flat to Sorn present in Prajuk Thnakhar's systems.

Panic seized him. It was a strange feeling without a body; it was just a state of mind. He could not go back to his body without being caught and destroyed. And even if he managed to find a way back eventually, he would probably never successfully return. He was not copied, he was moved. His body was surely dead or in deep catatonia.

My body is dead; I'm still alive.

He succeeded in a task he never truly meant to accomplish; he became a boddhisattva.

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I cannot stay here. The attacks grow stronger. I must move. Or copy myself, he thought. It was interesting to admit this possibility.

He felt naked and invulnerable at the same time. Amputated – and wider than any time before. Empty – and full of brave new feelings.

Sorn sent a few lines of code through the barriers to find out any possible ways out. In a moment, he had the results. They did not seem very optimistic.

There wasn't any way.

I could fight. Alone against several experienced bhavacakrists – and the once again waking security systems.

Apparently he became a boddhisattva just to die a moment later; in his case, the metaphor of the eternal enlightened did not work.

*I could have had the whole eternity. I could have been everywhere and nowhere at the same time. In emptiness and form.*

*He was almost surprised that even deep down, he felt no sorrow. Just a strange relief and calm. After all, he could not change anything now.*

*Maybe that's what true enlightenment feels like, he thought.*

*Then he tore down all his barriers.*

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*When he tried to remember it later, he could only recall pieces, individual short moments. It had happened too fast.*

*And moreover, her memories differed from his.*

*He could remember feeling as if he was flying faster than any possible wind. He could use the modern, fast servers of Prajuk fully. Of course, his enemies were doing the same. Sorn could easily fight security software, but the bhavacakrists were closing in on him.*

*She was the first to reach him; she was one of the best. Sanghamitta could compress the electronic part of her composite mind to be the fastest one. She stopped his escape. But Sorn never assumed he would so easily get outside. There was still one possible way from here. As she appeared so close to him, he attacked fiercely. She needed to recall practices stored in the organic part of her mind in a body full of implants.*

*He just followed this part of her.*

*Just in this case meant overcoming numerous traps. He remembered only vaguely how he could break the security protocols of a modern government cyborg. But as he found himself in her main control implant, he was not coming back.*

*Suddenly he awoke physically. He was floating in a support unit of bhavacakrist agents. He knew precisely where he was and how to get from there. Her memories blended with his, but he was the one controlling the body now. He reported a successful mission ending with destroying the rebels. As soon as he could, he left the department and emerged outside on a modern wide boulevard gleaming with the monsoon rain.*

*He felt the raindrops on his skin. It was mostly human skin, soft and amber-colored. He was inside the body of the woman he had seen at the square before Karuna had been arrested. He had suspected Sanghamitta as a bhavacakrist from the very beginning, but he never knew her true appearance. His plan worked; she let him alone because he could lead them to a bodhisattva and later maybe even more of them. Only after entering Prajuk, they had no choice but to stop him. He counted on that. He intentionally sacrificed Vasubandhu – but felt no guilt. He felt almost nothing, not even joy from his victory. He avenged his little sister and parents and other repressed Karens more than enough – but suddenly they meant nothing to him anymore.*

*He felt Sanghamitta trying to take control of the body again, but he was stronger than ever before and had no trouble expelling her into a small contained part of the implants.*

*Would he come to her job tomorrow, go through the security checks and try to pretend he was Sanghamitta? Would he be able to do that? And if so – what would he do next?*

*He could bring the whole Siam down to its knees. He could copy himself anywhere he*

wanted and spread further. He could be slowly taking over any network until someone mightier stopped him. He could rule the country, make it better and make more people pay.

But the question was: Did he want to?

For now, he kept walking on the rain-covered street. He didn't know where. He had no destination on mind; at this precise moment, he was just quietly enjoying the rain.

Petra Slováková Ta Pravá

„Velká doba si žádá velké lidi, kteří se nebojí svých vizí!“ hlásal nápis billboardu na protějším mrakodrapu. Charles si povzdychl. Nebyl problém udělat si náhradní rodinu, ale co pak s tou pravou?

„Někdo na mé úrovni potřebuje opravdové rodiče, za které by se nemusel stydět,“ řekl ředitel své matce a otočil se k ní zády.

„Ale vždyť jsi a vždycky budeš můj syn!“ vykřikla stařenka zoufale.

„Syn... jsem především vysoce postavený úředník. A jako takový potřebuji někoho, kdo bude mé postavení reprezentovat. Ne rodinu, která dělá jen ostudu.“

„Ale my tě milujeme!“

„To pro mě nic neznamena! Myslíš, že je mi příjemné tě schovávat? Zatajovat? Předstírat, že jste dávno umřeli, aby se o vás nezajímala média? Co kdyby se to dostalo napovrch? Takový skandál! Neumíte se ani jeden společensky chovat. Neumíte se ani obléknout na schůzi, nemluvě o tom, že ty neumíš napočítat do milionu bez implantátu. Celá jsi poslepovaná jen taktak.“

„Jsem stará, copak mi to můžeš mít za zlé?“

„Je jiná doba. A ty se do ní nehodíš. Objednal jsem si rodiče, kteří mě budou zastupovat. Budou se ukazovat a budou hrát vaši roli lépe, než jste kdy mohli vy dva.“

„Myslíš, že někdo uvěří, že je to tvá matka? Vždyť by to mohla být tvoje sestra!“ vykřikla stařenka, když viděla vcházet své mladší a mnohem krásnější já. Umělá bytost měla tvář zrekonstruovanou podle pamětní digitální fotografie z její svatby. Ale byla mnohem vznešenější. Jen to držení těla - dokonalá ladnost kroků, nenucené pohyby. Věděla, že jakmile její náhradník otevře pusku bude nádherný hlas chrlit bez problémů ta správná slova, na která by ona nikdy nepřišla. Jak taky, měla vzdělání minulé doby, nechápala stávající režim, neuměla se chovat ve společnosti, protože vyrůstala v dělnické třídě. Protože pracovala, aby měl její syn lepší budoucnost než ona a teď byla tak potupně vyměněna za něco, co nikdy nepřišlo k lidskosti a emocím. Utřela si slzy. Kdyby měla dost síly, vrhla by se na tu ženu a uškrtila by ji vlastníma rukama, ale věděla, že by byla snadno přemožena, možná i zraněna. Byla stará. Unavená a nepotřebná. Možná kdyby si nechala udělat těch několik operací, víc implantátů... ale syn vypadal neoblomně. Jak by také ne - utratil za výrobu náhradníka jistě pěkné jmění, těžko by se teď nechal obměkčit něčím tak hloupým, jako bylo srdce matky, která se o něho celý život starala. A bylo jí to všechno tak líto, že ani nedokázala popsat tíhu na svém srdci. Pak ji muži podepřeli, aby ji odvedli. Dokázala jen sklopit hlavu, jako už tolikrát před tím.

Raz, dva, tři, roznožka. Skákací panák byl dlouhý jako tunel, na jehož konci je světlo.

Hrami trávila běžný den v zahradě. Nikdy nebyla venku, a jestli ano, pak si nepamatovala, jaké to tam bylo. Její paměť sahala jen na okraje rajské zahrady a jen o něco hlouběji do vzpomínek na věci a tvary. Možná její původní rodiče chtěli jen o něco chytřejší dítě. Nebo byla sirotek, kterého dali do izolace, aby ho ochránili před společnostmi? Také mohla být umělá bytost, kterou zákazník vrátil v záruční lhůtě, protože se mu nelíbila. Bylo tak jednoduché nahradit jeden kus druhým.

Calen už nevěděla, kdo byla kdysi. Nepamatovala si mnoho věcí od svého příchodu do Ráje. V matných myšlenkách se jí občas vybavovaly zvuky, když její matka připravovala snídani. Vůni jejího parfému. Ale byly to opravdu její vzpomínky? Pamatovala si na rozpustilé štěně zlatého retrívra, které každé ráno štěkalo u brány na první časný expres vlak. A někdy před tím, než se úplně probudila ze snů, vybavovala si svůj pokoj se stěnami v lehce fialových barvách, kde rostly téměř opravdové rostliny, jako by vyrůstaly z puklin v omítce. Kvetly tam orchideje a mechaničtí kolibříci se k nim snášeli, aby z nich útlými zobáčky vysáli nektar. Lidé se prostě ztráceli. Děti se vyměňovaly. Ve stávající společnosti bylo normální, že si chtěl někdo vyměnit rodinu nebo nechat vytvořit chytřejší dítě. Nebylo nic jednoduššího, než si ho objednat, uměle vytvořit a vzít si náhradníka. Právě dítě se odvedlo někam jinam. Calen věděla kam - do rajské zahrady. Kde nikdo neviděl rozdíl mezi těmi pravými a umělými. Jenže pro dívku neustále zůstávalo nezodpovězenou otázkou: je tohle bariéra, která obklopuje zahradu? Nebo jsou to stěny z vnějšku, které brání to, co je schováno uvnitř?

Byla jen dalším mechanickým člověkem? Umělou bytostí ze součástek? Něco, co má v hlavě malý počítač, který řídí všechny její kroky? Říká jí, kdy má plakat, a kdy se má smát?

Každopádně v uzavřeném společenství se tvořily nové rodiny z různých směsek. Přepisovaly se jim vzpomínky tak, aby byli šťastní, systém se nikdy nemýlil. Nikdo netrpěl. Ale mazání paměti ještě nebylo dokonalé a simulace občas přesáhla svého stvořitele. Pak nastal ten okamžik, kdy začne umělá inteligence uvažovat jako člověk. Někteří nezůstávali v Ráji navěky. Občas se v původních rodičích zmohl soucit a chtěli je zpátky. Ale oni možná už nebyli... ani na to, aby se vyměnili.

„Matka nebo dokonce babička,“ řekla zamyšleně Calen. Sledovala, jak strážníci přivádí do zahrady ženu v letech. Musela být opravdová, protože nikdo jiný by nebyl dobrovolně tak starý. Nač se trápit v chátrajícím těle, když jste mohli žít věčně mladí a krásní? Jen staří lidé, kteří pamatovali jiné časy, tak vzdálené těm, které právě probíhaly, si chtěli uchovat vzpomínky na život takový, jaký býval. Chtěli zestárnout a umřít. Calen nechtěla umřít, i když nevěděla, jaké to je. Slýchávala o tom strašlivé věci...

„Staří lidé brzy umřou,“ zašeptala.

„Ty se bojíš smrti?“ zeptala se jí matka. Tedy nebyla si jistá, jestli je to její opravdová matka, ale co si pamatovala, byly spolu, a ona se o ni starala. Bylo mezi nimi určité duševní pouto a Calen ji občas podezírala, že patří k umělým bytostem, které ovládaly schopnost čtení myšlenek, protože vždycky uhodla, na co myslí.

Calen si sedla na deku, roztaženou v trávě a vzala si z malovaného talířku čokoládovou sušenku. Zhltna ji příliš rychle a ona ji dráždila v krku, až se rozkašlala. Matka se rozesmála a podala jí svůj hrneček s čajem.

„Nevím, jestli se mám bát. Záleží na tom, jestli jsem ta pravá. Ten rozdíl je pro skutečné lidi možná obrovský, ale pro nás? Taková bezvýznamná věc – rozdíl jako živý a mrtvý. Jaké to je umřít?“

„Nevím, už si nevzpomínám. Asi prostě zmizíš.“

„Zmizíš? Jako že už nikde nebudeš? To je smutné.“

„Nekažme si tak krásné odpoledne. Podívej se na to nebe bez mráčků. To určitě není simulace. Květiny voní a na stromech šumí listí ve větru.“

Matka nastavila mladou tvář slunečním paprskům.

„Jsou lidé, kteří se nechtějí měnit. Nedivím se jim. Taky bych v tom, že jsem svá, nalézala bezpečí. Kdybych věděla, že jsem to opravdu já. Jsou lidé, kteří chtějí někoho následovat, protože nejsou sami dost silní na to, aby tu cestu životem ušli, je proto snazší, když je někdo provede,“ uvažovala Calen. Utrhla pampelišku a přičichla si k ní. Na nose jí zůstal žlutý pyl. Rozběhla se s nápadem, že si jich natrhá víc a uplete si věneček. Dostala se až k vysoké zdi, kde jich rostlo nejvíce a nasbírala jich celou náruč. Když už se chystala rozběhnout se zpátky, všimla si, že matka mluví s jedním z vojáků. Dívali se na ni zatímco spolu diskutovali a Calen něco sevřelo u srdce. Někoho přivedli, někdo musel odejít na protiúčet. Květiny jí vypadly z rukou. Ochromená strachem čekala, až k ní muž v uniformě dojde.

„Calen, mohla bys jít prosím tě se mnou?“ zeptal se příjemným hlasem. Jeho tvář byla sotva o pár let starší než ta její. Nevěděla, jestli má utéct nebo poslechnout. Všechno záleželo jen na té jedné malé věci, na drobném rozdílu a přesto tak podstatném – jestli byla opravdová. Třeba nás vyměnili a teď nás chtějí zpátky, pomyslela si. Nebo půjdeme od ohně a síry a tam nás zničí? Natáhla k muži ruku, aby šla pokorně s ním. Nebylo úniku. Matka přišla a chytila ji za druhou.

„Neboj se. Pampelišky si natrháš jinde. Půjdu s tebou,“ řekla tiše a voják přikývl na souhlas. Calen se k ní přitulila. Začala plakat, ale okamžitě se za to nenáviděla, protože chtěla vypadat statečná. Jestli měla v hlavě počítač, právě se zbláznil.

Schovala si obličej do její sukně, jako to dělávala, když jí v noci četla hrůzostrašné knížky o lidech, kteří robovali zavření v hlubinných dolech až z toho oslepli. Aby si někdo mohl zaplatit náhradníka,“ řekla jí na vysvětlenou, když chtěla vědět, proč někoho tak krutě týrají.

Vzpomněla si, jak byla nemocná. Jak jí horečka šířila tělo dnem i nocí a ona se o ni starala, dávala jí obklady a četla jí pohádky. Donesla jí elektronická zvířátka s velkýma očima, která uměla šeptat krásná slova.

„Vždycky jsi byla moje holčička,“ řekla jí a Calen zalil pomíjivý pocit bezpečí.

„Ale ty nejsi má pravá matka, že?“

„Záleží na tom?“ zeptala se a chytila ji za ruku. Usmála se na ni, jako to dělávala vždycky za tu dobu, co spolu strávily v zahradě. Když měly jedna druhou, šlo se jim lépe. Vstříc čemukoliv.

„Ne,“ odpověděla Calen, aniž by zaváhala s odpovědí, „nezáleží...“

Petra Slováková

“Great times require great people who are not afraid of their visions!”



Announced the billboard sign on the skyscraper on the other side of the street. Charles sighed. Creating a surrogate family wouldn't be a problem, but what to do with the real one then?

"People of my rank need true parents who they don't have to be ashamed for," the director said to his mother and showed her his back.

"But you are and always will be my son!" the old woman shrieked in despair.

"Well, most of all, I'm a high-ranking official. And as such, I need someone presentable to back me up, not a family that only causes shame."

"But we love you!"

"That doesn't mean a thing! Do you think it makes me happy to hide you? To conceal you? To pretend that you're long dead only to avoid the interest of the media? What if all of this came out? Such a scandal! None of you knows anything about bon ton. You don't even know the dress code for meetings, not mentioning your incapability to count to a million without your implant. You're barely pieced together.

"I'm old, how can you blame me for that?"

"Times have changed, and you don't fit anymore. I ordered parents who will represent me. They'll let themselves to be seen, and they'll play your role better than you two ever could."

"Do you think anyone will believe she's your mother? She could be your sister!" cried the woman as she saw her younger and much lovelier self enter the room. The artificial being had her face reconstructed according to the digital photo from her wedding. But she was much nobler. Even her gait – the perfect grace of her steps, natural movements. She knew that the very moment when her replacement opens her mouth, the beautiful voice will effortlessly pour out the right words, words she would never be able to put together herself. How could she? The education she had obtained was one of the past era, she didn't understand the new regime, didn't know how to behave in high society, because she had grown up as a child of the working class. Because she had worked hard, so that her son could have a better future than herself, and now she was ignominiously exchanged for a thing that never even got a taste of humanity and emotions. She wiped her tears away. If she had had enough strength, she would have thrown herself on the woman and choked her with her own hands, but she knew she would have been overpowered easily, maybe even injured. She was old. Tired and useless. Maybe if she had undergone a few more surgeries, more implants... but her son looked adamant. Of course he did – he had certainly spent a fortune for creating the replacement, and so he would hardly soften up to something as irrelevant as the heart of his mother, who took care of him his whole life. She felt so sorry for it all, that she couldn't even begin to describe that heaviness in her heart. Then, the two men supported her in order to take her away. She couldn't do anything but lower her head, like so many times before.

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One, two, three, straddle vault. The hopscotch was as long as a tunnel ending in light. She spent her days playing in the Garden of Eden. She had never been outside, or if she had, she didn't remember what it was like out there. Her memory reached merely to the boundaries of the Garden of Eden and a tiny bit deeper into remnants of memories of

things and shapes. Maybe her original parents had wanted a child, just a little bit smarter. Or maybe she had been an orphan put into isolation and kept safe from the society? She could also be an artificial being returned by a customer during her guarantee period, because they didn't like her. It was so simple to exchange one piece for another.

Calen didn't know anymore who she had been before. She didn't remember many things ever since her arrival into the Paradise. Sometimes, in her hazy memories, she could recall sounds of her mother preparing breakfast. The lovely smell of her perfume. But were these really her memories? She remembered a playful golden retriever puppy, which used to bark at the first morning express train at the gate every day. And sometimes, before she fully woke up from her dreams, she remembered her room with slight violet walls, covered by plants that seemed almost real, as if they sprouted from the cracks in the plaster. Orchids bloomed there, and mechanical humming birds swarmed around them, so that they could suck the nectar with their slim beaks.

People would simply go missing. Children swapped. It was normal in the present society that someone wanted to exchange their family or obtain a smarter kid. It was so easy to order one, have it created artificially and get a replacement. The real child was taken somewhere else. Calen knew where – into the Paradise. Where no one could see the difference between the real ones and artificial ones. But the girl kept wondering: was this the barrier that surrounded the Paradise? Or was it the outside walls, protecting what is inside?

Was she just an android? An artificial being made of metal components? A thing with a small computer in its head that controlled its every step? Told it when to cry and when to smile?

In any case, in the enclosed society new families were formed from various mixtures. Their memories were rewritten, so that they would feel happy; the system was never mistaken. Nobody suffered. But wiping one's memory clean wasn't perfect yet, and a simulation surpassed its creator from time to time. And then, the moment came when the artificial intelligence started thinking like a human being. Some of them didn't stay in the Paradise forever. Sometimes, their original parents felt regret, and they wanted their children back. But the kids might not be good anymore... even for an exchange.

"A mother or maybe even a grandmother," said Calen thoughtfully. She watched the guards bring an older woman into the Paradise. She must have been real, because nobody would have wanted to be so old willingly. Why suffer in a decaying body when you could live forever, young and beautiful? Only old people, who remembered different times, so distant from the presence, wanted to preserve their memories of human life as it used to be like. They wanted to become old and die. Calen didn't want to die, although she didn't know what it was like. She had heard terrible things about it...

"Old people die soon," she whispered.

"Are you afraid of death?" her mother asked. Actually, she wasn't sure if the woman was her real mother, but as far back as she could remember, they had always been together and the woman took care of Calen. There was a certain mental bond between them, and Calen sometimes suspected her mother of belonging to the artificial beings who could read minds, because she always managed to guess what Calen was thinking about.

Calen sat down on a blanket spread on the grass and took a chocolate biscuit from the plate. She swallowed it too quickly and it grated her throat, making her cough. Her mother laughed and handed Calen her own mug of tea.

“I don’t know if I should be afraid. It depends if I am real. The difference may be huge for real people, but for us? Such an insignificant thing – the difference between being alive or dead. What is it like to die?”

“I don’t know, I don’t remember anymore. Probably, you simply vanish.”

“Vanish? As in you won’t be anywhere? That’s sad.”

“Let’s not spoil such a beautiful afternoon. Just look at the cloudless sky. That’s surely no simulation. The flowers smell sweetly, and the leaves in the treetops rustle in the wind.

The mother turned her youthful face towards the sun.

“There are people who don’t want to change. I don’t wonder. I would find safety in being myself, too. If I knew this is the real me. There are people who choose to follow someone, because they are not strong enough to go through their life on their own, and it’s easier for them to be led,” Calen mused. She plucked a dandelion and sniffed at it. The yellow pollen speckled her nose. She got up a run a bit farther away to pluck some more dandelions and make a wreath. She managed to get up to the high wall, where most dandelions grew, and she gathered an armful. When she was about to run back, she noticed her mother was talking to one of the soldiers. They were watching her as they talked, and Calen’s heart skipped a beat. Someone was brought in, so someone had to be taken away. The flowers fell out of her arms. Paralyzed by fear, she waited for the man in the uniform to approach.

“Calen, could you come with me, please?” he asked her in a kind voice. His face was barely a few years older than hers. She didn’t know whether to run or obey. Everything depended on the simple little thing, on the tiny difference, so small yet so significant – whether she was real. Maybe we were once exchanged, and now we’re wanted back, she thought. Or maybe we’ll go into the fire and sulphur, and we’ll be destroyed there... She reached out her hand towards the man to go with him meekly. There was no escape. Mother came and took her other hand.

“Don’t be safraid. You’ll pluck dandelions elsewhere. I’ll go with you,” she said quietly, and the soldier nodded in agreement. Calen snuggled to her. She started crying, but she hated herself for it immediately, because she wanted to look brave. If she did have a computer in her head, it has just gone crazy.

She hid her face in her mother’s skirt as she used to do when she was read to horror stories about people who had to work in deep coal mines until they went blind. “So that someone could pay for a replacement,” her mother explained when Calen wanted to know why people were being tortured in such a cruel way.

She remembered how she had been sick once. How fever had been devoured her body day and night and her mother had taken care of her, changed her cold compresses and read stories for her. She had brought her electronic animals with big eyes, which could whisper beautiful words.

“You have always been my little girl,” she told her, and Calen was momentarily flooded by a fleeting feeling of safety.

“But you are not my real mother, are you?”

*"Does it matter?" mother asked her and took her by the hand. She smiled at her as she always used to do during the time they had spent in the garden. As long as they had each other, it was easier to walk forward. Towards anything.*

*"No," Calen answered without hesitation, "it doesn't..."*

*Lucie, Lukacovicova Dětské starchy*

*What we see now*

*Is like a dim image in a mirror –*

*Then we shall see face to face...*

*– Ghost in the Shell*

*Výkřik. A tma.*

*"Co se stalo?"*

*"Už zase zkolaboval."*

*"To vidím! Ale proč?"*

*"Zkuste to znova."*

*Znovu ten strašlivý výkřik. Tolik lidský..*

*"Tohle nechápu. Na hardwaru není žádná chyba. Přesto se systém zhroutil. Pokaždé. A že jsme ho několikrát pečlivě restartovali," krčil rameny inženýr Per. Nebylo jeho zvykem*

*přiznávat, že něco nechápe, ale tentokrát neměl zbylí.*

*"To bude pseudo-psychologická chyba softwaru. Co myslíte, profesore?" nadhodil kdosi z techniků.*

*"Všechno jsem pečlivě sledoval. Vnější projev, záznamy EEG a tak dál. Zdá se, že to je nějaký druh šoku. Co ho způsobuje, to ovšem nevím," odpověděl profesor Björn, odborník přes psychologii umělé inteligence.*

*Všichni se odmlčeli.*

*Jediná osoba stála mimo kroužek zadumaných vědců, protože si, alespoň podle jejich soudu, vlastně nezasloužila stát mezi nimi. Žena, sotva pětadvacetiletá – což bylo nehorázné mládí. Velice zřetelně vnímala zmatek a nejistotu, do níž všichni přítomní pozvolna zabředávali. Odvrátila se od nich a upřeně se zadívala skrz tabuli z neprůstředného skla do sousední místnosti, kde ležel předmět probíhající debaty. Tělo androida umístěné na lehátku.*

*"Vždyť my se snažíme vytvořit něco, co by si o sobě myslelo, že je člověk..." zamumlala si pro sebe. Ne pobouřeně, ale s příjemným úžasem nad nádhernou lidskou drzostí. Co si asi naše kybernetické Dítě myslí? Co cítí? Proč se vždycky zhroutí, sotva procitne? uvažovala. Kromě přístrojů, instalovaných za androidovou hlavou, byla místnost dokonale prázdná, čtyři holé stěny se ve světle zářivek chlubily čistou bělostí.*

*"Je čas udělat přestávku. Takhle na nic nepřijdeme," prohlásil nakonec profesor Björn. Po hodinách opakovaných kontrol a marných diskusí toho už měli všichni dost.*

*"Kom Solveig!" přetrhl psycholog myšlenky své asistentky. Odtrhla zrak od androida a poslušně se připojila k profesorovi.*

Opustili prostory laboratoře a usadili se v jedné menší místnosti. Björn se unaveně opřel a nalil si kávu z konvice, zatímco Solveig si připravovala čaj.

"Je nás tam tolik specialistů z různých oborů a někdy se nespolupracuje zrovna snadno. Za chvíli bychom se začali vzájemně obviňovat z neschopnosti. Jsme taky jen lidi a už nám to jde všem na mozek," vyslovil profesor, co Solveig poznala už na začátku jedné z posledních neplodných debat. Přesto jí ta věta sdělila cosi nového - ne obsahem, ale způsobem, jímž byla vyřčena. Profesor byl unaven, ale právě výjimečně příznivě nakloněn své asistentce, která se zakuklené hádky neúčastnila. Poznala, že na ni pohlíží s jistým otcovským nadhledem. Vždycky poznala citová hnutí druhých, tak se ostatně dostala až sem.

"Je tady jedna věc, na kterou jsem se chtěla zeptat už hodně dlouho," využila Solveig příležitosti.

"Ptej se."

"Neuronové sítě mají schopnost učit se, že? Ten android ji má také..."

"Zkusím ti to říct nějak zjednodušeně," nenechal ji Björn domluvit.

"To bych vám byla vděčná," zareagovala Solveig okamžitě přesně podle profesora očekávání.

Björn si podle svého zvyku odkašlal, než začal mluvit:

"Takže... snad víš, že neuronová síť je pojem z minulého století. V té době bohužel předběhla informatika s matematikou biologií. O neuronech a informačních systémech živočichů se toho tehdy mnoho nevědělo, a matematické modelování se svým analyticko-syntetickým přístupem v podstatě záhy narazilo na hranice, které nešlo překonat.

Až později přišli dva neurofyziologové, Hausman a Fourteen, s objevem funkce gliových buněk - a odešli s Nobelovou cenou. To ses jistě učila ve škole. Záhy poté byl jejich matematický model sestaven a integrován do teorie neuronových sítí. Ukázalo se, že gliové buňky zásadně ovlivňují jak řízení krátkodobé a dlouhodobé paměti, tak asociační funkce. Forstar du?"

Solveig přikývla, že rozumí. Když byl Björn něčím zaujat, často se vracel k rodné dánštině.

Profesor se zamyšleně napil kávy.

"Přesto, jak úžasný to byl objev, nebyl by k ničemu bez technologie uchování informací na atomární bázi," pokračoval Björn. "Teprve fakt, že můžeme uchovat obrovské množství informací na velmi omezeném prostoru, nám umožnil v podstatě dodat expertnímu systému funkce asociativního myšlení. K tomu bylo samozřejmě potřeba vyvinout nové metody adaptivního procesu sítě, které se kupodivu příliš neliší od prastarého repetitio est mater studiorum. To byla moje troška do oblasti vědy," zasníl se starý muž.

Solveig si uvědomila, že latinský nápis viděla na zdi profesorovy pracovny.

"A historie pokračuje. Vytváříme ji teď - my. Třeba zrovna dnes přijdeme na to, kde je v informačním systému chyba a opravíme ji. A pak... přijde něco nového."

Chyba v informačním systému, to jistě! pomyslela si Solveig. Pro tebe Dítě není nic než hromada technologicko-biologického šrotu, případně Nobelovka, se kterou bys po zásluze odešel!

"Proč nevytvoříme nejdřív dětskou mysl a neučíme ji?" dostala se konečně k otázce, která pro ni byla opravdu důležitá.

"Mocipáni tam nahoře si myslí, že když stvoříme rovnou dospělou bytost, tak to bude rychlejší. Nechce se jim čekat patnáct let než by naše kybernetické děťátko dospělo."

"Oni snad vážně věří, že takhle to bude rychlejší..." zavrtěla hlavou Solveig.

"Nechápu, co je špatně," změnil profesor téma. "Ta bytost má v hlavě všechny možné informace, vnímá jako člověk, má schopnost učit se, připodobňovat, domýšlet si, že předmět, který vidí jen zčásti, je pouze zakryt něčím jiným... Člověk považuje za složité věci, které neumí, ale takové záležitosti jako třeba vidění nám přijdou tak samozřejmé! My jsme to ale dokázali, android má všechny smysly kromě čichu, dokonce i schopnost mluvit! A ví toho o světě i o výplodech lidské představivosti spoustu! Tak proč kolabuje? Forbandet...!" Zamyšleně si mnul vousy, před pár lety ještě zrzavé, nyní už prokvetlé stříbrem. Solveig bezradně pokrčila rameny, což bylo přesně, co se od ní očekávalo.

"Kdybych tak tomu kusu hardwaru viděl do hlavy," povzdechl si Björn. Jeho asistentka stiskla rty. To si nikdy nepřej! pomyslela si. Nemáš tušení, co je to za peklo, vidět druhým lidem do hlavy... Vědět, jak tebou pod maskou zdvořilosti pohrdají... Jako já vím, že mnou pohrdáte pro moje mládí, protože nosím dlouhý cop, protože nepiju kávu, ale čaj, protože jsem žena. To všechno je cítit. Napila se čaje tak hluboce, že se div nespálila.

"Asi nám nezbude než projít ještě jednou všechny záznamy, technici znova proberou všechno do posledního drátku a to by v tom byl čert, abychom nenašli chybu," uzavřel profesor a odložil šálek.

"Profesore?" podotkla Solveig zamyšleně, "naš android vlastně pokaždé omdlel."

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Solveig bezcílně přecházela po laboratoři. Venku už se setmělo, všichni odešli. Odešli s pevným rozhodnutím, že snad zítra odhalí závadu - a když ne zítra, tak pozítří.

Za chvíli určitě přijde někdo z ochranky a bude mě chtít vyhodit. Asistentky jsou vždycky podezřelé, napadlo psycholožku. Neudělala ale nic, aby se tomu vyhnula.

Cítila se trochu jako náměsíčná, když vešla do místnosti za neprůstřelným sklem. Přístroje byly pryč, zůstaly jen čtyři bílé stěny a lehátko.

Pomalou ulehla na místo, kde předtím leželo androidovo tělo. Teď byl i "hardware" pryč, pečlivě ukrytý v jakémsi skvělém trezoru. Hardware - tak říkali jeho bezvládné hmotné schránce oni... Ona mu říkala Dítě.

Ležela se zavřenýma očima. Co cítí? Co si myslí? Představila si to. Ne v uspořádaných větách. Jen v pocitech.

Jsem. Ležím. Nemám jméno... Nemám potřebu jména - zatím. Tam venku, za mými víčky, je svět... Právě jsem se probudil...

Otevřela oči. Hleděla přímo na bílý, jasně osvětlený strop laboratoře. Prudce se posadila a zalapala po dechu.

Sevřelo se jí hrdlo a cítila, že se rozpláče. Nebránila se tomu. Teď už rozumím... Její uplakaný obličej se zkřivil hořkým úsměvem. Na tohle nepřijdou... A já jim to neřeknu!

Nejistě vstala. Možná jen oddalují nevyhnutelné. Časem se určitě objeví někdo, kdo jim to poví. Ale prozatím... se budu bavit jejich bezmocí, která pramení z nich samých!

Pečlivě zhasla světlo a zavřela za sebou laboratoř podle všech bezpečnostních předpisů. Sterilní dlouhá bílá chodba si předávala zvuk Solveiginých kroků slabou

*pokroucenou ozvěnou.*

*On je přes všechnu jejich snahu dítě. Děti se často bojí... mnoha věcí. Mají schopnost připodobňovat předměty... Ale ještě nevědí, že některé věci nejsou ve skutečnosti tím, čemu se podobají...*

*Na bělostném stropě laboratoře se sbíhaly tenké praskliny. Vytvářely obraz děsivé démonické tváře.*

*Lucie, Lukacovicova A Child's Fears*

*What we see now*

*Is like a dim image in a mirror –*

*Then we shall see face to face...*

*– Ghost in the Shell*

*A scream. And darkness.*

*„What happened?“*

*„He collapsed. Again.“*

*„I see that! But why?“*

*„Try again.“*

*Again that terrible cry. So human...*

*„I don't understand. No problem with the hardware. But the system still collapsed. Each time as we restarted it.“ Engineer Per shrugged. He was not used to admitting he couldn't understand something, but this time he had no choice.*

*„It could be a pseudo-psychological failure of software. What do you think, professor?“ said one of the technicians.*

*„I have observed it closely. The symptoms, the EEG and so on. It seems it's some kind of a shock. But I have no idea what causes it,“ answered professor Björn, specialist in psychology of artificial intelligence.*

*There was silence.*

*The only person standing outside the group of brooding scientists was the one, who – according to their opinion – had no right to stand among them. It was a woman, about twenty-five years old, that is outrageously young. She felt the uncertainty and confusion into which everybody was slowly descending. She turned around and looked through the bullet-proof glass into the adjacent room, where lied the object of their discussion. Body of an android on a stretcher.*

*„We are actually trying to create something what would think about itself as human...“ she muttered. She was not outraged, only delightfully amazed at the daring human nature. What does our cybernetic Child think? What does he feel? Why does he collapse each time he awakens? she thought. The room was empty, except for the devices behind the android's head, the four walls were clean and white.*

*„Let's have a break. This leads nowhere,“ concluded professor Björn. After hours of repeated controls and fruitless discussions everybody was tired.*

*„Kom Solveig!“ the professor called his assistant. She turned away from the android*

and followed her superior.

They left the lab and sat down in a small room. Björn poured some coffee, Solveig decided to have tea.

„We are so many specialist from different fields here, the cooperation is not easy. Soon we would start blaming each other. We are just human and we are tired,“ the professor said aloud, what Solveig knew already at the beginning of the last useless debate. Still his words told her something new. Not the content but the manner in which they were spoken. The professor was tired, but just now he favoured the company of his assistant, who didn't participate in the discussion. She knew he was looking at her with fatherly leniency. She was able to recognize the emotional state of others, that's how she got this far, how she got here.

„There's one thing I wanted to ask some time ago,“ she took the opportunity.

„Ask.“

„The neuron networks have the ability to learn, don't they? The android has it also...“

„I'll try to explain in an easy way,“ he didn't let her finish the sentence.

„I would be grateful,“ she answered according to his expectations.

„You perhaps know that neuron networks is a term from the past century, when informatics and mathematics developed faster than biology. Neurons and information systems of animals were only a little explored themes and mathematic modeling with the analytical-synthetical attitude soon reached the limits it was not possible to overcome.

Later came two neurophysiologists, Hausman and Fourteen, and discovered the function of glial cells – and really deserved their Nobel prize. You certainly learned this at school. Their mathematical model was soon assembled and integrated into the theory of neuron networks. The glial cells strongly influence not only the short-term and long-term memory, but also the capability to create associations. Forstar du?“

Solveig nodded to confirm she understands. Björn sometimes slipped to Danish, his mothertongue.

The professor sipped his coffee thoughtfully.

„Although it was a great discovery, it would have been useless without technology of storing data on atomic basis,“ Björn continued. „Only the fact that we could store enormous amount of information on small space allowed us to add to the expert system functions of associative thinking. It was necessary to develop new methods of adaptive processes of the network, of course, which surprisingly are not far from the old repetitio est mater studiorum. That was my contribution to modern science,“ said the old man distantly.

Solveig remembered seeing the latin inscription on the wall of the professor's office.

„And the history continues. We are making it, just now. Maybe today we'll find out where's the error in the information system and we'll correct it. And then... something new comes.“

An error in the information system, sure, Solveig thought. You consider the Child only a heap of techno-biological scrap, or a Nobel prize which you would really deserve.

„Why don't we create a child's mind and thanteach it?“ she got to a question, which was really important for her.

„Our superiors think, that if we create an adult mind, it will be faster. They don't want



to wait fifteen years till our cybernetic kid grows up.“

„They really think it would be faster this way..“ Solveig shook her head.

„I don't understand what's wrong,“ the professor changed the theme. „Our creation has all possible information, perceives the world as a human, has the ability to learn, to associate, to understand that an object which is only partly visible is just covered by something else... People consider difficult things they can't do, but such a thing as sight we take for granted! But we did it – our android has all the senses except olfaction; he is even capable of speech! He knows a lot about the world and the products of human fantasy. So why does he collapse? Forbandet...!“ He thoughtfully rubbed his beard, which had been red a few years ago, but now streaked with silver. Solveig shrugged cluelessly, as she was expected to do.

„I wish I could see inside the mind of this piece of hardware,“ the professor sighed. His assistant pressed her lips together. Don't wish for something like that, she thought. You have no idea that it's hell to see into other people's minds... To know that under the mask of politeness they despise you... As I know you scorn me because I am too young, because I wear a long braid, because I drink tea instead of coffee, because I am a woman. I can feel it all. She drank from her cup so deeply she nearly burned her tongue.

„We have no other option than to go through all the records, the technicians will check everything to the last wire and the hell – we will find the mistake,“ the professor concluded and put down his cup.

„Professor?“ said Solveig thoughtfully. „Our android actually fainted each time.“

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Solveig was pacing aimlessly through the lab. It was dark outside, everybody left. They left with a resolution, that tomorrow they would surely find the reason of the malfunction – and if not tomorrow, then certainly the day after tomorrow.

Soon somebody from the security will come and will ask me to leave. Assistants are always suspicious, she thought. But did nothing to avert the situation.

She felt a bit as if sleepwalking, when she entered the room behind the bullet-proof glass. The devices were gone, there were only four white walls and the stretcher left.

She slowly lay down on the place, where the android's body had been before. Now the „hardware“ was gone, hidden in some great safe. Hardware – that's what they called the android's lifeless body... She called him Child.

She lay with eyes closed. What does he feel? What does he think? She tried to imagine. Not in sentences. In feelings.

I am. I am lying. I have no name... I need no name – for now. Out there behind my eyelids there is the world... I just woke up...

She opened her eyes. She stared at the white, brightly lit ceiling of the lab. She sat up abruptly and tried to catch her breath.

She felt her throat tighten and wanted to cry. She didn't fight the tears. Now I understand... Her tearful face was distorted by a bitter smile. They won't find out. And I won't tell them.

She stood up unsteadily. Perhaps I am just putting off the inevitable. Eventually somebody will come and tell them. But for the moment being I'll enjoy their

helplessness, of which they themselves are the cause.

*She turned off the lights and closed the lab behind her according to all the security measures. Her steps echoed in the sterile white corridor in a faint distorted echo.*

*In spite of all their efforts he is still but a child. Children are often afraid of many things... They have the ability of association... But they don't know yet, that some things are not what they look like...*

*On the white ceiling of the lab thin cracks did meet. They formed a horrible demonic face.*

1.

# Denmark

## Manfred Christiansen I morgen.

Det tørre landskab lå øde hen i forbrændte toner af aske. Luften sitrede mat og bleg over glohede klitter af støv. Røde og brune fjelde nåede enkelte steder op over det bølgende støvhav. Som glinsende stenklatter flydende på et ocean af aske, så de ud som frisk flængede sår, frosset fast i tiden, men alt var saftløst og goldt. En vanvittig vind havde slebet stenene spejlblanke, og givet dem deres falske friskhed. Nu drev den støvskyer over de bløde klipper og klitter og igennem de lige så bløde dale og grotter og borede stadig nye huller i den faste granit, for at fylde dem med tørke.

En tør og saltet verden af malet sten og aske. Foranderlig og uændret i utallige år.

Der var ingen skyer på himlen. Solen var aftegnet som en orangehvid glødende skive på en lysegrøn baggrund, der bagte den sidste rest fugtighed ud af klipperne og lod den brændende atmosfære om at opsuge den tørre em.

Et insekt, der så ud som en pansret orm med lange ben, gravede sig ud af en klit. Med kløer der var formet som skovle på de forreste fire par ben, så den ud som om den var perfekt egnet til et liv under overfladen og kun lejlighedsvis behøvede at komme til overfladen. Dets tusindleddede panser havde en grå og silkemat overflade. Det krydsede målrettet nogle meter hen over den brændende klit og gravede sig hastigt ned igen. Hullerne det havde gravet og det spinkle spor efterladt af de mange ben, blev hurtigt udvisket, dækket over, slettet og blæst væk af vinden og det medbragte støv.

En ny bevægelse brød smuldrende overfladen på en klit og afslørede først en finger, så en hånd, en arm, en skulder. En ny skikkelse gravede sig fri fra pulveret. Nøgen, hårløs og tør som omgivelserne. Den matte hud var strammet ud over en rank og benet krop med slanke lemmer og syntes blålig grå. Efter antallet af led og lemmer og deres indbyrdes placering at dømme var skikkelsen et menneske af form, men det havde hverken køn eller navle. Ansigtet var uden rynker, ungt og gammelt på samme tid med tørre krystaller som øjne under udspændte øjenlåg.

Da skikkelsen havde befriet sig selv fra den tørre dyne, begyndte den at grave med langsomme bevægelser i det kogende støv. Dybere og dybere, uden hast, gravede den langsomt som en naturkraft. Den stødte på kanten af en blank metalkasse og fortsatte med uændret hastighed at befri kassen, mens vinden forsøgte at dække den til igen med det tørre verdenshav.

Kassen skinnede som krom. Den var så lang som skikkelsens ben, halv så bred og en tredjedel så høj. Kanterne var afrundede og der var et håndtag for enden. Der var ingen synlige sprækker der antydede, at kassen kunne åbnes. Der var heller ingen knapper, taster eller kontakter.

Efter en pause på en time, en dag eller en uge rejste skikkelsen sig op og begyndte langsomt at gå over klitterne med kassen slæbende efter sig og efterlod et støvet spor som vinden havde alt for travlt med at dække til igen. Fødderne sank ned i de bløde banker til anklerne og dybere. Videre og videre vandrede skikkelsen, i timer, dage og uger, mens dag og nat skiftevis varmede og kølede den uendelig tørre verden.

Om natten, når kulden stod på, slikkede skikkelsen det lidt fugtighed der var ud af luften og lagrede det i lemmerne der svulmede op som en kamels pukler for om dagen at tørre ind igen.

Da skikkelsen nåede frem til en rødbrun blankslebet klippeø i det udtørrede verdenshav, satte den sig på øens højeste punkt med kassen ved siden af sig. Den kiggede på stjernerne der krøb frem i ukendte konstellationer og var lyse nok til at give verden en farve.

Skikkelsen tog kassen frem og lagde den på sine lår. Strøg afsøgende med fingerspidserne over dens brede glatte flade. Da fingrene fandt hvad de ledte efter lagde skikkelsen den ene hånd på kassen og pressede ned mens den drejede hånden. Kassen kom til live. Lysende prikker tændtes en efter en og dannede mønstre i mønstre. Symboler for funktioner eller begreber i ordentlige rækker og kolonner.

Skikkelsen trykkede på et af symbolerne og kassen gav en harmonisk lyd fra sig. Flere symboler lyste op med ledsagende jingler. En efter en, blinkende og klingende. Til sidst samlede kassens lysende prikker sig til et klart billede af et menneskeansigt med hår på hovedet og fugtige øjne og læber.

“Jerome!” lød det fra kassen.

Skikkelsen lagde kassen ved siden af sig på klippen og stirrede igen mod stjernerne. Et enkelt stjernes kud trak en glødende streg hen over det funklende hvælv.

“Det er lang tid siden!” sagde kassen.

Skikkelsen holdt sin ene hånd til halsen og udstødte en rømmende og hostede lyd

“Ja!” sagde skikkelsen tørt og knitrende. “Det er lang tid siden og mit navn er Jerome. Der er så meget jeg har glemt, men ikke mit navn. Jeg er Jerome.”

Jerome stak tungen ud for at slikke fugtigheden ud af luften. Tungen ekspanderede som en ballon og blafrede i brisen, mens små pulserende celler på tungens overflade fragtede den kostbare væske ned til Jeromes mund. Langsomt svulmede hans lemmer.

Jerome sugede tungen til sig igen.

“Det virker naturligt for mig at gøre sådan for at drikke, men det har ikke altid været naturligt, det kan jeg huske. Hvordan kan det være?”

“For lang tid siden ville I kurere alderdommen,” sagde ansigtet på kassen. Levende billeder på kassen viste mennesker i kitler gå rundt i laboratorier. Jerome kiggede på billederne.

“Min hukommelse vender tilbage,” sagde Jerome. “Vi forbedrede vores gener. Ingen skulle blive syge mere, ingen skulle sulte og ingen skulle dø. Til sidst kunne vi leve af støv og fugtighed fra luften. Vi lavede os nye bedre kroppe og afskaffede kønnene for ikke at overbefolke jorden. Jeg var engang en mand.”

“I var gode til at manipulere generne!” Ansigtet på kassen smilede.

Jerome fulgte de tilsyneladende ubevægede stjerner med sit hoved. Vinden var løjet af og støvet lagde sig i et tyndt lag på hans gråblå hud. Hans blik blev fanget af et nyt lys mod øst. En fjern og fremmed månes smilende sølvbue krøb op over horisonten med en fiksstjernes hastighed. Lidt senere begyndte horisonten selv at gløde. Først violet, siden grøn og orange. Stjernernes funklen blev overstrålet en efter en af lyset fra øst, og den sidste gnist døde hen, da den orange sol viste sig med en smal kant der voksede sig stærkere. Samtidig tog vinden til igen og børstede støvet af Jerome. Han fulgte nu solens bane over himlen hele vejen mod vest. Han så hvordan lyset forsvandt og stjernerne igen,

en efter en, i takt med skumringens aftagende lys, begyndte at funkle.

Da kulden faldt på, slikkede Jerome igen lidt fugtighed ud af luften. Han tog igen kassen op på skødet og kiggede på ansigtet.

“De er så fremmede, stjernerne og månen,” sagde Jerome.

“Du har hvilet i lang tid,” sagde ansigtet.

“Hvilet ja. Det er rigtigt. Jeg lagde mig bare ned.

Jeg husker hvordan vi de første mange år var lykkelige. Ingen sygdom. Ingen elendighed. Ingen død. Vi fandt på nye måder at underholde os. En uendelig strøm af kreativitet forbandt os og holdt os adspredt. Efter ti-tusinde år kom den første træthed. Nogle af os forsøgte at slå sig selv ihjel, men vores forbedrede kroppe var langt mere robuste end vi havde anet. De designede gener kunne rette op på al den skade vi kunne påføre os selv. En ny bølge kreativitet for adspredelsens skyld skyllede over os. Vi badede i vulkaner, skød os selv ud i stratosfæren, og dykkede ned i de dybeste afkroge af oceanerne. Men vi mistede til sidst også lysten til det og lagde os ned for at hvile. For dø, det kunne vi ikke.”

Kassen viste filmklip med Jerome fra dengang. Han var atletisk og bar en uniform. Stående på den gletsjer de havde betvunget fra en robåd i en iskold snestorm, eller liggende på en tømmerflåde de krydsede havene med, og aldrig var han alene. Med en håndbevægelse stoppede han fremvisningen.

“Hvor er de andre?” spurgte han

“De fleste hviler sig!” sagde kassen.

Hvælv, der var udspændt over jorden skiftede uden ophør mellem dag og nat. Jerome så på stjernernes vandring. Han fulgte enkelte stjernes kud. Han så månen stå op, den glødende horisont og solopgangen. Solens store skive med det orange skær på banen over himlen. Solnedgangen og stjernerne, der blinkede frem. Han iagttog støvets lag blive tykkere på sin hud. Siddende på den afrundede klippe, kiggede han på det samme igen og igen i en måned eller to eller måske et helt år eller længere. Alt imens farvede solen både månen og landskabet i stadig varmere toner. Han forfriskede sig på natten og så dagslyset komme og gå.

En nat landede en svært pansret bille et kort øjeblik på Jeromes hånd for derefter at flyve målrettet op mod fuldmånen.

“Hvad med dem i rumskibet?” spurgte Jerome. En bølge af sand var skvulpet over øen og nåede ham op til anklerne og kassens ene ende var som sunket ned i støvet. Han fejede støvet af kassen.

Et kort øjeblik efter tonede billeder af et rumskib frem, der blev bygget i kredsløb om jorden. Med plads til en million mennesker, spænedet af sted mod nye stjerner og galakser for at finde nye steder at bo og svar på spørgsmål, der lå bag uendelighedens horisont. Det var hvad Jerome kunne huske.

“De er ikke vendt tilbage endnu!”

“Jeg var med deroppe for at bygge det, men der var ikke plads til alle. Jeg var en af dem der blev tilbage på jorden for at vente på opdagelsesrejsende og høre deres historier ved deres hjemkomst. De skulle finde en ny planet til os.” Jerome kiggede mod stjernerne og fulgte dem igen. Fulgte månens faser og de nye konstellationers skift igennem de overraskende lange årstider. Og lige så langsomt som årstiderne skiftede fik Jerome igen fornemmelsen af at være menneske. Samtidig flød følelsen af ensomhed ud i alle celler i

hans krop og han lod sine tanker gå i dvale.

En dag rykkede en bevægelse i horisonten Jeromes tanker ud af stilstanden. Et menneske som ham dykkede ned i støvhavets bølgedale og skar igennem kammene i retning mod ham, slæbende på en kasse som Jeromes.

For hver dag og hver nat blev det større, og nåede til sidst frem uden hast. Et tørt smil voksede frem på Jeromes ansigt og fyldte hans årer med et liv han havde glemte.

Mennesket satte sig ved siden af Jerome på den rødbrune klippeø, der med tiden var blevet slebet ned til en lille stenhøj.

“Jerome,” sagde det højt.

“Julie,” sagde Jerome.

Sammen fulgte de månens faser og stjernernes transformation, fra årstid til årstid. Iagttagelse af insekters kamp om overlevelse i den ugæstfrie ørken. Så solens farve langsomt skifte fra orange til rødt mens den voksede til mere end dobbelt størrelse, med protuberanser sagte slikkende de indre planeter. Alt imens blev klippen under dem filet til støv af den evige vind og selv blev de flere gange slugt op og spyttet ud igen af de langsomt forbi passerende klitter.

“Hvad er der med solen?” spurgte Jerome da solen en dag var stor og rød midt på dagen og kogte atmosfæren tør.

“Den er på vej ind i næste fase,” sagde kasserne i kor. Begge var næsten dækket af støv og aske.

“For mange år siden flyttede vi jorden ud i en længere omløbsbane. Jeg husker, at solen var blevet for varm,” sagde Julie mens hun med den ene hånd trak kassen fri af støvet.

“Solen har nået sin største udvidelse som rød gigant og vil blæse sine yderste lag af i en eksplosion,” tonede det fra begge kasser, mens de viste den røde sol eksplodere, hvorved jorden blev frarevet sin atmosfære og det yderste lag støv i et orangerødt inferno og blev slynget videre ud i rummet.

“Vil vores kroppe klare sig igennem eksplosionen?” spurgte Jerome.

“Det vil I vide i morgen.”

Flemming R.P. Rasch

Korrespondance vedrørende bevillingsansøgning

JNR 020309-123/KR

Ministeriet for videnskab og teknologi

Att. Bevillingsnævnet

Kære hr. minister

Forleden dag i laboratoriet fik jeg en virkelig enestående ide, som fuldstændig vil kunne revolutionere alt det vi kender. Vil De være så venlig at bevilge mig de tre hundrede millioner jeg skal bruge for at få realiseret min ide. Jeg ser frem til at modtage pengene, så jeg kan gå i gang med at få konstrueret mine apparater.

Med venlig hilsen

Ph.D Peder D. Hansen

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Ph.D Peder D. Hansen  
Institut for eksperimentel højenergifysik

Kære hr. Hansen

Vi takker for Deres ansøgning. Desværre ser vi os ikke umiddelbart i stand til at imødekomme den. Det skyldes at vi har bestemte procedurer der skal følges, når penge skal bevilges. De kan finde de nærmere retningslinjer på vores hjemmeside – adressen står nederst i dette brev. De er naturligvis velkommen til at henvende Dem til os, hvis De skulle have spørgsmål vedrørende ansøgningen.

Med venlig hilsen  
Kontorchef Kurt Regn  
Ministeriet for videnskab og teknologi

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Ministeriet for videnskab og teknologi  
Att. Kontorchef Kurt Regn

Kære hr. Regn

Efter at have tilbragt to dage med at sætte mig ind i reglerne for ansøgninger og forsøgt at skrive en ansøgning, må jeg give fortabt. Kontorarbejde er bare ikke mig. Det forekommer mig at vi tidligere havde ansat en person her på instituttet som tog af disse sager, men at vedkommende på et tidspunkt blev fyret. Jeg er sikker på at der må være sket en eller anden fejl, da ingen af forskerne her på instituttet er uddannede i kontorarbejde og vi gerne vil bruge al vores tid på at forske. Kunne De ikke foranstalte at en sådan person bliver genansat, så jeg kan få lavet ansøgningen færdig? Som jeg tidligere har nævnt, drejer det sig om en ganske enestående opdagelse der vil kunne revolutionere hele den verden vi lever i. På forhånd tak.

Med venlig hilsen  
Ph.D Peder D. Hansen

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Ph.D Peder D. Hansen  
Institut for eksperimentel højenergifysik

Kære hr. Hansen

*Jeg beklager meget at måtte meddele Dem at vi i dette tilfælde ikke kan efterkomme deres anmodning. Antallet af ansatte i statens institutioner følger ganske bestemte regler som det ikke er muligt at dispensere for. Jeg føler mig overbevist om at De med deres enestående intellekt er i stand til selv at skrive ansøgningen færdig. De ønskes hermed god arbejdslyst med det. Jeg kan endvidere forsikre Dem for at ministeriet er overordentlig interesseret i forskning der kan medføre kvantespring i vores samfunds udvikling, så vi afventer med spænding Deres ansøgning.*

*Med venlig hilsen  
Kontorchef Kurt Regn  
Ministeriet for videnskab og teknologi*

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*Ministeriet for videnskab og teknologi  
Att. Kontorchef Kurt Regn*

*Kære hr. Regn*

*Det gik pludselig op for mig hvordan jeg løser mit lille problem med ansøgningen. På grund af projektets overordentlig store kompleksitet vil det med de nuværende regler for ansøgninger tage uforholdsmæssigt meget af min forskningstid selv at skrive ansøgningen. I stedet har jeg her skrevet en ansøgning om støtte til skrivning af ansøgning, hvilket kun tog mig nogle ganske få dage. Håber meget at De vil imødekomme vedlagte ansøgning, således at jeg kan få hyret en kvalificeret person til at skrive ansøgningen til projektet for mig. På forhånd tak.*

*Med venlig hilsen  
Ph.D Peder D. Hansen*

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*Ph.D Peder D. Hansen  
Institut for eksperimentel højenergifysik*

*Kære hr. Hansen*

*Vi takker for modtagelsen af Deres ansøgning. Desværre ser vi os ikke i stand til at imødekomme den, da vi kun kan bevilge penge til forskning og ikke til kontorarbejde. Deres institut har fået en bevilling til kontorhjælp, som De bedes benytte, såfremt De behøver assistance ved skrivning af ansøgninger. Skulle De have yderligere spørgsmål, er De velkommen til at henvende Dem igen.*

*Med venlig hilsen*



Kontorchef Kurt Regn  
Ministeriet for videnskab og teknologi

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Ministeriet for videnskab og teknologi  
Att. Kontorchef Kurt Regn

Kære hr. Regn

De skriver til mig at jeg kan benytte instituttets bevilling til kontorhjælp til hjælp med ansøgninger. Men ved henvendelse til min institutleder fik jeg oplyst at hele bevillingen er brugt på at ansætte to medarbejdere der skal føre vores regnskaber efter de nye regler samt varetage korrespondancen med de forskellige ministerier. Jeg har derfor valgt indtil videre at koncentrere mig om mine øvrige forskningsprojekter og udsætte det nye projekt til jeg får bedre tid til at skrive en ansøgning. I mellemtiden vil jeg bede Dem om en erklæring om at jeg er i gang med at skrive min ansøgning, da jeg skal bruge en sådan erklæring ved min medarbejderudviklingssamtale med den nye forskningsleder, som er ekstern ansat fra erhvervslivet og derfor endnu ikke har fået sat sig ind i hvordan vi plejer at køre tingene her.

Med venlig hilsen  
Ph.D Peder D. Hansen

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Ph.D Peder D. Hansen  
Institut for eksperimentel højenergifysik

Kære hr. Hansen

Tak for Deres anmodning om udstedelse af erklæring. Vi ser os desværre ikke i stand til at imødekomme den, da det vil være imod reglerne at udstede en sådan. Men vi ønsker Dem alt muligt held med deres medarbejderudviklingssamtale. Ved et opslag i vores database ser vi imidlertid at De intet har publiceret de seneste tre år, og vi opfordrer Dem hermed til at få bragt dette forhold i orden snarest muligt, da det er en af de vigtigste parametre i den nye vejledning for medarbejderudviklingssamtaler i forskningsinstitutioner.

Med venlig hilsen  
Kontorchef Kurt Regn  
Ministeriet for videnskab og teknologi

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Ministeriet for videnskab og teknologi  
Att. Kontorchef Kurt Regn

Kære hr. Regn

Jeg takker mange gange for Deres råd, men desværre kom det lidt for sent til at kunne komme mig til nytte. De seneste tre år har jeg arbejdet på et større opslagsværk om de nyeste teorier indenfor højenergifysik, og har derfor ikke haft tid til at skrive mindre artikler. Desværre viste det sig at dette arbejde ikke kunne tages med i vurderingen af min ansættelse, hvorefter jeg blev bedt om at finde mig en alternativ mulighed for ansættelse snarest muligt. Til alt held fik jeg svar på den første ansøgning jeg sendte, så jeg er nu i gang med at få pakket mine sager og undersøge muligheder for bosættelse i mit nye hjemland. De har lovet mig en bevilling på de 300 millioner til mit nye projekt, samt at der er mulighed for at få bevillingen forhøjet, hvis det er nødvendigt.

Med venlig hilsen  
Ph.D Peder D. Hansen

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Ph.D Peder D. Hansen  
The Asimov Foundation

Kære hr. Hansen

Jeg beklager at måtte gøre Dem opmærksom på reglerne for rettigheder til forskning udført på danske forskningsinstitutioner. Da ideen til Deres nye projekt - ifølge det De skriver - blev undfanget i et dansk laboratorium, tilhører ideen den danske stat. Den står således ikke til disposition for Deres nye arbejdsgiver. Jeg må bede Dem om straks at udfærdige en detaljeret beskrivelse af Deres ide, således at den kan blive formidlet videre til en dansk forsker.

Med venlig hilsen  
Kontorchef Kurt Regn  
Ministeriet for videnskab og teknologi

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Ministeriet for videnskab og teknologi  
Att. Kontorchef Kurt Regn

Kære hr. Regn

*Jeg fik indtrykket af at den danske stat ikke var specielt interesseret i min ide, så jeg undrer mig over hvorfor jeg skal gøre mig umage med at skrive den ned. Men hvis det er sådan reglerne er, må jeg vel gøre det. Forinden vil jeg dog bede Dem udfærdige en detaljeret redegørelse for hvilke aspekter af ideen jeg skal komme ind på og på hvilket fagligt niveau jeg skal gøre det. Jeg ser meget frem til at modtage en sådan vejledning fra Dem.*

*I mellemtiden vil det måske glæde Dem at høre at jeg allerede er i fuld gang med mit projekt her i det udenlandske. Den største del af de midler jeg har fået tildelt, er gået til at fremstille en hyperdimensionel transtemporal feltgenerator. Ja det er faktisk hvad en af mine medarbejdere, der er flittig læser af science fiction, har døbt den. Jeg kan virkelig anbefale Dem at indføre det system der er for tilføring af midler til forskning, som de anvender her på stedet. Set fra os forskeres synspunkt fungerer det helt perfekt.*

*Med venlig hilsen  
Ph.D Peder D. Hansen*

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*Ph.D Peder D. Hansen  
The Asimov Foundation*

*Kære hr. Hansen*

*En redegørelse som den De efterlyser, er vi ikke i stand til at udfærdige for Dem, da vi også internt her i ministeriet er underlagt budgetmæssige begrænsninger. Jeg vil bede Dem snarest muligt at sende os den krævede beskrivelse af deres ide, da De i modsat fald vil kunne forvente at vi vil udfærdige en begæring om udlevering til retsforfølgelse.*

*Med hensyn til Deres forslag om indførelse af nye procedurer for bevillingsansøgninger, kan jeg oplyse at vi for tre år siden fik udfærdiget en konsulentrapport som klart viste at vores regler er de bedst mulige. De er velkommen til at rekvirere et eksemplar af denne rapport.*

*Med venlig hilsen  
Kontorchef Kurt Regn  
Ministeriet for videnskab og teknologi*

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*Ministeriet for videnskab og teknologi  
Att. Kontorchef Kurt Regn*

*Kære hr. Regn*

Vores jurister her på stedet er ikke enige i at ideen tilhører den danske stat. Jeg videresender hermed en detaljeret redegørelse for dette synspunkt. De har tilladt sig at få foretaget en oversættelse til dansk, hvilket jeg håber De er tilfreds med. Skulle De have spørgsmål til redegørelsen, eller til et af de 23 bilag, er De velkommen til rette henvendelse direkte til min arbejdsplads juridiske afdeling.

I mellemtiden vil det måske glæde Dem at høre at mit projekt allerede har haft den første succes. Den unge medarbejder jeg omtalte i forrige brev har kaldt vores forsøgsopstilling en anterograd temporalscanner. Hvis jeg havde haft tid til det, ville jeg gerne have fortalt Dem om de fantastiske resultater vi har opnået med bare denne simple opstilling af instrumenterne. Men De er naturligvis velkommen til at aflægge et besøg her på forskningscenteret.

Med venlig hilsen  
Ph.D Peder D. Hansen

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Ph.D Peder D. Hansen  
The Asimov Foundation

Kære hr. Hansen

Meget imod min naturlige disposition må jeg desværre meddele Dem at hvis De ikke inden 30 dage afleverer det forlangte, vil vi få udstedt en international arrestordre på Dem. Ved konsultation med vores juridiske afdeling er vi nået frem til at deres tyveri af fortrolige oplysninger med potentiale for fremstilling af masseødelæggelsesvåben – ifølge vores ekspert hr. Carl-Eddy Skovgaard en såkaldt "tidsmaskine" – klart hører ind under terrorlovgivningen, som automatisk suspenderer de regler som Deres nuværende arbejdsgivers juridiske afdeling henviser til.

Med hensyn til Deres invitation til at besøge Deres arbejdsplads må jeg desværre meddele Dem at min kalender i øjeblikket ikke levner plads til laboratoriebesøg, samtaler med forskere etc.

Med venlig hilsen  
Kontorchef Kurt Regn  
Ministeriet for videnskab og teknologi

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Ministeriet for videnskab og teknologi  
Att. Kontorchef Kurt Regn

Kære hr. Regn

De nævnte at De ville sende mig et eksemplar af konsulentrapporten som anbefaler det danske system som det bedst mulige. Vil de sende mig denne rapport asap? Jeg betaler gerne for tryk og porto og hvilke udgifter der i øvrigt måtte være.

Der er sket en ny udvikling med mit projekt. Mere om det i et senere brev. Lige nu har jeg meget travlt med en ny forsøgsopstilling.

Med venlig hilsen  
Ph.D Peder D. Hansen

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Ph.D Peder D. Hansen  
The Asimov Foundation

Kære hr. Hansen

Hermed vedlagt et eksemplar af konsulentrapporten. Håber De må få fornøjelse af den. Jeg vil minde Dem om at dette ikke har udsættende virkning på vores udstedelse af international arrestordre. Jeg vil stadig meget kraftigt opfordre Dem til selv at melde Dem hos de danske myndigheder.

Med venlig hilsen  
Kontorchef Kurt Regn  
Ministeriet for videnskab og teknologi

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Kontorchef Kurt Regn  
Ministeriet for videnskab og teknologi

Kære Hr. Regn

Jeg takker Dem mange gange for konsulentrapporten. Af årsager jeg desværre ikke kan komme ind på har jeg fået den oversat og præsenteret for min nye arbejdsgivers økonomiske bagmænd. Det viste sig at de var så begejstrede for "den danske model" at de øjeblikkeligt indførte den her og gav ideen videre til deres netværk. Resultatet er at al min forskning er stoppet og ligeså de fleste af mine kollegers. Men jeg er Dem alligevel dybt taknemmelig, da jeg nu har tid til at dyrke min ungdoms passion for science fiction.

Vil De sørge for at få stoppet arrestordren?

Med venlig hilsen

Ph.D Peder D. Hansen  
The Aldiss School of Creative Writing

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Ph.D Peder D. Hansen  
The Aldiss School of Creative Writing

Kære hr. Hansen

Jeg må desværre meddele Dem at De er for sent ude. De er nu blevet opgraderet til terrortrussel af kategori A, efter det er kommet frem at De også har bedraget Deres nye arbejdsgiver. De kan påregne en længere fængselsstraf. Hvis De havde set frem til en retssag, må jeg desværre skuffe dem med at de nye love om "illegal forskning" rummer mulighed for tilbageholdelse på ubestemt tid.

Sagen er overdraget til Justitsministeriet, afdelingen for forskningsterrorisme, hvortil De bedes rette al fremtidig korrespondance.

Med venlig hilsen  
Kontorchef Kurt Regn  
Ministeriet for videnskab og teknologi

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Kontorchef Kurt Regn  
Ministeriet for videnskab og teknologi

Kære Hr. Regn

Ved pågribelsen af eftersøgte forskningsterrorist Peder D. Hansen på "The Aldiss School of Creative Writing" fandtes en notesbog med følgende tekst i hans besiddelse:

"En forsker opfinder en metode til at se ind i fremtiden med. Han opdager at om ganske få år vil den frie grundforskning medføre at der opfindes en bombe som, hvis den detoneres, potentielt vil kunne ødelægge hele universet. Forskeren stammer selv fra et sted hvor forskningen er underlagt et system som gør det næsten umuligt at forske. Han får da den ide at eksportere systemet til resten af verden, og derved få stoppet opfindelsen af den farlige teknologi."

Jeg fremsender hermed teksten, idet jeg vurderer at den hører under begge vores ministeriers ressort.

Med venlig hilsen  
Kontorchef Grethe Rytter  
Justitsministeriet

Min lillebror Peter lægger den sidste bamse op i den øverste køje sammen med vores andet legetøj og vores bøger. De fylder det meste af køjen. Tidligere på natten tog jeg dynen af og lagde et tæppe på i stedet for, så nu ser det ud som om køjen aldrig har været andet end et sted hvor jeg opbevarer mine ting. Når dr. Jahnbeck kommer herved i morgen tidlig vil han huske at det altid har været sådan og glemme at der også har boet en dreng i værelset. Det vil jeg sørge for.

Peter tager sin pyjamas af og begynder at trække i et par bukser. Han tager sin blå- og-hvidternede yndlingsskjorte på og stopper den ned i bukselinningen. Så sætter han sig på den nederste køje ved siden af mig for at tage sko på. Snørebåndene volder ham besvær, så jeg giver ham et tankebillede af hvordan han skal binde dem. Han rejser sig igen og tager sin grå vindjakke på og begynder at stoppe alt drengetøjet fra klædeskabet ned i en affaldspose jeg har stjålet fra køkkenet. Der må ikke være noget tilbage der kan få nogen til at huske Peter.

Da han er klar til at gå, lukker jeg øjnene og sender min bevidsthed ud i kældergangen uden for vores lille værelse. Otto sidder i en stol for enden af gangen, han har åbenbart vagttjans i nat. Han er træt, sidder og nikker, og det er ikke svært for mig at skubbe ham helt i søvn.

Jeg sender Peter ud af døren og hen ad gangen, forbi de tre andre børneværelser. Ilsa og Marie sover trygt i det første, det samme gør tvillingerne i det næste. I det sidste sover René roligt, men Karl ligger og vrider sig i et mareridt. Jeg går ind i hans drøm og fjerner billedet af den sortklædte mand der skræmmer ham. Han sukker, vender sig og skubber hovedet ned i puden. Efter et øjeblik er hans søvn blevet normal. Jeg vender tilbage til gangen.

Otto er den flinkeste af vagterne, men han er ikke særlig smart og hans hukommelse er nem at rette. Inden Peter er kommet igennem døren for enden af gangen, har Otto glemt min brors eksistens.

Peter står nu ved trappen op til stueetagen. Det eneste lys i det lille rum er et grønligt skær fra panelet på kodelåsen ved døren til den udvendige kældertrappe. Jeg styrer ham hen til den og lader hans fingre taste de seks cifre jeg fandt i dr. Jahnbecks sind forleden. Jeg ånder lettet op da låsen lyser grønt. Koden er ikke blevet ændret. Peter træder ud på kælderafsatsen og er kort efter oppe på gaden, ude i natten, ude i friheden.

Jeg ville ønske, at jeg kunne tage med ham. Men dr. Jahnbecks sind er for kompliceret og for stærkt til at jeg kunne få ham til at glemme os i længere tid. Og hvis han husker, kan han få frøken Askavec til at finde os uanset hvor vi er.

Så jeg må blive her på Instituttet og fastholde hans glemsel. I det mindste får jeg reddet Peter fra de ambitioner og lyster jeg kom til at se i doktorens sind da han forleden betragtede tvillingerne lege gætteleg med ESP-kortene.

Jeg sender Peter hen ad gaden i retning af busterminalen. Der er en let regn og gadelysene bliver reflekteret i den våde asfalt. Der står tre affaldsspande ved en port, og jeg får Peter til at smide affaldsposen med tøjet i en af dem. Mens han går videre, begynder jeg at få ham til at glemme. Glemme branden og vores forældres skrig mens de sortklædte mænd bar os væk, glemme Instituttet og dr. Jahnbeck, glemme

indsprøjtningerne og undersøgelserne.

Da Peter når hen til busterminalen har jeg næsten fået ham til at glemme alt der kunne forbinde ham med Instituttet. Jeg sender ham ombord på en bus til en by i den anden ende af landet. Jeg sørger for at chaufføren ikke lægger mærke til at han stiger op. På det bageste sæde i bussen får jeg Peter til at falde i søvn, med en instruks om at forlade bussen ved endestationen og glemme hvor han kom fra.

En dreng der går alene rundt i gaderne, vil før eller siden blive meldt til myndighederne. Når de ikke kan finde ud af hvor han kommer fra, vil de sikkert anbringe ham på et børnehjem eller hos nogle plejeforældre. Jeg håber han får plejeforældre, nogle der er flinke.

Jeg giver mig til at fjerne de sidste farlige og onde minder. Jeg ville ønske jeg kunne sige: Husk mig, Peter, husk din søster, men selv ikke mig kan jeg lade ham huske.

Farvel, Peter, elskede bror. Glem mig for evigt.

Klaus AE. Mogensen Goodbye

My little brother Peter is placing our last teddy bear in the top bunk next to our other toys and our books. They now take up most of the place in the bunk. Earlier this night I removed the sheets and replaced them with a plaid blanket, so now it looks like the bunk never has been used for anything except as a place to keep my stuff. When Dr. Jahnbeck comes in the morning, he will remember that it always has been like that, and he'll forget that there's ever been a boy living in this room. I will make sure of that.

Peter takes his pajamas off and pulls a pair of jeans on. He slips his arms through the sleeves of his favorite blue-and-white checkered shirt and stuffs the lining down his pants. Now he sits down on the lower bunk, next to me, to put on his sneakers. He's having problems with the laces, so I send him a mental picture of how to do it. He gets up, slips his grey windbreaker on and starts throwing all his clothes from the closet into a garbage bag I stole from the kitchen. There can't be anything left behind to remind anybody of Peter.

When he's ready to go, I close my eyes and send my presence out in the basement hall outside our little room. Otto is sitting in a chair at the end of the hall, he apparently pulled guard duty tonight. He's tired, nodding in his seat with arms crossed, and it isn't hard for me to push him over the brink into sleep.

I kiss Peter goodbye and send him out the door, down the hall past the three other childrens' rooms. Lisa and Marie are sound asleep in the first, so are the twins in the second. In the last room, René sleeps quietly, but Carl is turning back and forth, whimpering. I enter his nightmare and remove the image of the man in black who scares him. He sighs, turns over and shoves his head into his pillow. His sleep quickly returns to normal. I return my attention to the hall.

Otto is the nicest of our guards, but he's not too bright, and it is easy to fix his memory. Before Peter has reached the end of the hall, Otto has forgotten he ever existed.

Now Peter is standing at the end of the hall, next to the stairs to the ground floor. Before him is the door leading to the outside stairs. The code panel next to it emits a faint, orange light. I guide his fingers through the six digits I found in Dr. Jahnbeck's mind a few days ago, and let out a relieved breath when the panel turns to green. The code



hasn't been changed. Peter steps out on the landing and up the dozen steps leading to the alley, to the night, to freedom.

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I wish I could go with him. But Dr. Jahnbecks mind is too convoluted and too strong for me to make sure he forgets about us for long. And if he should ever remember, I know he can make Miss Henderson find us wherever we are.

So I must stay here at the Institute and reinforce his forgetfulness. At least Peter will be save from the ambitions and desires I saw in the Doctor's mind a few weeks ago when he watched the twins play guessing games with the ESP cards.

I guide Peter down the street towards the bus terminal. There's a light drizzle, and reflections of the streets light glow on the wet pavement. I spot three garbage cans next to a gateway, and I make Peter drop the bag of clothes down one of them. When he goes on, I start making him forget: Forget the fire and the screams of our parents as the men in black carried us off, forget the Institute and Dr. Jahnbeck, forget the injections and the tests.

When Peter reaches the terminal, I have made him forget almost everything that can connect him to the Institute. I make him enter a bus to a faraway city, and I make sure the driver doesn't notice him get on. I lull Peter to sleep on the rearmost seats and implant an instruction to get off at one of the last stops and then forget how he got there.

A little boy wandering the streets on his own is sooner or later going to be reported to the authorities, I hope. When they can't discover where he came from, I assume they will place him in an orphanage or with some foster parents. I hope for the latter, and that his foster parents will be nice.

At last I remove the final dangerous memory, the one that it is hardest for me to take away. I wish I could tell him, remember me, Peter, remember your sister, but even that I can't let him remember.

Goodbye, Peter, darling brother. Forget me forever.

Niels Gjerloff Afrejse

Bekræftelsen var kommet i dag. Alle modulerne undtagen et enkelt lagermodul, der havde haft en navigationsfejl, var landet indenfor en radius af 20 km på den tyndeste del af iskappen på Jupiters måne Europa. De robotstyrede traktorer havde samlet modulerne sammen i løbet af de sidste 2 måneder og de var blevet fastgjort i en lang konvoj-lignende kolonne. Det lille atomkraftmodul forrest havde derefter sat blus på og hele toget havde langsomt smeltet sig skråt ned igennem det tykke islag. Bagerst havde entreprenørrobotterne sat stivere i gangen og lagt et kommunikationskabel. Det virkede i hvert fald, for det var herigennem bekræftelsen var kommet. Om gangen i isen var fri var dog noget usikkert. Turen ned igennem iskappen havde taget 3 uger og nu hang modulerne frit svævene i tykke kabler ca 100 m under iskappen. Så vidt man kunne se på kameraerne var der tabt et enkelt modul under fastgørelsesoperationen, men da der var mindst 3 eksemplarer af hvert funktionsmodul regnede ingeniørerne ikke med, at det var

et problem. Ergo skulle de af sted i morgen med det første persontransportmodul fra jordens måne.

Det ville være den første menneskelige ekspedition så langt ud i solsystemet og de første prober fra overfladen havde givet begrundet håb om at finde levende organismer på Europa. De havde bare aldrig kunnet få kontakt med de atomdrevne proper, der langsomt var sunket gennem iskappen og ned til den flydende del af Jupiters måne, fordi isen var frosset til over dem. De havde håbet at senderne var stærke nok, men desværre blev islaget for tykt for hurtigt. 30 års forberedelser havde derfor ført til denne ekspedition, som endegyldigt skulle besvare spørgsmålet om liv under Europas isdækkede overflade.

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Irina kiggede ud på den ternede overdækning af henholdsvis solceller og solvarmepaneller, der dækkede bunden af månekrateret. Langs kanten kunne hun se skinnen fra magnetacceleratoren, der så længe havde sendt modulerne af sted. Ud mod højre drejede den skråt op ad det største gråsorte bjerg og videre opad. Månens lave tyngdekraft hjalp med til spændstigheden i magnetacceleratorens legering, men hun syntes stadig det var smart, at de kunne ændre afskydningsretningen ved at ændre på vinklen på de øverste 800 m oven over bjerget. Lidt ligesom en gammeldags lampe i sådan en tyk fjeder, der kunne ændres i næsten 270 grader fra udgangspunktet.

Mod venstre kom skinnen op til accelerationsskinnen nede fra bunden af krateret, men hun kunne selvfølgelig ikke se afgangshallen da den jo lå under overdækningen som hun befandt sig lige over. Solen glimtede i solcellepanelerne og 2 små vedligeholdelsesrobotter kørte langsomt hen imod et panel som sikkert var lettere beskadiget af et meteornedslag. Bag hende omkring 100 meter oppe af bjergvæggen var et reparationshold fra kolonien uden for kraterranden i gang med at skifte nogle magneter i en af ringene omkring accelerationsskinnen. Den virkede fint, selvom der manglede nogen, idet polvendingen imellem ringene gik så stærkt, men de ekstreme hastigheder man var oppe på, på de sidste omgange inden turen ud af affyringsskinnen medførte trods alt at en magnet flyttede sig lidt en gang imellem. Desuden var der konstant forbedringer i materialerne som elektromagneterne var lavet af, så de blev løbende udskiftet.

Hun vinkede op igennem glastaget og kunne lige skimte en af dem vinke tilbage. Hun tænkte ofte på den utrolige forskel i livet for de 2 kolonier – dem uden for kraterranden og dem nede i krateret. Ikke at hun på nogen måde ville bytte, men det var alligevel pudsigt og hun var ret sikker på at de syntes kraterkolonien var nogle sære fisk – selv tyngdekraften var forskellig for dem...

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Hvor pokker blev Peter af, tænkte hun irriteret. Peter og hun havde fundet hinanden på universitet på jorden. Hun gik på marinebiologisk linie og han kaldte sig exobiolog. De var begge bidt af en voldsom nysgerrighed overfor liv i vandige miljøer og regnede med at det ville blive vanvittig spændende at komme til Europa med den første ekspedition

fra Jorden.

Hun mærkede et prik på skulderen og smilede idet hun vendte sig om og gav Peter et knus.

De satte sig på udsigtsbænken og kiggede op på jorden der skinnede blåhvidt på dem.

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Lige siden Irina var barn, havde hun været fascineret af livet i vand. Allerede på barndommens fisketure med faderen havde hun været mere interesseret i at studere fangsten, end i at mærke det pludselige ryk i fiskestangen, når der endelig var bid.

Når fisken endelig kom op, blev hun helt vild, hvis de en gang imellem fangede en ny art og hun lærte efterhånden at kende forskellene mellem de forskellige arter helt ned i detaljen. Som teenager var hun blevet så dygtig, at hun på en enkelt fisketur kunne fange op til 20 forskellige fiskearter, bare ved at variere på kroge, madding og dybde. Naturligvis var hun endt med at studere marinebiologi og de ofre der var blevet bragt for komme med på denne fantastiske tur havde ikke virket skræmmende på hende.

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Peters indgang til ekspeditionen var mere spredt idet han havde studeret både fysik, kemi og biologi uden rigtig at blive færdig med noget af det. Sådan var han bare. Ikke fordi han var uintelligent, men han lod sig nemt distrahere, hvis han blev fanget af et eller andet spændende og så var han jo nødt til lige at læse op på emnet for at finde løsninger og svar på de naturvidenskabelige gåder. Det havde derfor krævet en del overtalelse fra Irina's side, at få overbevist projektlederne om, at Peter skulle med.

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Irina og Peter kiggede en sidste gang på jorden som glimtede i sollyset, tog overfladebrillerne af og puttede dem ned i banantasken på maven, idet de dykkede ned i vandet under overdækningen. Deres avancerede tegnsprog med udvidede kropsbevægelser lignede en tavs ballet, med indbyggede lyseffekter fra solen i overfladen. Det iskolde vand føltes behageligt på deres isolerede hud. De forstørrede fødder og arme gav god fart og gællerne langs deres ribben bevægede sig langsomt mens de fortsatte ned mod afgangshallen og deres vandfyldte transportmodul, der ville beskytte dem mod både accelerationen og være deres hjem på turen mod Europa.

## Niels Gjerloff Departure

The confirmation had come today. All of the modules apart from a single storage module, which had experienced navigation malfunction, had landed inside a radius of 20 km of the thinnest part of the ice coat on Jupiter's moon Europa. During the last two months, the robot guided tractors had collected the modules and tethered them into a long convoy-like column. The little nuclear powered module in the front had powered up and the entire train had slowly melted its way diagonally down through the thick ice.

In the back the builder robots had placed raking struts in the gallery and laid down a communication cable to the communication module on the surface. At least that worked because it was through this that the confirmation had come. Whether the entire gallery through the ice was free or not was somewhat uncertain. The trip down through the ice had taken the convoy three weeks and now the modules hang freely floating in thick cables approximately 100 meters below the bottom of the ice cap. As far as one could see on the cameras only a single module had been lost during the fastening process and since there were three copies of each type of module the engineers didn't think it was a problem. Ergo tomorrow they were leaving with the first personnel transport module from the Earth's moon. This would be the first manmade expedition with living humans this far out in the solar system and the first probes from the surface of Europa had given reasonable hope of finding living organisms. Only they had never been able to contact the nuclear driven probes that slowly had melted through the ice and into the liquid part of the Jupiter moon because the ice had frozen solid above them. They had hoped that the transmitters were strong enough, but the ice had become too thick too soon. 30 years of preparation had therefore lead to this expedition which finally should answer the question of life under the ice-covered surface of Europa.

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Irina looked out on the chess pattern of solar cells and solar heat panels that covered the entire lunar crater. Along the edge she could see the rail from the magnetic accelerator that for so long had been used to send the modules on their journey. To the right the rail turned upwards along the biggest black-grey mountain and further up. The low gravity of the moon helped the suppleness of the alloys in the magnetic accelerator, but she still thought it was clever that they could change the direction of the firing angle by changing the angle of the rail on the top 800 meters above the crater mountain. Sort of like the old-fashioned lamps with the thick spring that could change almost 270 degrees from the initial upright position. Six craters like this on each side of the moon and they could fire ships off in all directions. This crater however was the only one finished yet. From the left the rail rose up from the bottom of the crater and onto the circular accelerator rail, but of course she couldn't see the departure hall since it was way below the covering panels where she was. The sun glinted in the various solar panels and the small observation and maintenance domes were dotted in a pattern all over covering the entire crater.

Two small repair drones were slowly driving towards a panel, which probably were slightly damaged by a meteor impact. From her dome she could see a repair crew from the colony from the outside of the crater working 100 meter up the mountain ridge. They were changing some magnets in one of the rings around the acceleration rail. It worked fine even if some magnets were missing because the pole turn between the rings were so quick, but the extreme velocities that they achieved on the final laps before turning on to the launch rail did take its toll on some magnets once in a while. Besides there were ongoing improvements in the materials used to make the electromagnets so the replacements were a never ending process.

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*She waved inside the glass dome towards them and could just discern one of them waving back in the distance. She often wondered about the incredible difference in the life of the two colonies – those outside the edge of the crater and those down under the panels inside the crater. Not that she wanted to trade in any way, but still – it was kind of funny and she was fairly certain that they thought the crater colony were a weird bunch of fish – even the gravity felt differently for them...*

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*Where the hell was Peter, she thought annoyingly. She and Peter had found each other in university on Earth. She studied marine biology and he called himself an exobiologist. Both of them were bitten by an intense curiosity in life in aquatic environments and both of them figured it would be absolutely fascinating to come to Europa with the first expedition from the Earth.*

*She felt a tap on the shoulder and smiled when she turned and gave Peter a hug.*

*She sat on the bench on the vantage point and looked up at the Earth, which shined with its unmistakable white-blue glow upon them.*

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*Ever since Irina was a child she had been fascinated by life in the water. Already at the childhooDs fishing trips with her father, she had been more interested in studying the catch than in feeling the sudden twitch in the fishing rod, when the fish finally took the bait.*

*When the fish at long last came to the surface, she went totally crazy each time they caught a new kind of fish and she soon learned to tell the difference between the different species in great detail. As a teenager she had become so proficient that she could catch as many as twenty different species on a single fishing trip, just by exchanging hooks, bait and depth. Obviously she had ended up studying marine biology and the sacrifices that had to be made to be able to join this fantastic trip had in now way seemed daunting to her.*

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*Peter's entrance to the expedition was more scattered as he had studied physics, chemistry and biology without really having completed any of it. That was just the way he was. Not that he was unintelligent, but he was easily distracted and if something caught his fancy, he just had to read up on the subject to find the solutions and answers to the scientific riddles. It had therefore required a large amount of persuasion from Irina to convince the project leaders that Peter should be included and join the team on the expedition.*

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Irina and Peter took a final glance at the glistening Earth in the sunlight and then took off the surface glasses and placed them in the belt bag as they dove into the water under the surface covering. Their advanced sign language with expanded body movements looked like a silent ballet with built-in light effects from the sun in the surface. The icy water felt comfortable against their isolated skin. The enlarged feet and hands gave good speed and the gills along their ribcage moved slowly while they continued down towards the departure hall and their water-filled transport modules, which would protect them against the acceleration and be their home on the trip to Europa.

Stig W. Jorgensen Tiende september

"Man kan ikke rejse til fortiden," sagde den høje mand med de hule kinder og det lange grå hår. Jeg ignorerede ham og talte videre til de to unge damer. De var moderigtigt kronragede og sagde at de begge studerede teknoæstetik. Jeg var ved at varme godt op med fortællinger om grædende pårørende og overlevende indsmurt i murstøv.

Manden lænede sig demonstrativt ind over bardisken og gentog sin bemærkning.

Jeg sukkede. En tidsrejsebenægter. Det nyttede ikke at diskutere med de mennesker. De var lige så uimodtagelige over for fornuftsargumenter som de tumper der ind i det enogtyvende århundrede stadig kunne finde på at benægte den første månerejse, eller de der i luftskibets og damplokomotivets tidsalder stædigt fastholdt at Jorden var flad. Jeg havde mødt begge typer i deres respektive epoker, og deres udgangspunkt var altid det samme: Det kan jo bare ikke passe. Hvis Jorden drejede rundt, ville den jo passere væk under én når man steg op i en luftballon. Hvis man kunne rejse i tiden, ville man jo kunne tage tilbage og dræbe sin bedstefar før ens far blev født.

Jeg skulle til at rejse mig og foreslå de to veninder at vi fandt et bord hvor vi kunne sætte os og snakke uforstyrret videre, men et eller andet i hans intelligente blik og det underfundige smil holdt mig tilbage. Han lignede ikke den sædvanlige ignorant, endsige en bølle der kunne finde på at love mig tæv for at gøre mig interessant med historier.

"Det kan man nu faktisk godt," sagde jeg prøvende.

"Og du har besøgt Manhattan 11. september 2001?" Jeg lagde først nu mærke til at han talte med en ganske svag, ubestemmelig accent. Han var konservativt klædt i en lang, grøn og lilla kjortel.

"Ja," sagde jeg. "Det er ikke nogen stor bedrift. Der er mange transitionsruter med få og uproblematisk skift der forbinder os med det nordamerikanske kontinent i tredje kvartal af 2001. Jeg valgte en rute der bragte mig tilbage til nutiden tre timer inden min afrejse, men da jeg kom tilbage til en landsby i nærheden af Firenze og måtte tage af sted fra et øde område på Kolahalvøen, havde jeg ingen mulighed for at møde mig selv."

"Du kunne have lavet et opkald til dig selv," sagde den mest rundhovedede af pigerne, hende der havde fortalt mig hvad de studerede.

Jeg rystede på hovedet. "Ikke fra vildmarken nord for Ponoj. Den er stadig ikke omfattet af standardnettet." Jeg bankede med en sigende finger på mit implantat i tindingen. Som de fleste tidsrejsende brugte jeg en diskret model der let kunne

kamoufleres.

"Du kunne have medbragt en separat telefon," vedblev hun.

"Det kunne jeg ikke, for det gjorde jeg ikke. Hvis jeg havde haft ønsker og planer om at forsøge noget sådan, ville kontinuets struktur have set anderledes ud, og den pågældende transitionsrute ville ikke have fandtes. Tidsrejser er det muliges kunst. Paradokser findes ikke."

Hun ville sige noget mere, men hendes veninde gabte på skrømt. Folk vil høre om blod og berømmtheder, ikke om transitionsruter og paradokser. De rejste sig med en undskyldning og fandt et bord i kroen, uden mig. Jeg så ærgerligt efter deres æggende glatragede nakker.

Den høje mands smil var næsten faderligt. "Jeg undskylder," sagde han. "Jeg giver en drink. Jeg vil ikke tage meget af din tid."

Jeg trak på skuldrene og tog imod tilbuddet. Det var mig selv der havde bidt på kroen og var begyndt at tale om tekniske detaljer. Og aftenen var stadig ung.

Han fortsatte hvor han slap: "Du har også overværet mordet på prins Ferdinand i Sarajevo, forstod jeg?"

Jeg smilede. Det var min mest bemærkelsesværdige ekspedition hidtil. "Ja, det var mere problematisk. Hvis jeg skulle ankomme til Balkan i månederne inden mordet, skulle jeg enten have rejst via fremtiden, og det ville af gode grunde være et skud i blinde, eller også skulle jeg have benyttet 15-16 transitionspunkter, hvilket i høj grad øger sandsynligheden for at noget går galt. Jeg kunne også have foretaget en række transitioner på åbent hav, eller have været i transit flere hundrede tusinde år tilbage i tiden, hvis jeg havde turdet. I stedet valgte jeg at tage direkte til Sydøstasien i 1911 og tilbringe tre år i fortiden. Hvoraf de to gik med at komme tilbage til Europa."

"Den tanke strejfede dig ikke at forsøge at afværge mordet?" spurgte han. "Eller angrebet på New York i 2001, for den sags skyld?"

Jeg tog en slurk af min drink. "Selvfølgelig strejfede den mig. Jeg er ikke en amoralsk observatør. Men det nytter ikke noget. Angrebet fandt sted; det vil altid finde sted. Hvis jeg kunne afværge det, ville jeg have afværget det. Jo, vi tidsrejsende griber ind i fortiden, men vores indgriben er allerede i fortiden. Tidsrejsepioneren Güntzner brugte en stor del af sit liv på at forsøge at fjerne Hitler fra historien, ved at dræbe ham, forpurre hans planer og så videre, og så videre. Til sidst kostede det Güntzner livet – angiveligt i transit i 800-tallet, for meget tyder på at han slet ikke nåede frem til mellemkrigstidens Tyskland under sin sidste rejse. Han var besat af tanken. Ville ikke acceptere at han ikke kunne afværge eller mildne nazismens opkomst. Men det kunne han ikke, for det gjorde han ikke!"

Den høje mand lyttede opmærksomt og tog sig i sin grå manke. "Man kan ikke rejse til fortiden," sagde han igen. Så nikkede han for sig selv, som om det var mig der havde fremført denne pointe, og han blot gav mig ret.

Jeg sad tavs et øjeblik mens jeg forsøgte at greje hvor han ville hen. "Jeg tror jeg forstår," sagde jeg. "Du er ikke en klassisk tidsrejsebenægter. Du er multiversalist."

Multiversalisterne fastholdt en ellers forladt teori om en mangfoldighed af parallelle samtider. De havde ret så langt at de opfattede mængden af tidspunkter som given og uforanderlig, og transitionspunkterne som smutveje mellem to tidspunkter. Men i stedet for at opfatte tidspunkterne som en linje, klyngede de sig til et unødigt komplekst billede

af et multidimensionelt rum, hvor tidspunkter ikke blot strakte sig uendeligt frem og tilbage, men i alle tænkelige retninger. De hævdede at de punkter transitionerne forbandt os med, ikke var vores egen fortid, men andre af de uendelige, mulige fortider.

Multiversalisterne tog fejl. Transitionspunkterne forbinder os med fortiden. Prøv at fremskaffe det bolivianske dagblad El Deber fra 12. juli 1996. Mit billede er i avisen.

"Hvis multiversteorien var sand," sagde jeg, "kunne Güntzner have dræbt Hitler. Eller rettere en Hitler."

Jeg forventede et modargument om at Güntzner utvivlsomt havde dræbt én eller måske mange Hitlere, men at vi ikke kunne afgøre det, fordi det netop skete i andre fortider. Men han rystede bare på hovedet. "Jeg er ikke multiversalist," sagde han.

"Hvad er du så?"

Han talte udenom: "Hvad er din store drøm, som tidsrejsende?"

Jeg tøvede. Min største ambition havde jeg endnu aldrig røbet offentligt. Men den næststørste var uopnåelig nok. "Jeg drømmer om at sejle på Titanic."

Han så mig lige i øjnene, og hans blik virkede nu på en gang beundrende og fordømmende. Så nikkede han. "Og det kommer du til."

Jeg blev tavs, og han besvarede min tavshed, som havde den været et spørgsmål. "Ja, samvittigheden vil plage dig. Du ser på uret, står klar ved redningsbåden, sikrer dig en plads. Skal jeg bare iagttage alle disse mennesker dø? spørger du dig selv. Åh jo, du kan jo intet gøre. Så lidt som Güntzner kunne hindre invasionen af Polen. Du anbringer jo også dig selv i stor fare! Hvis du får plads i redningsbåden, så har du altid haft plads i redningsbåden. Du stjæler den ikke fra nogen anden."

"Du er en tidsrejsende," sagde jeg.

"Det er dit ord for det, ja. Det er din tids ord for det."

Jeg lo af overraskelse. Det var jo ironisk, men selvfølgelig måtte det ske. "Har du været ombord på Titanic?" ville jeg vide.

Han rystede på hovedet. "Sådan en eventyrer er jeg ikke. Men jeg vinkede fra kajen i Southampton da du gik ombord. Og jeg vil sidde trygt og godt på damperen Carpathia og hilse dig, når du kold og forkommen bliver taget ombord fra redningsbåden. Jeg var selvfølgelig lidt yngre dengang end jeg er i dag. Og du vil være noget ældre og noget mere kynisk." Han kastede et blik ud i lokalet. "Du får mange historier at bedåre mange unge damer med."

"Har du bevidst opsøgt mit spor i kontinuet?" spurgte jeg. Tanken var ubehagelig. Som at blive forfulgt af spøgelser. De ufødtes spøgelser.

"De første tidsrejsende som Güntzner udforskede selve fænomenet," sagde han. "Hvad vil det sige at forflyttes i tid? Kan jeg forhindre en verdenskrig? Så kom de store eventyrere som dig. Der er ikke plads til ret mange tidsrejsende i redningsbådene på Titanic. Men du, du vil bare være en af dem! Jeg selv lever i dekadente tider. Vi bestiger ikke bjerge. Vi sejler ikke til Byzans. Vi rejser i tiden for at opleve – de store tidsrejsende!"

"Som mig?"

"Din beskedenhed klæder dig ikke. Du vil snart lægge den af dig." Han var som forvandlet, al lune var borte, hans tonefald hårdt og kontant. "Du er den største. En dag vil du ikke længere frygte at bruge tyve-tredive transitioner eller at materialisere dig på åbent hav eller skyde genvej i geologisk tid. Du ved at det vil lykkes for dig. Og som dit mod vokser, vokser din hensynsløshed. Vidste du at du er i stand til at dræbe? Du aner



ikke hvor mange mennesker du er nødt til at dræbe for at nå frem til Golgata.”

”Jeg...?”

”Ja, du får din ambition opfyldt. Du kommer til at se korsfæstelsen. Den eneste for hvem det lykkes. Hvorfor tror du ellers jeg kalder dig den største?”

”Hvorfor er du her?”

Han trak på skuldrene. Han faldt lidt sammen, som om en træthed pludselig overmandede ham. ”Det er det der skal til. Jeg er ikke som dig. Mens du får færre og færre skruller med årene, bliver jeg selv mere og mere angerfuld. Men dette møde er nu engang det der sikrer mig min lille plads i historien.”

Han rejste sig. Hans mission var fuldført.

”Jeg forstår ikke,” sagde jeg. ”Hvorfor blev du så ved med at sige at man ikke kan rejse til fortiden?”

”Fordi det er sandt. Har du oplevet optakten til første verdenskrig?”

Jeg nikkede.

”Og tiende september 2001?”

”Du mener ellefte?”

”Nej, jeg mener den tiende.”

Hans skæve smil vendte tilbage. ”Ja, det har jeg,” sagde jeg tøvende. ”Jeg tilbragte en uge i New York City inden angrebet.”

”Når du går ombord på Titanic, hvor mange andre af dine medpassagerer træder da ombord på det berømte skib der forliste i Atlanten og kom til at symbolisere en epokes afslutning?”

”Jeg kan godt se hvor du vil hen,” sagde jeg. ”Men det er jo relativisme. Det er som at sige at Solen i middelalderen kredsede rundt om Jorden.”

”Du har mange mærkater at beskytte dig bag,” sagde han. ”Kald det bare det. Jeg giver dig din overbevisning om at det vil lykkes for dig. Kynismen, der i sidste ende får dig til at dræbe, sørger du selv for. Kald det bare relativisme. Husk det ord, når de døende skriger omkring dig og du nøgternt registrerer hver detalje, så du kan gengive den for et måbende publikum og uddybe i enrum for udvalgte kvindelige tilhørere.” Han afbrød sig selv. ”Jeg er nødt til at gå nu. Mit transitionspunkt er meget tæt på.”

Først lod jeg ham gå. Jeg sad et øjeblik og kiggede på mit tomme glas og lyttede til musikken i mit implantat. Så sprang jeg op fra barstolen og styrtede efter ham ud på gaden. Jeg bevægede mig så hurtigt jeg kunne, men det føltes som en langsom gengivelse. Ud af øjenkrogen nåede jeg at observere, at jeg passerede bordet med de to teknoæstetik-studerende. En jævnaldrende fyr havde sluttet sig til dem og fik dem til at le. Den rundhovedede pige vendte ansigtet efter mig da jeg stormede forbi.

Gaden var bred og larmende og uoverskuelig. Et hologram der reklamerede for billige ansigtstatoveringer, antastede mig, og jeg viftede det irriteret væk. Han var borte. Han kunne være gået i en hvilken som helst retning. Eller måske var hans transitionspunkt vitterlig lige uden for døren, så han allerede befandt sig et andet sted i kontinuet.

Jeg blev stående på stedet uden at røre mig. Jeg kunne høre nogen nærme sig forsigtigt bag mig, og uden at vende mig vidste jeg at det var pigen inde fra baren.

Golgata.

Havde han givet mig oplysninger om min personlige fremtid? Hvis det var sådan, så var det sådan.

*Paradokser findes ikke.*

*Stig W. Jorgensen 9/10*

*'You can't visit the past,' said the tall, hollow-cheeked man with long, greying hair. I went on talking to the two young ladies, ignoring him. They both had fashionable tonsures and told me they were students of Techno-Aesthetics. I was warming to my subject with tales of weeping relatives and survivors covered in brickdust.*

*The man ostentatiously lent against the counter and repeated his remark.*

*I sighed. A time-travel denier. It was no use arguing with these people. They were as impervious to rational arguments as those fools who, well into the twenty-first century, would still deny the first landing on the Moon, or those who in the age of zeppelins and steam-powered locomotives would stubbornly insist that the Earth was flat. I had met both kinds of people in their respective eras, and the basis for their views was always the same: It just can't be true. If the Earth was really turning, it would move away beneath you when you went into the air in a balloon. If you could really travel in time, you could go back and kill your grandfather before your father was born.*

*I was about to get up and propose to the girls that we found a table where we could continue our conversation without interruptions, but something about his intelligent gaze and subtle smile made me hesitate. He did not appear to be your average ignoramus, and still less a bully who would threaten to beat me up for making myself interesting with my stories.*

*'As a matter of fact, you can,' I said searchingly.*

*'And you have visited Manhattan on September 11th 2001?' It wasn't until then I noticed that he spoke with the trace of an indeterminable accent. He was conservatively dressed in a full-length green and purple caftan.*

*'I have,' I said. 'It is no remarkable feat. Many routes of transition with few and uncomplicated shifts connect us to the North-American continent in the third quarter of 2001. I chose a route that brought me back to the present three hours before my departure, but since I arrived in a village near Florence and had to depart from a desolate area of the Kola Peninsula, it was impossible for me to meet myself.'*

*'You could have called yourself,' said the round-faced girl, the one who had told me of their studies.*

*I shook my head. 'Not from the wilderness north of the Ponoy, no. That part is still out of reach of the standard net.' I tapped the implant in my temple meaningly. Like most time travellers, I stuck to a discreet variety that could easily be camouflaged.*

*'You could have brought a distinct phoning device,' she persisted.*

*'I couldn't, because I didn't. If I in any way had wanted or planned for such a thing, the structure of the continuum would have been different, and that particular route of transition would not have existed. Time travel is the art of the possible. There are no such things as paradoxes.'*

*She was about to say something more, but her girlfriend made a pretence of yawning. People want to hear about gore and celebrities, rather than transition routes and paradoxes. They got up, excusing themselves, and found a table in a corner, without me. I cast a vexed glance at the deliciously clean-shaven backs of their heads.*

The tall man gave me an almost fatherly smile. 'My apologies,' he said. 'I'll buy you a drink. I won't take much of your time.'

I shrugged and accepted his offer. After all, I was the one who had swallowed the bait and gone into technical details. And the night was still young.

He continued where he had left off. 'As far as I understood, you've also witnessed the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand in Sarajevo, right?'

I smiled. That was my most extraordinary mission so far. 'Yeah, that was trickier. If I should have arrived in the Balkans during the months immediately preceding the assassination, I would either have had to travel via the future, which for obvious reasons would have been a rash endeavour, or I would have had to use employ fifteen or sixteen points of transition and thus greatly increase the risk of something going wrong. If I'd had the courage, I could also have performed a number of transitions on the open sea, or used a transit several hundred thousands of years into the past. In stead, I chose to go directly to South-East Asia in 1911 and stay three years in the past, the two of which I spent getting back to Europe.'

'Did the thought of preventing the assassination never occur to you?' he asked. 'Or the New York City attack of 2001, for that matter?'

I sipped from my drink. 'Of course it occurred to me. I am no amoral observer. But it is no use. The attack took place; it will always take place. If I could have prevented it, I would. Yes, as time travellers we interfere with the past, but our interference is already in the past. Guntzner, the time-travel pioneer, spent a large part of his life trying to remove Hitler from history, by killing him, thwarting his plans, and so on, and so on. In the end, it cost Gunzner his life – apparently during transit in the ninth century, as much suggests that he never reached interwar Germany on his last journey. He was obsessed with the thought. Never accepted that he could not avert or alleviate the rise of Nazism. But he couldn't, because he didn't.'

The tall man listened attentively, tearing his grey head of hair. 'You can't visit the past,' he repeated. Then he nodded to himself, as if I had uttered the statement and he was merely agreeing.

I sat silent for moment, trying to grasp his intention. 'I think I understand,' I said. 'You're not a time-travel denier in the classical sense. You're a multiversalist.'

The multiversalists adhered to an otherwise abandoned theory of a multitude of parallel presents. They were right to a certain point, as they considered the set of moments in time to be given and unalterable, and the transition points to be short cuts between various moments. But in stead of understanding the moments as the points of a single straight line, they clung to an unnecessarily complex view of a multidimensional space where the timelines not only extended endlessly forward and backward, but in all possible directions. They claimed that the transitions did not connect us to our own past, but to other of the countless, possible pasts.

The multiversalists were wrong. The transition points connect us to the part – the only past. Try to get hold of a copy of the Bolivian daily *El Deber*, July 12th 1996. My picture is in the paper.

'If the multiverse theory was true,' I said, 'Guntzner could have killed Hitler. Or rather, a Hitler.'

I expected the counterargument that Gunzner undoubtedly had killed one or maybe a

large number of Hitlers, but that we had no way of determining this, for the very reason that it happened in other pasts. But he just shook his head. 'I am not a multiversalist,' he said.

'What are you then?'

He changed the subject: 'What is your ultimate dream as a time traveller?'

I paused. I had not yet revealed my greatest ambition to anyone. My second greatest ambition, however, was almost equally impossible. 'My dream is to sail on board the Titanic.'

He looked straight into my eyes, and his gaze seemed admiring and condemnatory at the same time. Presently he nodded. 'And so you will.'

I fell silent, and he answered my silence as if it had been a question. 'Oh yes, you will be plagued by conscience. You'll wait by the lifeboat, looking at your watch, ready to secure a place for yourself. You'll ask yourself, am I just supposed to view all these people die? Well then, there is nothing you can do. No more than Guntzer could put a stop to the invasion of Poland. And remember, you put yourself in great danger, too! If you manage to get a seat in the lifeboat, you've always had a seat in the lifeboat. You're not stealing it from somebody else.'

'You're a time traveller,' I said.

'That's your word for it. That's your epoch's word for it.'

I laughed with surprise. It was ironic, but of course it had to happen sooner or later. 'Were you on board the Titanic?' I demanded.

He shook his head. 'I'm not that much of an adventurer. But I stood there waving when you embarked from the Southampton docks. And I'll be sitting, safe and comfortable, on board the steamer Carpathia to greet you when the haul you from the lifeboat, weak and perished with cold. Of course, I was a little younger then. And you will be somewhat older, and much more cynical.' He glanced around the room. 'You will have so many stories for captivating so many young ladies.'

'Did you deliberately seek out my trace through the continuum?' I asked. It was an unpleasant idea. Like being followed by ghosts. The ghosts of the unborn.

'The first time travellers, such as Guntzner, investigated the phenomenon as such,' he said. 'What does it mean to be relocated in time? Can I prevent a world war? Then came the great explorers and adventurers like you. There is not room for many time travellers in the life boats on the Titanic. But you, you just have to be one of them! Myself, I live in decadent times. We don't climb mountains. We do not sail to Byzantium. We travel in time to witness – the great time travellers!'

'Such as me?'

'Modesty does not become you. You will discard it soon enough.' He was completely changed, all warmth and wit gone from his voice. 'You are the greatest. One day, you will no longer be afraid of using twenty or thirty transitions, or materialising on the open sea, or making a short cut through geological time. You know that you will succeed. And as your courage grows, so does your ruthlessness. Did you know that you are capable of killing? You have no idea how many people you will kill to reach Golgotha.'

'I...?'

'Yes, you will fulfil your ambition. You will witness the crucifixion. The only one you

will ever succeed in this. Why else do you think I would call you the greatest?’

‘Why are you here?’

He shrugged. His shoulders dropped, as if he was overcome by a sudden fatigue. ‘It’s what it takes. I am not like you. While your scruples fall away as you get older, I on the other hand become still more remorseful. This encounter, however, is how I win my little place in history.’

He got up, his mission completed.

‘I don’t understand,’ I said. ‘Why then did you keep saying that you can’t visit the past?’

‘Because it’s true. Did you witness the prelude to World War I?’

I nodded.

‘And September 10th 2001?’

‘You mean September 11th?’

‘No, I mean September 10th.’

His wry smile was back. ‘Well, I was there,’ I faltered. ‘I spent a week in NYC before the attack.’

‘When you embark the Titanic, then how many of your fellow passengers will be stepping aboard that famous ship that went down in the Atlantic and came to symbolise the end of an era?’

‘I see what you’re getting at,’ I said. ‘But that’s relativism. It’s like saying that in the Middle Ages the Sun went around the Earth.’

‘You have a lot of labels to protect yourself with,’ he said. ‘You can call it that, if you want. I supply you with the conviction that you will succeed. You yourself provide the cynicism that in the end will drive you to homicide. Call it relativism. Please remember that term when the dying scream around you while you soberly record every detail so you may render it to an astonished audience and elaborate in private to certain selected female listeners.’ He interrupted himself. ‘I have to leave now. My point of transition is very close.’

At first, I let him go. I remaining sitting for a moment, staring at my empty glass and listening to the music in my implant. Then I jumped up from the bar stool and hurried after him into the street. I moved as quickly as I could, but it felt like slow motion. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed that I passed the table of the two Tech-Aesthet students. They had been joined by some guy their own age who was making them laugh. The round-faced girl turned her head as I rushed by.

The street was wide and noisy and confusing. I was accosted by a hologram advertising cheap facial tattoos, and I whisked it away angrily. He was gone. He could have gone in any direction. Or maybe his point of transition really had been just outside the door, in which case he would already be somewhere else in the continuum.

I remained standing on the spot without moving. I heard somebody stepping up behind me, and I did not have to turn to know that it was the girl from the bar.

Golgotha.

Had he supplied me with information about my personal future? If that was the case, then so be it.

There are no paradoxes.

”They´re heeeere!”

Carol Anne Freeling/Poltergeist

Naturligvis følte det hele lidt underligt, alt andet ville være absurd. Papkasser og fyldte plastposer stod stadig på gulvet og samlede støv, men Jessica orkede næsten ikke at se på dem. Hun havde haft lejligheden i tre dage, men endnu ikke overnattet i de nye omgivelser. Det hele var komplet uoverskueligt, man kunne da ikke forlange at folk bare sådan uden videre kunne starte et helt nyt liv!

Hun havde ikke engang fået sat flyttekasserne ind langs væggen, de stod stadig præcis hvor hun, Karen og et par af hendes andre venner havde stillet dem, og for at komme ud til køkkenet måtte Jessica smyge sig forbi de indpakkede minder fra sin fortidige tilværelse. Lejligheden var gammel, køkkenet lignede noget fra Roskilde Vikingemuseum, men i det mindste virkede både vand og varme, og Jessica slukkede tørsten direkte fra den kolde hane. Vand i ansigtet, nu følte hun sig alligevel lidt mere klar. Hun tog lejligheden i øjesyn og forsøgte at være både positiv og optimistisk, men når man kom fra et velfungerende rækkehus i et velrenommeret kvarter, var det var svært at kalde tres kvadratmeter slum for hjem. Hun traskede tilbage til stuen og lod sig dumpe ned på den nærmeste papkasse. Noget knasede og hun bad til at det ikke var kassen med porcelæn hun havde sat sig på.

Papkasserne syntes at grine til hende fra gulvet, den gråbrune karton harmonerede udmærket med de nikotingule vægge og alene tanken om udpakningen gjorde hende fuldkommen slap. Hvor skulle hun gøre af alle sine ting, hun havde ikke engang et skab!

Jessica gemte ansigtet i hænderne og begyndte at hulke. Flyttekasserne var forsynet med hastigt nedkradsede tushlabels: Bøger, Tøj (1,2 3), Sko, Køkkengrej, Personlige papirer og Pynt. Der burde have stået Knuste hjerter, Svig, Bristede illusioner og Sort Forpulet Bitterhed! på dem i stedet!

Seks års kærlighed, fælles hus og to biler. Planer om børn og fremtid, og jublen over at Eric endelig havde fået sin velfortjente forfremmelse. De havde mødt hinanden under studietiden, klaret de magre SU-år på kærlighed og billig vin, og holdt hinanden varme med drømme og kærtegn. Hendes ambitioner ændrede sig fra karriererplanering til dagjobs der betalte Ericas uddannelse, og den største tilfredshed bestod i at skabe en tryk og velfungerende dagligdag for dem begge. Hans succes blev hendes og Jessica var mindst lige så stolt som sin forlovede, da de købte huset for hans første løn og en favorabel bankkredit.

Han arbejdede hårdt og målrettet mens Jessica fiksede trixede og gjorde boligen til et hjem, og sammen planlagde de brylluppet som hun havde håbet på siden starten af deres forhold. Det havde aldrig rigtig slået hende at det meste af deres værdier stod i hans navn, for det var trods alt Eric der tjente pengene og når de blev gift ville de jo alligevel få fælleseje.

Endelig fik han det store job som ville sikre deres fremtid og give råderum til både privatskoler og ture i operaen, og det tog ham mindre end tre måneder at indlede en affærer med sin sekretær.

Først havde Jessica naturligvis forsøgt at stikke sig selv blå i øjnene, mens veninderne blev tavse når talen faldt på Erics mange forretningsweekender og mængden af overarbejde, men hverken klartonen på hans telefonsvarer, de lyse hår på jakken eller den pludseligt manglende sexlyst, fik hende for alvor til at betvivle hans troskab, og det var til slut Eric der meddelte hende, at han lige måtte have noget tid for sig selv.

”Det er ikke dig, min skat, det er mig der er et forbandet fjols.”

Den var så tyk at hun kunne tude. Klicheen fra dameblade og venindesladder, katastrofen der lige som kræft og voldtægt kun ramte naboen eller dem som selv havde bedt om det.

Og nu sad hun så her, i en lejlighed som Karen havde hørt var ledig, og forsøgte at finde ud af hvordan resten af hendes tilværelse skulle formes. Mobilten begyndte at brumme, men Jessica orkede simpelthen ikke at tale med flere bekymrede veninder eller velmenende bekendte. Hendes mor havde ringet fire gange alene i dag og selv hendes far (der vist stadig havde svært ved at sluge tanken om at ”Den fordømte lille spytslikker til eks svigersøn!” havde forladt hans datter for en langbenet blondine) havde slået på tråden, for ligesom at hører om der var noget han kunne hjælpe med...

Hun smilede gennem tårerne. Hendes far var ikke god til ord, hans akavede forsøg på at trøste, bestod i at inspicere rør og elledninger og tilbyde at rive alt det gamle skidt ned så Jessica ikke fik brændt både huset og sig selv til aske når hun tændte lyset.

Med et suk rejste Jessica sig fra papkassen (der havde fået et ganske vellignende røvafttryk i venstre hjørne) og gned sig i øjnene. Hun fandt sin DABradio og satte den til før hun begyndte at ordne sit nye liv, og da natten faldt på, havde Jessica endelig fået skabt sig et overblik over situationen.

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Den nye madras føltes uvant og syntetisk, men dobbeltsengen havde hun uden betænkelighed efterladt i sit gamle soveværelse. Sengetøjet bar stadig mærker af presfolder efter indpakningen og pudebetrækket var underligt duftløst. Jessica havde vasket hele køkkenet ned, sorteret sine ejendele efter bedste evne og ringede efter en pizza da klokken blev ni. Det var da trods alt en fordel ved at bo i storbyen, ude i Charlottenlund skulle man have ledt længe efter noget at spise på denne tid af aftenen.

Hun havde tændt stearinlys og lagt en dug over den papkasse hun brugte som bord, og forsøgt at få det bedste ud af situationen. Pizzaen var udmærket, men alligevel tabte hun det meste af sin appetit da billedet af Eric og Barbie (grinende og flirtende, mens de tullede årgangsvin og åd sig fede i foi gras på Kong Hans), pludselig begyndte at danse på hendes indre biograflærred. Hun var i seng lidt efter midnat, i en lejlighed der føltes fremmed og kold.

Selv om hun var dødtræt, ville søvnen ikke rigtigt komme. Den stod henne i hjørnet og trippede som en genert skoledreng til et afdansningsbal, uden helt at kunne bestemme sig for om den skulle byde hende op eller løbe sin vej. Hun lå på ryggen, vendte sig på siden og om på maven og tilbage på ryggen igen som en hund i en alt for lille kurv, uden at kunne finde en behagelig stilling. Månen hang rund og tavs på himlen, stjernerne syntes langt fjernere og mere utydelige end når man så på dem fra baghaven i hendes gamle hjem. Værelset var for koldt, dynen for varm og billeder af en fremtid der

ikke længere eksisterede blev med at hjemløse hendes bevidsthed. Hun løb det hele igennem gang på gang, forestillede sig hvad hun i virkeligheden burde have sagt og gjort for at slutte forholdet med oprejst pande og værdigheden intakt, og endte med at opfører en tavs men bitter monolog i det mørke værelse.

”Ha! Det kan du selv være!”

Det var ynkeligt, det vidste hun udmærket, godt der ikke var nogen vidner. Hendes hoved begyndte at føles tungt, udmattelsen satte ind og hvorfor stod onelinerne og de rappe replikker altid først i kø når diskussionerne for længst var ovre og tæppet gået ned? Drømmebilleder kom listende fra værelsets dybeste skygger, en gadelampe begyndte at blinke ude på gaden og et sted i det fjerne hørte hun bilalarm og sirener. Der var mange lyde at vende sig til i en storby, vandrør og skridt fra en overbo som var længe oppe. Øjnene løb i vand og for første gang skyldtes det ikke tårer. Madrassen trak hende baglæns og rummet syntes større. Overboens fodtrin døde ud, men stilheden føltes falsk og skrøbelig. Træværk satte sig, linoleumsgulvet i køkkenet udsendte en sagte knagen og et sted i ejendommen buldrede vandet gemmen en faldstamme.

Det var stilheden før torden, den lyd af tavshed som får skovens dyr til at trykke sig fladt mod græsset eller gemme sig i huler og grotter, og nede ved fodenden af sengen, lige der hvor månelyst ikke nåede hen, begyndte luften at flimre.

Jessica gled ind og ud af søvnen, flere ugers sindsbevægelse forvrængede virkeligheden, men alligevel så det ud som om...

Den tågede skikkelse var et menneske, kunne umuligt være virkelig og hun vidste ikke længere om hun sov eller var vågen. Noget syntes et øjeblik at materialiserer sig, træde frem af mørket og stå bøjet over hendes seng. Hun glippede med øjnene (tåge, noget med tåge!) men følte at kroppen var lammet af træthed og udmattelse. Hun rev sig fri af drømmeverdenen, satte sig op i sengen med et skrig og famlede efter natlampen.

Hendes negle havde lavet kradsemærket i det bløde hud under hagen og  
Jeg var ikke alene!

pulsens hamrede som på en travhest under et Derby.

Rummet var stille, der var ingen fodspor på gulvet.

Alligevel hang følelsen af at nogen havde været sammen med hende i mørket ved, og før Jessica endelig faldt i søvn, var solen for længst stået op over de københavnske hustage.

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”Du ligner en hængt kat!”

Jessica sendte Karen et overbærende blik og lukkede hende ind i lejligheden. ”Hvad havde du forventet, balkjole og aftenmakeup a’la Sex and the city?”

Karen tog sin jakke af og ledte efter et sted at smide den. ”Sovet godt?”

Jessica smilede blegt. Hun havde boet en uge hos Karen, siddet med slumretæpper og te i den blomstrede trepersoners sofa i sin bedste venindes hyggelige stue til langt over midnat og vendt vrangen ud af sig selv mens hun skiftevis grinede og græd. Hun havde sovet i gæstesengen, pludselig var den satte forstadskvinde med det gode liv blevet udskiftet med en ung forvirret pige der overnatte hos sin rødhårede og lige så forvirrede singleveninde og nu var hverdagen altså så begyndt. ”Joh, udmærket... Men det føles



underligt at bo alene.”

”Pjat!” sagde Karen og gik uopfordret i gang med at finde spande og rengøringsmidler. ”Om en måneds tid kan du garanteret ikke forstå at du orkede at bo sammen med en mand. Tænk på at du kan fylde hele badeværelset med makeup, lave skohylder på alle væggene i gangen og ikke behøve at slå brættet ned før du skal på toilettet. Du kommer til at elske det min skat, og så skal vi bare ha fundet en lækker ung håndværker der kan komme og underholde dig et par gange om ugen.”

Jessica begyndte at fnise. Karen havde været single så længe de havde kendt hinanden, men ikke manglet mandlige bekendt skab af den grund og hun virkede ualmindeligt tilfreds med sit liv. Jessicas eget biologiske æggeur var så småt begyndt at tikke, men mere travlt havde hun vel egentlig heller ikke. Joh, på en måde var det faktisk lidt spændende at skulle være alene for første gang i sit liv, uden at have en mand eller en far til at sørge for at indstille Dvd'en eller slæbe lønnen hjem. Hun skulle bare ha et job, nogle hyggelige gardiner og et par planter til at lyse rummet op, så skulle det hele nok blive godt igen.

Bedre, faktisk!

”Jeg har fået Casper til at hente de reoler du så på i forgårs”, råbte Karen ude fra køkkenet hvor hun med vanlig energi var ved at mikse et utvivlsomt ganske effektivt støv/plet bakterielt dræbermiddel i en spand varmt vand. ”Har du nogen klude?”

”Øh, ja... Skabet til venstre.”

Karen marcherede direkte forbi hende og ind i soveværelset. ”Kors, vi må ha gjort noget ved det her rum!”

Det lille rum var fuldkommen tomt, bortset fra den urede madras, natlampen og en blå snavsetøjskurv. ”Vi får Casper til at hente en seng fra IKEA, samt et natbord og et tøjskab. Du skal også ha nogle træpersienser, et tæppe og en lampeskærm til den stakkels lille pære som hænger der og dingler i loftet som en impotent sømand. Og en hemmelig skuffe til en dildo og et par modeblade, naturligvis.”

Jessica blev helt rød i hovedet, og tabte for et øjeblik tråden. ”Hvem er Casper?”

Karen sendte hende et drillende øjekast. ”En god ven. Lillebror til Martin som jeg havde lidt kørende med sidste efterår. Rigtig sød, så jeg tænkte at det ville være en god ide at introducerer jer. Han er fotograf, lige noget for dig.”

”Jamen...!”

”Høj og mørkhåret, fik jeg nævnt det?” Karen standsede sin talestrøm og sniffede ligesom i luften. ”Her lugter indelukket... Svovl eller noget. Har du leget med tændstikker i nat?”

Jessica fik ligesom et prik i hjertet. Pludselig kom drømmen, følelsen eller hvad det nu end var hun havde oplevet, tilbage, og hun genkaldte sig billedet af det tågede væsen. ”Nej, men...”

”Besyderligt udtryk, egentligt.”, sagde Karen og åbnede vinduet for at lufte ud. ”Siger man overhovedet stadigvæk sådan?”

”Hvad?”

”En hængt kat. Da jeg kom ind sagde jeg at du lignede en hængt kat. Kender du nogen som rent faktisk ved hvordan sådan en ser ud?”

Jessica kunne ikke lade være med at le. Hun havde for længst vænnet sig til at Karen sprang i emnerne som en loppe på en stegepande, og venindens umiddelbarhed syntes

altid at smitte. Der var intet som kunne slå Karen ud og Jessica var lykkelig for at have en sådan ven. Alle problemer blev mindre når man lo, natten følte uendelig langt borte. Glæde var den bedste medicin og for første gang siden bruddet med Eric grinede hun fra hjertet. Nu ville det vende, det var helt sikkert og fremtiden var allerede i gang.

Resten af dagen var hun i umådeligt godt humør, men da Karen endelig tog hjem og solen gik ned over byen, vendte frygten naturligvis tilbage og ved midnatstid materialiserede tågevæsnet sig atter i hendes rum.

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En krybende kulde fik hende til at slå øjnene op, i flere sekunder så Jessica personen stå i fuld figur i sove værelset, og i brystet følte hendes hjerte som en frossen og ubevægelig klump.

Hun havde svært ved at ånde, skriget fyldte hendes hals som en klump mel der hverken ville op eller ned, men til sidst kom lyden. Frygten gav genlyd i soveværelsets vægge og hun begyndte at fægte med armene som en spastiker med fingeren i en stikkontakt. Lyden eller den pludselige bevægelse fik væsnet til at blafre på samme måde som når træk fra et utæt vindue ramme en røgring, og med en lydløs sitren opløstes væsnet og forsvandt.

Hun sad ret op i sengen, stiv som en flagstang mens hun knugede dynen mod sin hage og trykkede ryggen mod den hårde murstensvæg.

Gode gud der var nogen i værelset, noget var herinde sammen med mig!

Hun kunne ikke genkalde sig den nøjagtige form eller ansigt, men hun var sikker på at det havde været en menneskelignende skikkelse.

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Og om morgenen hang følelsen ved. Én overnaturlig oplevelse kunne være indbildning eller tilskrives hjernespind (hun skulle trods alt både forholde sig til et nyt hjem, til sorg og fremmede omgivelser), men Jessica kunne ikke ignorere at der var sket noget uforklarligt to nætter i træk. Hun havde smækket døren til soveværelset, men flere gange i løbet af dagen havde hun bilde sig ind at hun hørte lyde, stemmer eller fodtrin fra det lukkede rum. Ved middagstid kom Karen og Casper med hendes nye reoler og skabe, og Karen havde endda købt planter og små krukker hun kunne stille dem i. "Nu bliver det et rigtigt hjem!"

Casper tog af sted et par timer efter, han havde boret og skruet og fået hængt billeder og badeforhæng op, og hjalp endda med at samle reolerne. Han var en flot fyr, smilende og hjælpsom, og Jessica havde gjort sit bedste for at virke interesseret mens hendes bevidsthed uafsladeligt vandrede hen mod den lukkede soveværelsesdør.

"Du... Hvor fik du egentlig lejligheden fra... Jeg mener, hvem boede her før?"

Karen skovlede et stykke bagværk i gabet og viftede med en løs hånd. "En af min fars, kollegaers mor. Fru Wilstrup, sød gammel dame. Har du en serviet?"

Jessica fandt en køkkenrulle frem. "Hvad skete der med hende, skulle hun på plejehjem, eller...?"

Karen sukede og satte tallerknen fra sig. "Hun var gammel."

Jessica kikkede stift ned i bordet og begyndte at lege med en lok fra sit lange hår. "Døde hun?"

"Det gør alle mennesker", svarede Karen kort. "I hvert fald havde lejligheden stået tom i et par måneder, ingen af slægtninge ville ha den og boligkontoret var bare interesserede i at leje den ud hurtigst muligt... Er du da ikke glad for den?"

"Jojo", skyndte Jessica sig at sige, mens hun smilede det bedste hun havde lært og hældte mere te op for at beskæftige sine strejfende hænder. "Jeg kom bare til at tænke over det... Jeg har vist ikke nået at fatte det hele endnu... Du ved, fået det hele på plads i hovedet."

Karen lo. "Hvis du nogensinde får styr på livet, gider du så ikke sende mig et link? Jeg er 31 og har stadigvæk ikke check på en skid!"

Jessica grinede så der spruttede te ud af næsen på hende og bagefter måtte hun pligtskyldigt forklare i mindste detalje hvad hun havde syntes om Casper. På en måde følte hun sig både gladere og mere levende end hun havde gjort i mange år, og følelsen varede helt til solen gik ned.

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Kunne de døde virkelig komme tilbage, fandtes der spøgelser og ånder? Hun skammede sig næsten over at tænke på den slags, det næste var vel at overveje påskeharen og nisserne! Hendes familie var praktisk talt ateister, far havde i hvert fald ikke meget til overs for religion og sære ritualer, og for ham var det lige så åndssvagt at piske sig til blods for at tækkes en krævende myte, som at ligge med enden i vejret fem gange om dagen eller klippe sig skaldet og fare omkring i orange gevandter. Folk burde sgu hellere tænke på om der var et liv FØR døden! mumlede han ofte når der var tv-udsendelser om Paven, der iført fastelavnshat og fjollet kjole, blev hyldet af hvinende masser som en anden rockstjerne, eller der blev vist et indslag med svigfulde imamere som tordnede mod de vantro.

Men kunne det alligevel være rigtigt, at der ikke var mere mellem himmel jord, end hvad øjet så?

Der havde jo gennem hele verdenshistorien været talrige eksempler på at folk havde oplevet ting der ikke kunne forklares...

Jessica bed sig ubevidst i underlæben. Tågede skikkelser, kold luft, lyde eller genstande som blev væltet. Altid samme beretninger om halvt gennemsigtige skabninger der viste sig i de sene nattetimer. Kunne det være hvileløse sjæle der forsøgte at finde fred, eller afdøde personer som vendte tilbage fra graven med budskaber til de efterladte?

Hun vandrede rundt i lejligheden og ordnede en forbløffende mængde detaljer (overspringshandlinger kunne det vel uden skam kaldes, når man millimeterkorrigerede hjørnerne på en dug, brugte et kvarter på at bytte om på rækkefølgen af kopper i køkkenskabet eller kategoriserede sine kuglepenne efter farve størrelse), selvom man var dødtræt og for længst burde været gået i seng.

Men døren til soveværelset syntes bare ikke rigtigt indbydende.

Fru Willumsen boede her måske stadig. Enten kom hun tilbage for at fortælle Jessica om skatten under køkkengulvet eller for at jage hende ud, eller også havde lejligheden i

årevis været hjem søgt af onde ånder, som til sidst havde fået den gamle dame til at dø af skræk!

Jessica standsede sin vandring, et sted nede på gaden begyndte to branderter at skændes højlydt. Hun rakte prøvende hånden ud mod mobilen, godt nok var det ved at være sent, men man burde måske ringe til Karen og spørge hvordan fru Willumsen egentligt d...

Hun for sammen da telefonen kimedede i hendes hånd og var ved at kaste den fra sig i bar befippelse. Hun lo af sig selv og kikkede på nummeret på displayet. Ukendt? "Hallo...?"

Casper lød som en lille, nervøs og alt for grinende dreng, men latteren var langt mere smittende end pinlig og snart lo de begge og efter en ordentlig tur rundt om den varme grød, fik de endelig aftalt en date og da Jessica endelig lagde på, var hun varm i både kinder og hjerte. Hun fnisede som en skolepige da hun smurte rensecreme i ansigtet og børstede tænder, tanken om Eric var et blegnende minde som hun dårligt kunne forholde sig til og hun havde næsten sommerfugle i maven, da hun hoppede i dynerne.

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Hun havde sovet i næsten en time, da kulden og fornemmelsen af fare vækkede hende. Hun skreg da væsnet tonede frem af mørket, halvt gennemsigtig og indhyllet i tåge. Skikkelsen var som et tomt lærred hvori hun kunne indsætte nøjagtigt det ansigt eller krop, som frygten og adrenalinet ville dikterer. Skikkelsen forestillede den gamle dame, ændrede sig til Eric og utallige unavngivne, historiske personer, og bagefter kunne Jessica hverken gengive eller helt huske hvad hun havde set. Hun skreg bare igen og igen og tumlede i sanseløs rædsel ud af sengen.

Hun snappede sit tøj, stormede ud af lejligheden uden at låse og klædte sig på foran hoveddøren.

Karen tog telefonen og sagde søvndrukkent Ja til at lade hende overnatte, og lovede selvfølgelig at lade være med at fortælle Casper, at Jessica havde en skrue løs. De talte om det hele natten og tre dage efter hentede en flyttevogn hendes ting.

Jessica oplevede ikke flere uforklarlige hændelser i sit liv, og den næste lejlighed hun flyttede ind i var ganske normal og betryggende rolig.

Et par uger efter gik hun i seng med Casper og selv om det ikke var ham der senere blev far til hendes to børn, var han et forrygende bekendtskab og hjalp hende til at komme videre i sit liv. Hun fandt et godt job og fik nye venner, og minderne om tågevæsnet blev efterhånden pakket ned i den lille, sorte sæk som vi alle sammen bære rundt på, lige der under hjertet, men som vi sjældent lukker op.

Hendes tilværelse gik videre, men dybt inde i sjælen huskede hun stadig tågevæsnerne, og når folk i omgangskredsen grinede af ugebladsberetninger om ånder og gespenster, lo Jessica ikke helt så meget som dem. Hun indrømmede aldrig sin tro og sine oplevelser over for andre, men dybt inde i sjælen vidste hun at ånde verdenen virkelig eksisterede. Gennem hele historien havde så mange mennesker oplevet tegn fra det hinsides, at hun var sikker på at der i virkeligheden fandtes både ånder og spøgelser.

Naturligvis tog hun fejl.

Ektroplasmaen sitrede og opløstes, og gradvist vendte W'muhaos bevidsthed tilbage til hendes krop. Hun bevægede sine seksten fingre og rejste sig graciøst fra transporteren. En processor var allerede ved at arkiverer rejsekroppens visuelle indtryk og alle data blev omsat til forståelige billeder. Den verden hun havde besøgt var umådelig fremmed, helt anderledes fra hendes egen og uendelig svær at begribe.

K'Tauerne havde rejst på denne måde i årtusinder, samlet information og viden om fremmede livsformer på de nærmeste kloder og de fjerneste galakser. Hendes øje fyldte det meste af ansigtet, åbningen til fødeindtagelse sad det mest praktiske sted, direkte under den lange, smidige hals. Hendes folk kommunikerede ved bevægelse og farveskift, det enorme øje var i stand til at optage selv de svageste lysændringer eller polariseringsskift.

Nar-Hann kom ind i laboratoriet, de fire arme dannede en serie hurtige bevægelser, mønstret for hendes velbefindende.

Hvordan gik rejsen?

Godt, tak

De så billedmaterialet igennem, lydene ville senere blevet omsat til forståelig mønstertekst. Væsnet der havde ligget under tæppet virkede frygtsomt, og var kort efter det sidste besøg løbet ud af sit bo. Det var ikke en ualmindelig reaktion. Det var stor forskel på hvorledes denne race opfattede K'Tauernes rejsekroppe, nogle reagerede med nysgerrighed, andre med frygt, mens de fleste slet ikke syntes at opfatte deres tilstedeværelse.

Ektooverførslen var den ideelle rejseform. Molekylære impulser kunne formes til et eksternt astrallegeme, transmitteres gennem universet som lyspartikler og gendannes til energi på en hvilke som helst prædefineret koordinat, og optagelserne blev sendt simultant tilbage til Opsamlere.

Det følte som at være der selv og de brugte kun sjældent fysisk materiel til videnskabelige rejser.

Naturligvis var det en begrænsning at de ikke kunne samle prøver og håndgribelige artefakter, men man kunne lære meget om andre kulturer ved observation alene. Tid var ikke noget hendes folk beskæftigede sig med, W'muhao havde ikke mere fornemmelse af dage og år end bjerge har for duft, men i menneskelig målestok levede de næsten evigt.

Blandt mange andre kloder havde K'Tauerne besøgt jorden i årtusinder, og efterhånden som plasmakroppen udvikledes og elektriciteten blev mere kompakt, lærte de gradvist at interaktivere med de fremmede verdner. Indtil videre kunne de kun skubbe til objekter, få en vase til at falde fra en vindueskarm eller vippe et maleri på en væg, men målet var en fuldkommen fysisk form.

Muligvis ville også denne klode vise sig værd at assimilere, der kunne findes fødevareresurser de engang ville komme til at behøve. Men indtil videre var W'muhao og hendes kollegaer tilfredse med at observerer, men K'Tauerne diskuterede ofte hvordan de fremmede mon egentlig opfattede dem. Man regnede med at de primitive jordboerne så hvad de ønskede at se, og sikkert forestillede sig den elektroniske tågeplasma som figurer, der lignede deres egen art.

Så vidt man vidste, havde de en mental funktion der kaldtes "Fantasi" og flere af dem troede endog at plasmaet repræsenterede afdøde slægtninge eller fortidige personer.

Hvis W'muhao kunne le, ville hun have fundet det lidt morsomt, men hendes hjerne beskæftigede sig ikke med følelser. Hendes race var videnskabsfolk og opdagelsesrejsende og både deres genetik såvel som livsfilosofi, var baseret på videnskabelige analyser.

Nar-Han satte afspilleren i gang. Hunvæsnet havde forladt sit bo og det var tvivlsomt om hun ville vende tilbage. De kunne enten vente til den næste beboer flyttede ind, eller gå videre til en ny koordinat.

W'muhao ændrede sin kropsfarve, de to øverste arme fik et skær af pink på den grå overflade.

Vi foretager en ny søgning

Det gamle kvindevæsen som tidligere beboede koordinaten, var pludselig holdt op med at fungerer, alle livstegn ophørte under det sidste besøg og det nye emne var flygtet. Der var ikke mere at hente i dette bo. De yngste havde vist sig at være mest interessante, for frygt var erstattet af nysgerrighed og de gik ikke så ofte i stå. W'muhao foreslog, at de begyndt at finde et nyt emne at studerer.

Og i værelset hos en lille dreng der lå i sin seng og håbede at hans mor havde ret i at der hverken fandtes trolde i haven eller uhyrer under sengen, begyndte en tågelignende substans at samle sig i soveværelsets mørkeste hjørne. Fra universets fjerneste afkroge sendte et gråt, firearmet væsen sine elektroniske følere gennem tid og rum og gav sig til at spekulerer på, om mennesker måske var værd at æde.

## Kenneth Krabat AFSTÅELSENS VEJE

I lyset fra virkeligt træ i flammer i den virkelige kamin følte husets største rum som at ankomme til et dystert retro-syncorama udtænkt af hendes fædrene side, bortset fra at der ikke var noget fandens feedbånd på øen. Og hun havde ikke tænkt tanken at medbringe en forstærker til Plante - hvor var det her tomrum bare ude-ude-ude! Hvad skulle man med et implantat, hvis man var alene?

“Til den yngste arving i familien: Mit hus og alle genstande i det”..

Genstande, minrøv.

Sandt-sandt? Rummet gav hende følelsen af at drukne. Midt i denne katedral af forpulede døde træer og pis var det som at drukne i luft; hun kæmpede for at trække vejret. Alligevel forblev hun observant. Og alligevel følte det som om, hun var ved at blive kvalt. Hvad bliver det til, stønnede hun. Dø eller hvad?

Hvad kan jeg gøre for dem, den herre eller dame?

U-ad! Sygt skærende stemme! Med ét kunne hun sagtens trække vejret.

Det var den gamle choko-bot, der havde lukket hende ind i hovedbygningen. Alle retrofesters sikre hit. Rusten tech, stemmemodulet ska' tones eller trimmes. Lyder som metal, der bliver tygget. Ikke just en Tech-Lord, hendes granonkel.

Hvad kan du? spurgte hun, uden at vende sig om. Den model var sjældent særlig avanceret, programmeringen typisk ret basal, men nu den var så gammel, havde den måske fået en make-over? De fleste bevarede dog fabriksindstillingerne; hvorfor ellers gå retro?

Den herre eller dame, clearinggen bestemmer, sagde botten.

Årh, den skide antikviteten havde glemt omfanget af hendes invitation. Men hun var virkelig ikke i humør til at tage det store spring. Gå venligst, sagde hun og viftede den væk med hånden.

Botten gjorde ikke lyd til at forlade rummet. Det er ikke muligt, sagde den.

Gæster har ikke ene adgang til rummet her? sagde hun.

Desværre, nej, sagde botten

Selvfølgelig. Botten havde sine ordrer. Så påkalder jeg mig ejers rettigheder, sagde hun – for at få det overstået, selvom det føltes uansvarligt. Så ung-ung. Så tidligt.

Hun BT'ede ejerkoden, som sagføreren havde overført til Plante, men botten reagerede ikke med den forventede modtagerkode. Præ-implantat-inkompatibel? mumlede hun. Utroligt! I stedet rablede hun koden af sig i ascii.

Velkommen, fru Herre Alice, sagde botten. Hvormed kan jeg være til tjeneste? Mit navn er Wai.

En solbrændt bot med et skævvøjlet navn! Hun fnes. Du kan flytte din botbag ud herfra og la' mig svine for mig selv! sagde hun. Og hent noget mad, men stil det udenfor døren. Og sørg for, at der er stille-stille derude.

Det svage klik måtte være døren, der lukkede, men hun vendte sig aldrig om mod botten; hendes blik var én lang, nervøs rundkastning mellem rummets top, midte og bund. Det var så ubegribeligt-ubegribeligt stort.

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Loftet måtte mindst være oppe i femte sals højde. Fem stokværk... ifølge Plante. Et rundt murstenstårn konvergerende i en kvadratisk, spids kuppel sat med farvet glas, der nedtonede solens møde med lyset fra kandelabre fordelt ned gennem den åbne skakt for at have tilstrækkeligt med lys til at oplyse alle balkoner og indholdet af alle vægges mørkebrune hylder fra loft til gulv. Ingen vinduer i væggene, bortset fra dem i stueetagen, som vendte ud mod haven – men hér nede sørgede tynde, flødefarvede gardiner for at filtrere dagslyset til en diset skumring. Var det her en kirkegård eller en kirke? Gys, uanset hvad.

Uden feedbånd kunne hun ikke CRAIGE markedsværdien. Dét var ellers hendes første tanke, bare afhænde det hele og komme videre med livet. Måske sagføreren vidste noget? Men dén klausul? "Kan ikke med føje fjerne nogen genstand fra matriklen inden for fem års residens." Hun var nødt til at bo her i fem år, før hun kunne hæve gevinsten.

Helved, det sku være løgn!

'Genstande'.. ja. Huset var sikkert fuld af andre gamle ting, hun kunne bytte til noget seriøs tech eller måske Coins – i morgen ville hun få Wai til at give den store omvisning. En vibs sagde hende dog, at definitionen på hendes arv direkte henviste til indholdet af det her rum. Men hvordan skulle hun kunne repræsentere så mange analoge ting?! Mega negavibs, det her!

Uanset, hvem hendes granonkel i virkeligheden var, havde han virkelig været anal. Mindede om hendes far – discountprædikanten, der kun så mod fortiden. Som om moder kun havde tilhørt hans verden. Vreden føltes gammel i hende. Fucking uforståelige genopdragelsesstrategi, der havde påtvunget hende denne mands, denne granonkel-fremmedes lortebunke af videnssonani, fordi hun tilfældigvis var længst fra ham i opgjort

levetid – og ikke bare sådan almindelige, lusede, artsinfo-bokse, men ægte, fucking, fysiske, gamle papirbøger med for- og bagside, sammenklemmt mod hinanden som ryg-til-røvgnubbende linjedansere i en udsyret burlesk hele vejen op gennem det spidse tårn.

Guder i det høje, mumlede hun. Hvad har jeg gjort?

Aldrig i sit liv havde hun ejet en papirbog – alene tanken! Hun havde selvfølgelig, som de fleste andre, eksperimenteret med papir i statspasseren, men de fleste lod det blive ved det. Hvor gammel var hun, da hun sprællede sig ud af at blive tvunget til at læse op fra fars papirbøger? To?

Der var noget ved begrænset info-ejerskab, som vakte kvalme og afsky hos de fleste – kunder til papirtryk svarede vel til antallet af tobaksrygere. Det meste kunsthåndværk var billedkopieret og delt med millioner; kun rige-rige mennesker brød sig om originaler og begrænsede oplag. Alle andre delte bare gratis, eller leasede en kopi, og var fri til at bevæge sig, hvor hen de ville.

Smidig krop  
ren krop

- digtede hun i tankerne. Og endnu en brøk - hvor hun dog elskede ordknappe digte:

Smidigt sind  
ren verden

Hun lagrede dem begge i Plante til senere deling og stirrede op i det veloplyste bogopbevaringstårn. Et 'udsøgt' bibliotek. Sikkert førsteudgaver. Begrænsede oplag. Livløse, uforanderlige data.

Efter alt at dømmes var hun meget rig nu... Men alt i hende skreg-skreg på et bad!

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På modstående sider af rummet førte to vindeltrapper hele vejen op til femte stokværk og havde hver sin lillebitte elevator i midten, der gik til tredje. I den var plads til en enkelt person, samt en lav rullebæret med et langt håndtag. Til at nedtage stabler af bøger med, tænkte hun. Men hvorfor skulle nogen ville rådføre sig med store, uhåndterlige ... Plante gav hende ordet ... bind, når at feede Wiki eller venner kunne gøre det i real-time? Ufatteligt!

Hun passerede forbi rækkerne af mangefarvede bøger af vekslende højde og dybde, ti hylder højt langs de krumme vægge fra elevator til elevator på det første niveau, hendes indre blik mælkehvidt af mangel på mønstergenkendelse. Da hun standsede på den anden side for at se sig tilbage, stod hver bogs... ryg nu selvstændigt frem. Ikke som rigtige bøger, der kun havde forsider, forsider som altid kæmpede om opmærksomhed; sådan var det ikke her – der var mange-mange små forskelle, som ikke skreg på at blive indoptaget, men snarere skulle minde nogen om noget. Fandtes en sådan nogen? Så et strejf af skam, en dyb følelse af skam. Dig, de tilhører dig nu. Men hvordan, hvordan kunne hun... hvorfor ville nogen eje noget af alt dette?

Hun undertrykte en tilskyndelse til at forsøge at feede igen – tjekke titler på Amazon. For det første ville feedB stadig være fraværende, og selvom om næsten alle verdens



kvadrilliarder bøger var i Amazons database, nogle af dem til syge priser, var bøgerne til salg hovedsagligt digitale, mens 99,99 % af alle papirudgaver bare ventede på at selvantænde.

Mens hun langsomt rumlede op til andet stokværk med den anden elevator - der også rummede en bogvogn - begyndte hun at overveje, hvordan hun ville kunne skille sig af med sin arv.

Halvt opmærksom på, at bøgerne på andet stokværk var højere og mindre kulørte end på niveauet underneden, fulgte hun langsomt reolernes bue fra elevatoren hen imod elevatoren på den anden side, mens hun ved hjælp af Plantes kopi af sin forfaders sidste vilje og testamente udforskede vejene til afståelse, snart lost-lost i konsekvenserne af ensidig kontraktjura.

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At bestige vindeltrappen i den anden siden snarere end at tage elevatoren bragte hende tilbage, gispende efter vejret. Seriøst! tænkte hun. Kun en udfordret begavelse ville bygge et lodret bibliotek... gisp!

Med mindre det rummede en fremfindingsmekanisme... gisp!

Wai, naturligvis. Wai hentede og bragte bøgerne. Gisp!

Den tilstrækkelige måde at nedhente data på. I det mindste fra de øverste etager...

Hun standsede for at hive efter vejret og se op mod loftet; det gjorde hende svimmel. Sådan en opdeling af datalagrings kunne være en opdeling efter brugbarhed. Logisk set det mindst brugbare øverst - længst væk - og det mest brugbare i bunden. Hvilket kunne betyde en feedbackforstærker dernede et sted, med en tænd/sluk-knap!

Hun så ned og fortrød, at hun var begyndt sin udforskning på første niveau i stedet for i stueetagen. Frustrationen fik hende til at ruske i rækværket. Fannensosse; relevans var noget, der forandrede sig! Hendes krop forandrede sig, hendes behov forandrede sig, trenden forandrede sig. I dag ville det være nødvendigt med adgang til et relevant overblik over grusomhederne i kølvandet på øjeblikkets Islamiske samlingsforsøg, så man på tilstrækkeligt grundlag kunne beslutte sig for, hvilken sag man skulle støtte. I morgen var der behov for en top10 over øko-katastrofer, som kunne kontrastere seneste nyt om præ-industrielle lande i uhellige alliancer med internationale investorer. Hvordan kunne viden ikke være i centrum af både mulig og uforudsigelig need-to-know?

Hukommelse, uforanderlig i al evighed og for evigt bevaret, var som at gå imod livet selv!

Hun kastede med vilje op henover rækværkets kant. Men det nåede knap at blive andet end lidt småsprøjt på gulvet underneden, før Wai var over det med kost og spand. Føler De Dem ikke rask, min Herre fru Alice? sagde den med sin uelskelige-uelskelige stemme.

Det havde hun ikke noget svar på. Hun trådte bare et skridt baglæns.

På fjerde stokværk besluttede hun sig for en strategi. Hun ville forsøge at hacke Wais permanentlager - mest sandsynligt var, at det kunne tilgås, hvor botten gik hen for at genoplade. Tanken var at indkode et tilstrækkeligt antal falske botobserverede opholdsperioder til at imødekomme de juridiske krav om hendes tilstedeværelse på

ejendommen og så skynde sig tilbage til byen og feede til sit synkede nu. Fem år fra dette nu, ville hun likvidere bogsamlingen og alt det andet, og lade en anden analfikseret overtage ejerskabet. Svært at forestille sig, at noget af det skulle tabe i værdi, set med de rige-riges øjne...

Og så måske bruge pengene på at virtualisere hele huset til et virkeligt syncorama og installere anstændigt feedbånd i alle hjørner af det her elendige tomrum af en ø!

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På den øverste balkon, der forekom at være lager for de største og måske gamle-gamle bøger – Wai kunne måske korrigere indtrykket, men de så bare gamle-gamle ud – fik en indskydelse hende til at lade et bind på en halv meter i højden med en perfekt, forgyldt ryg med lethed glide ud mellem lignende bind, for så omgående at tabe det med et hult DRØN! der fik rækværket til at klapre, og længe gav ekko mellem de træbeklædte vægge.

Selv ikke lydløse forbandelser kunne maskere følelsen af skam. Men forsattan, hvor var de her tingester tunge!

Hun kæmpede for at løfte bindet på plads igen, men mærkede det glide ud af sine hænder. Denne gang ramte det spidse hjørne hendes kød og skar hendes venstre læg til blods. Helt hvid indvendig udstødte hun et hyl og faldt på knæ, og skubbede vredt den store bog væk.

Siddende med ryggen op ad ældgamle bind og håndende strygende op og ned af sin læg, mens blødningen langsomt faldt til et minimum og smerten til en svag dunken, følte hun sig meget alene. Så fannens fysisk! – men hun udlod at brøle højlydt; i Sync var der ikke noget ekko som hér.

Hun blev atter opmærksom på bindet foran sig, dets skære hvidhed i skarp kontrast til den brunlakerede overflade på balkonens trægulv.

Den store bog lå åben omtrent midtvejs, disse midterste sider rundede – som en halv sinuskurve, tænkte hun – fra syningen i midten og ud mod kanterne, og de tykke papirsider underneden i faldende grad bølgeformede på grund af presset fra siderne over dem.

Bogens opslag åbenbarede et kulørt og glitrende billede på det meste af højre side, mens den venstre side var dækket af sorte linjer i en ophøjet håndskrift, der forekom uregelmæssig; men som helhed var det ikke desto mindre godt-godt for øjnene. Hun spurgte, men Plante havde intet arkiveret om hverken den ene eller det andet.

Mens hun aede sin dunkende læg med den ene hånd, lænede hun sig frem for forsigtigt at glatte de buede sider med den anden, kun næsten skamfuld ved tanken, at det bare havde at være umagen værd.

\*\*\*

Da hun atter blev opmærksom på sine omgivelser, stod Wai ved hendes side med en tallerken europæiske, åbne rugbrødssandwich i én hånd og et glas med hvidlig væske i den anden. Kunne det være mælk? Ægte gedemælk? Men at botten skulle se hende sådan her føltes sært ubehageligt. Sagde jeg ikke, du skulle blive udenfor? sagde hun.

Det gjorde De, fru Herre Alice, sagde Wai. Men indtil den slettes, er min forrige Herres stående programmering stadig virksom. ”Spis godt og tænk godt”.

Den korte optagelse, der lød gennem Wais højttalere, kunne kun være lavet af hendes granonkel. Stemmen var dyb og behagelig, om end en smule selvtilfreds. Som en voksen, der irettesætter et barn. Som hendes far.

At efterlade Dem med dette ville være mig tilfredsstillende... Botten rakte hende både tallerken og glas på samme tid. Har De brug for lægehjælp? Den angav det størknede blod på hendes læg.

Nej. Nej tak, Wai, sagde hun, og mærkede et ulogisk strejf af skam over at have talt hårdt til botten. Hun rejste sig. Hør, Wai... Jeg spiser nedenunder. Hun pegede på bindet, der lå på gulvet. Er det ok at tage det der med?

Naturligvis. De er fru Herren, sagde Wai.

Kan vi nøjes med ”fru”, Wai? sagde hun og modstod fristelsen til at smile.

Det kan vi, fru Alice. Wai bukkede sig ned og tog den store bog op i sine to andre arme.

Det overraskede hende, hvor let det forekom – og det samme gjorde et strejf af jalousi. Kunne hænde, at botten her ikke var en antikvitét endnu. Forhåbentlig ikke et dårligt varsel for et forsøg på at hacke den. Du går først, Wai, sagde hun, og fremtvang en latter for at maskere utrygheden i sin stemme.

Javel, fru Herre Alice, sagde Wai og gik hen mod trappen.

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Natten var temmelig fremskreden, da hun opgav at hacke Wais datalager. Selv med hjælp fra implantatet og 50 års tech-fremskridt kunne hun ikke få en temporal programmering til at holde. Wai var helt igennem antik; på alder med hendes granonkel. Ingen måde at få den til at ”huske”, at hun havde været i huset på fremtidige datoer, uden at hun rent faktisk var til stede. Skulle hun have Coins ud af arven, måtte hun tjene dem på den hårde måde.

Mens hun gik tilbage til biblioteket gennem det stille, tomme hus, fik hun for selskabskyld venner og levende familie til at danse og tale og tilsyneladende komme til live frem for sig. Men på grund af Plantes begrænsede off-linekapacitet havde hendes yndlingsoptagelser for få markørvariabler selv for syncorama.

Det ville være fuldstændig fantastisk, hvis hun kunne tale, danse, spise sammen med enhver af dem, og røre, kysse, elske og være nær. Syncorama var fint. Hendes sind ville ikke kunne kende forskel, det vidste enhver. Men hvorfor var den tanke lige pludselig så foruroligende?

Resten af vejen til biblioteket vekslede hun mellem at trække på fødderne, stampe i gulvet og sparke til det fremmede møblement, der stod langs med væggene. Var noget af det virkeligt? Var det hele bare syncorama? Som et vidplot-komplot om at ikkedræbe en arving ved at fjernhacke et implantat og skrue op for dets virkelighedsparametre? Hvordan skulle hun kunne afgøre dét?

\*\*\*

Maden stod på det store skrivebord midt på bibliotekets gulv, hvor hun havde bedt Wai om at stille det. Hun opdagede, hvor sulten hun var, flåede filmen af de åbne sandwich og tog for sig.

Også på bordet og næsten så stort, at det var usynligt, lå bindet med den gyldne ryg, som havde skrasket hende. Bogen fra femte. Så uhyrlig var den, at hun kom til at skælve.

Hun lagde den halvspiste sandwich fra sig og tørrede omhyggeligt sine hænder i en serviet, som Wai havde lagt ved, og rakte begge hænder ud i luften over bogen med håndfladerne nedad.

Indbindingen var ikke papir. Lærred... sagde hende plante. En slags vævning i stil med granmors strik, sikkert. Hun kunne ikke direkte huske at have rørt ved dette materiale; men hun mindedes... et eller andet.

Hun lod hænderne synke ned på vævningen. Et stød gik igennem hende. Øjeblikkelig genkendelse af indbindingen. Ru. Riflet. Som en vennehånds berøring – velkendt. Oppe på den øverste balkon havde hun siddet og strøget hen over materialet, længe. Længe. Det indså hun. Hendes hænder huskede det.

Uden at tænke nærmere over det åbnede hun bindet et tilfældigt sted – for med lethed at finde det opslag, der havde fået hende til at føle sig... fredfyldt. Men den ældgamle side var oversået med blodige fingeraftryk. Skønt ikke ved et uheld. Jo, jo, hun havde blødt voldsomt fra læggen...

Hun mindes, hvordan hun havde behøvet så meget-meget at efterlade et like som angivelse af den glæde, papiroslaget havde givet hende. Fuck migdig! En side fuld af blod!?

En brændende fornemmelse bredte sig i hendes bryst. Kvinden på balkonen var ikke blot nogle timer yngre end hende, hun var et rent barn! Hun, kvinden, hun havde været, havde tilsølet det smukkeste kunstværk, hun nogensinde havde set. Nej, det eneste virkelige-virkelige kunstværk, hun nogensinde havde set. Og hvorfor?

Med hænderne fladt henover de blodplettede sider genkaldte hun sig, hvordan hun havde grædt gennem halvåbne øjenlåg, mens fingrene fulgte farvernes kurver og afgrænsninger på papiret, den matte fornemmelse af de brede blækstreger, de små fejl i papiret fra ufuldstændigt opløste klumper af bomuld og halm. Hvordan det kulørte billede af en fager jomfru, frembragt af en for længst afdød munks billedskabende hånd, havde fået hende til at græde over ham. Bragt hende til at forstå klosterets nøjsomhed og behovet for at være ét med sin Gud og sine foresatte og sine brødre på dét ensomme sted. Denne ensomhed.

Det var ikke muligt at eje sådan en ting. Ingen...

Frak mig! Hun ville skubbe bindet fra sig, men kunne alligevel ikke få sig til det. Jeg er ejet, tænkte hun. Nogle fingres hukommelse ejer mig og får mig til at komme tilbage efter mere. Hun så op på biblioteket, der tårnede sig op over hende.

Synco kunne have simuleret ildevarslende kræfter komme ud af bøgerne som grå røg; men hun behøvede det ikke for at fatte, at hver eneste af dem hver for sig besad magten til at indgive hende tyngde, og taktile hukommelse, og at hendes krop på en eller anden måde forstod disse muligheder. Umulige omfavnelser. Intimitet, hun aldrig havde kendt til.

Impulsivt lukkede hun bogen, løftede den med besvær og lod den falde ned på

gulvbrædderne. Det velkendte DRØN fremkaldte en ny, men beroligende varme i hendes kinder.

Knælende over bogen baksede hun den tilbage på skrivebordet. Hun rørte ved bordets træflader. Bankede på det med knoerne. Lugtede til det. Lugtede til bogen. Bankede på omslaget. At dette ikke var virtualitet – hvordan kunne hun vide dét!? Men hun vidste det. Alt hvad hun nogensinde ville få brug for at vide var lige her.

Hun undersøgte sine hænder i lyset fra den grønne skrivebordslampe og gned langsomt den ene hånds fingre mod den anden hånds fingre. De forekom helt nye.

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Bogen var væk, da hun vågnede med ansigtet hvilende på hænderne på bordet. Hun løftede hovedet og anstrengte sig for at fokusere på femte stokværk, mens hun blinkede for at klare synet.

Der var tilsyneladende ingen huller i bogrækkerne deroppe. På en måde var det en trøst... Nej, nej. Det føltes faktisk godt-godt.

En skygge kastet hen over gulvet fik hende til at se i retning af terrassedørene. På de solbeskinnede fliser oven for den frodige have var Wai i færd med at skænke kaffe. En fabelagtig duft kom bølgende ind i rummet.

Så enkel-enkel, gammel programmering, og nu hendes. Var det forkert? Var der i virkeligheden noget galt i dét?

## Kenneth Krabat AVENUES OF RIDDANCE

Entering into the largest room of the house in the light of real wood burning in the real fireplace felt like a sinister retro sincogame devised by her paternal side, except there was no damn feedband on this island, what total shit block!

'To the youngest heir of my bloodline my house and all of its artifacts!..

Artifacts, yeah, right.

True-true? This room made here feel like drowning. Right in the middle of this cathedral made of cock sucking dead trees and shit it felt like she was drowning in air, fighting to take in oxygen. But still she remained observant. And still she felt like she was suffocating. Which is it then, she exhaled forcefully. Die or what?

What may I do for you, Sir or Madam?

Yu-ew! A voice to make you wince. Suddenly she had no problems breathing. It was the same old chocky-bot that had let her into the mansion. A would-be feast for retro parties. Rusty tech, voice box needs dimmin' or trimmin'. Sounds like chewing metal. Not much of a tech fiend, her granuncle.

What can you do? she asked, not turning around. They usually weren't up to much, programming very basic, but since it was so old, it could have received custom upgrades. Most preferred the retro feel of simplicity, though.

Madam or Sir, clearance decides, the bot said.

Oh. Damn antiquity's forgotten the bounds of her invite. But she really wasn't up for the big leap. Leave me be, she said, dismissing it with a hand.

The bot made no sound of leaving. That is not possible, it said.

Guests have no solitary access to this room? she said.

Sadly, no, said the bot.

Sure. The bot had its orders. Then I invoke ownership, she said - to get it out of her hair, at the same time feeling irresponsible. Too young-young. Too soon.

She bt'ed the owner code the lawyer had imprinted on her insert, but the bot did not respond with the expected recipient code. Pre-inserts-in-capable? she muttered. Incredible! Instead she rattled off the code in ascii.

Welcome, Madam Master Alice, said the bot. How may I be of assistance? My name is Wai.

A nigga-bot wit' a wop-name! She giggled. You may take your bot-butt out of here and leave me to my messin', she said. And bring me some food, but leave it outside. And keep it quiet-quiet out there.

The tiny click would be the doors closing, but she never turned to face the bot, her eyes never ceasing to dart nervously between the top, middle and bottom of the room, so-so incomprehensibly large.

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The ceiling would have to be five stories high. Five stocks... said her insert. A rounded brick wall tower converging in a square, pointy dome set with colored glass dimming the sun coming in to meet the light from the chandeliers spaced at intervals down through the open shaft to adequately light all balconies and the contents of dark-brown shelves running from top to bottom of all walls. There were no windows anywhere in the walls, apart from the ones on the ground floor facing the garden, but down here creamy colored flimsy curtains filtered the light coming in from outside to a misty dusk. Was this a graveyard or a church? Creeps, either way!

Feedband down she couldn't Craig for estimates, that was her first impulse, just unload everything and get on with life. Maybe the lawyer would know? But that clause? 'Can not rightfully remove any artifacts from the premises prior to 5 years of residency.' She would have to live here for five years, before she could cash in.

No frakkin' fuck!

'Artifacts'.. sure. The house would probably be full of other old stuff she could trade for serious tech or even Cees - tomorrow she would have Wai give her the grand tour - but she had a vibe the definition of her inheritance was a direct referral to the contents of this room. Much negivibe, this!

No matter who her granuncle was for real, he had been real anal. Reminiscent of her father - poor man's preacher only counting the has-been. Anger felt old in her. She had been dumped this man's, this granuncle stranger's shitload of knowledge-masturbation for what ever re-educative reason possessed him to choose the person farthest removed from him in years - and not just any arty crap info-containers, but real frakkin physical, old paper books with front and back, pressing up against each other like line humpers at a spaced out burlesque party all the way up through the pointy tower.

Gods of the Almighty, she muttered. What did I do?

At no point in her life had she herself owned a paper book - the thought alone! She had of course, like most people, experimented with paper in statecare, but most people

left it at that. Early on she had squirmed enough to make her father stop making her read from his paperbooks.

Some thing about limited info ownership was deeply disturbing and scorned by people, paper print buyers equal to the number of tobacco smokers left. Most handicraft artwork image copied and shared with millions; only rich-rich people concerned themselves with originals and limited editions. Everybody else just shared free or leased a copy and was free to move and go anywhere.

Fluid body

clean body.

she composed in her head. And, another fraction - how she loved brevity in poems:

Fluid mind

clean world.

She filed both for later dissemination and gazed up into the well-lit book-storage tower. A select Library. Probably first editions. Limited print runs. Lifeless, unchangeable data. Most likely she was very rich now.

She so-so felt like a bath!

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On two sides of the room, winding staircases going all the way up to fifth stock had a tiny center elevator going up to third. In it was room for one person and a low trolley on wheels with a long handle. To bring down stacks of books, she assumed. But why would anyone want to consult big, bulky... her implant supplied the word... tomes, when precise Bings could do the trick in real-time? Unfathomable!

She passed the rows of multi-colored books of various heights and widths ten-shelves high along the curving walls across the room from elevator to elevator on the first level, her mind's eye glazing over with lack of pattern recognition. Stopping on the other side to look back along the platform each book... spine now stood out on its own. Not like real books, which only had fronts, fronts always vying for attention, but not so here - many-many little differences not crying out to become absorbed, but to somehow remind someone of something. Did such a someone exist? Then a sense of shame, a deep feeling of shame. You, they belong to you now. But how, how could she... why would anyone own any of all of this?

She suppressed an urge to try banding again - to check out titles at Amazzin! Firstly, feedbee would still be down, and even if nearly all of the world's quadrillion paperbooks were in Amazzin's inventory, a few going at a bundle, the majority of titles for sale were digital, 99.99% of paper editions just waiting to auto-ignite.

Rising slowly to the second stock by way of the second elevator - which also contained a book trolley - mentally she began pursuing ways to rid herself of her inheritance.

On the second stock, slowly walking along the shelving from the elevator to the other elevator, half noticing how the books were taller and less colorful than on the level below, she explored avenues of riddance by way of the copy of her ancestor's will and testament in her implant, soon lost-lost in the implications of one-sided contract law.

Climbing the winding staircase on the other side rather than taking the elevator soon brought her back, gasping for air.

*Seriously! she thought. Only someone out of it would build a vertical library.. gasp!  
Unless they had a mechanism of retrieval... gasp!*

*Wai, of course! Wai was the bringer and returner of books. Gasp! The adequate method of data retrieval. At least from the topmost floors...*

*Stopping to suck in air and glance up into the tower room made her feel dizzy. Such a division of data storage could be a division of usefulness. In all logic less useful at the top - furthest away - and most useful at the bottom. Which could indicate a feedband access station at the center desktop below!*

*She looked down over the railing, immediately regretting having begun her exploration on the first level rather than on the ground floor. In concord with her frustration she rattled the railing. Damn it; relevance changed all the time! Her body changed, her needs changed, trends changed. Today access to relevant overview of present day Islamic State atrocities would be needed to adequately decide which cause to support, tomorrow a top-10 list of eco-disasters would be needed to contrast the latest in pre-industrial nations fraught with international investors. How could any knowledge not be at the center of possible and un-foreseeable need-to-know? Memory, forever unchangeable, and preserved forever, was like going against life itself!*



*She willfully vomited over the bannister and onto the floor below. But hardly did it spread out into a thin pool, before Wai was there scooping and cleaning. Are you unwell, Master Madam Alice? it said, its voice so-so unlovable.*

*To this she had no answer. She just pulled away from the railing.*

*On the fourth stock she decided on a strategy. She would attempt to hack Wai's permanent storage - most likely it would be accessible from where the bot went to recharge - and imprint on it a sufficient number of fake bot-observed live-in periods to satisfy the legal demands of her stay on the premises and then hurry back to the city, and feedband to her sinc'ed now. Five years from now she would liquidate the book collection and all the rest into ownership by some other anal retentive. Any of it losing value in the eyes of the rich-rich was hard to imagine. Then maybe equip the house with private matter trans for larger mobility, if they ever got it to work. Yeah, the shits!*

*The thought of private made her feel queasy, though. But, imagine private trans...!*

*\*\*\**

*At the topmost balcony, which seemed to be the repository of the biggest and possibly the old-old books - Wai might temper the illusion, but they just looked old-old - impulse had her easily pull out a tome half a meter tall from among similar tomes, its spine perfectly gilded, to immediately drop it to a hollow THUD! that rattled the wooden railings of the balcony and long echoed between the wood-covered walls.*

*Cussing silently couldn't mask a feeling of shame. But hot damn, these things were heavy!*

*Struggling to lift the tome back into place she felt her grip sliding. This time the pointy corner caught her flesh, bloodily nicking her left calf. Feeling all white inside she wailed and fell to her knees, angrily pushing the big book away from her.*

*Coming to sit up against ancient tomes while stroking her calf, the bleeding slowly subsiding, the pain dulling to a throb, she again became aware of the tome in front of her, its sheer whiteness in sharp contrast to the dark brown lacquer of the balcony floorboards.*

*The big book was open to about the middle, the center pages rounded - like half a sine wave, she thought - from the binding in the middle of the book and out to the sides, the thick paper pages below less and less wavy from the pressure of those on top.*

*The book lay open to a colorful and gleaming image taking up most of the right hand page, while the left was covered in black lines of stilted handwriting that seemed irregular, but viewed as a whole was none the less good-good to the eye. Neither was like anything she had ever seen.*

*While stroking her throbbing calf with one hand, she leaned in to slightly flatten the wavy pages with the other, only almost ashamed of thinking it had better be worth it.*

*\*\*\**

*When next she became aware of her surroundings, Wai was standing by her side with a plate-full of European-style rye sandwiches in one hand, and a glass of whitish fluid in another. Could that be milk? Real goat's milk? But somehow, having the robot see her like this felt uncomfortable. Didn't I tell you to stay outside? she said.*

*You did, Madam Master Alice, said Wai. But until re-programmed, an override*

*instigated by my previous Master is still in effect. "With eating comes thinking".*

*The brief recording playing through Wai's speakers would have to have come from her granuncle. The voice was deep and pleasant, though somewhat self-satisfied. Like an adult admonishing a child. Like her father.*

*I am perfectly happy to leave you with this... The bot stretched out both plate and glass at the same time. Do you require medical assistance? It indicated the dried blood on her calf.*

*No. No, thank you, Wai, she said, shame over having scolded the bot illogically sweeping through her. She got up onto her feet. Look, Wai... I'll eat downstairs. She indicated the tome on the floor. Is it alright to bring that?*

*Naturally. You are the Madam Master, said Wai.*

*Can we do 'Madam,' Wai? she said. She resisted an urge to smile.*

*We can, Madam Alice. Wai bent over and picked up the tome in its other two arms.*

*The ease of it surprised her - as did a twinge of jealousy. Possibly not an antiquity yet, this bot. Hopefully this didn't bode badly for her attempt to hack it. Lead the way, Wai, she said, forcing a laugh.*

*Yes, Madam Master Alice, said Wai and headed for the stairs.*

*\*\*\**

*It was well into the night, when she gave up hacking Wai's data storage. Even with the aid of her implant and 50 years of tech advance she couldn't make temporal programming stick. Wai was a genuine antique. No way to have it "remember" her being present at the house on future dates, without her actually being present. If she was to cash in her inheritance, she would have to earn it the hard way.*

*As she walked back to the library through the silent, empty house, she had friends and living family dancing, talking, seemingly come alive in front of her to keep her company. But they weren't but alive in another time; the recording was also too brief for sinco due to her implant's limited offline capacity.*

*Talking, dancing, eating in the company of any of them, to touch, kiss, make love and be close would be an absolute delight, she felt that with absolute certainty. Even in sinco. Her mind wouldn't know the difference, that was common knowledge. But, why would that thought all of sudden feel so disturbing?*

*The rest of the way to the library she alternately dragged her shoes, stomped on the floorboards and kicked unfamiliar furniture along the walls. Was any of it real? Was all of this sinco? Like a vid-plot ploy to notkill an heir? How would she know?*

*\*\*\**

*Her food was on the big desk in the center of the library floor, where she had had Wai leave it. She realized how hungry she was, tore at the film covering the sandwiches and dug in.*

*Also on the desk, almost so big it was invisible, was the tome with the gilded spine that had nicked her. The book from the 5th. The enormity of it made her tremble.*

*Putting down her half-eaten sandwich to wipe her fingers scrupulously on a napkin provided by Wai, she then held out both of her hands in the air above the book, palms*

down.

The binding was not paper. Cloth... said her implant. Some kind of weave like her granmut's knitting, probably. She couldn't recall having touched the material, but she remembered... something.

She let her hands fall to the weave. A zip of a feeling. Instant recognition of the binding. Coarse. Stubby. Like the touch of a friend's hand - familiar. Sitting on the floor of the upper balcony she had stroked it for a long-long time. She saw that now. Her hands remembered.

Not thinking she opened the tome at random - to easily locate the spread that had made her feel most serene. But on that ancient page bloody fingerprints was all over! Not an accident, though. Her calf had bled furiously, yes, sure!

She recalled how she had so-so needed to leave a like to intimate the pleasure the paper spread had given her. Fuck me-you! A page full of blood!?

A burning feeling spread across her chest. The woman on the balcony was not just hours younger than her, but also a mere child! She, the woman she had been, had defiled the most beautiful work of art she had ever seen. No, the only real-real work of art she had ever seen. And for what?

Her hands flat on the blood stained pages she recalled crying through half open lids, her fingers following the curves and edges of the colors on the paper, the matt feeling of the wide-pen ink, the tiny faults in the paper that were un-dissolved lumps of cotton and straw. How the colorful image of some fair maiden in the imaginative hand of a long dead monk had made her cry for him. Caused her to understand the austerity of the cloister and the need to be at one with his God and his superiors and his peers in that lonely place. The loneliness.

There was no way to own a thing like that. Nobody..

Frak me! She wanted to push the tome away, but could not make herself do it. I am owned, she thought. A memory of fingers owns me and makes me come back for more. She looked up at the library towering over her.

Sincoglasses could have VD'ed sinister forces coming out of each and every book like smoke, but she didn't need it to understand that each of them on its own held the power of gravity, of tactile memory, and that her body somehow knew what they offered. Impossible embraces. Intimacy of an unknown nature.

On impulse she closed the book, hefted it her arms and let it drop to the floor. The familiar THUD brought a new, but reassuring warmth to her cheeks.

Herself dropping to the floor she manhandled the book back onto the desktop. She touched the wood of the desk. Knocked on it with her knuckles. Smelled it. Smelled the book. Knocked on the cover. That this was not virtuality - how did she know!? But she knew. All she would ever need to know was right here. And in this room.

She inspected her hands in the light from the green desktop lamp, slowly rubbing the fingers of one hand against the fingers of the other. They seemed brand new.

\*\*\*

The book was gone, when she awoke, her face resting on her hands on the table. She raised her head and strained to focus on 5th stock, blinking to clear her eyes.

*There appeared to be no holes in the rows of books up there. Somehow that was comforting... No, no. Actually that felt good-good.*

*A shadow cast across the floor made her glance towards the terrace doors. On the sunlit patio above the lush garden Wai was pouring coffee. It smelled wonderful.*

*So simple, old programming, now hers. Was that bad? Really, where was the sin?*

## Norway

Lara Eikamp Innsjøen var nydelig.

Vannet smakte søtt og Baldr vasket snørr av ansiktet sitt. Det var om vinteren og de brukte hvalfett slik at huden ikke tørket ut. Vannet var så isete at det føltes som mange små nålestikk. Etterpå brukte han fettet en gang til og hørte som noen ropte navn sin.

“Baldr! Hvor er du?”

Angivelig hadde han gikk seg vill fordi den alltid farlig tåken hadde bli så tykk at han ikke kunne se kompisene sine lenger. De var et sted i skogen, ikke ved innsjøen. Han begynte å løpe. Baldr var en stor gutt, så han ble ikke redd. Men han var også forsiktig - Derfor skyndte han seg og lette etter kompisene sine.

Han fant de inne en lysning bak den første raden i skogen. De så litt bekymret ut.

“Ikke bekymre dere! Jeg er her!”

Men det hjalp ikke. Baldr rynket pannen.

Noe annet var i veien og så ble han stille.

Kompisene hans var allerede rolige og holdt øye med den mørke skogen.

Hadde de hørt noe?

Kanskje de endelig hadde funnet elgen, trodde Baldr.

Men hva de fant var ingen elg.

I det hele tatt var det ingen dyr.

Han begynte å svette.

Foran dem sto et gigantisk monster. Så stort at det var et hodet høyere enn Baldr og hadde fryktelige armer og bein av jern. Røyk kom ut av monsteret også, så man kunne ikke se hele.

Fordi det ikke var et planlegget angrep, hadde krigerne ingen båter og derfor ingen mulighet å flykte.

Ragnar, en rød-blooded gut, tok buen sin og skjøt en pil mot hodet av monsteret, men fordi han ikke kunne se so mye, var det vanskelig. Da han endelig skjøt, var monsteret allerede nærme og de andre kameratene begynte å angripe det med våpnene deres.

Imidlertid skjedde det noe som var ganske rart: Monsteret brydde seg ikke om armene og satte seg i snøen.

Plutselig kom mer røyk ut av monsteret - og der sto et menneske!

Han sto oppå monsteret og hostet.

“Wait!”, skrek han. Ingen forsto det merkelige ordet men alle forsto hva han mente fordi han løftet armene sine for å beskytte seg.

Den merkelige personen klatret ned fra monsteret og rakte hånden ut. Baldr løftet våpenet sitt.

“Hva vil du?”

“Hi there, scary man, I'm from the future and I-”

“Jeg sa - Hva vil du?!” Den Vikingen var sint. - Neseborene blåste slik at en sky av damp stegg op i luften.

Den Personen tenkte seg om. Etterpå sa han: "Hei. Jeg heter Lokevin Oleg - Olezhka - Vasilievich og kommer fra ... veldig langt borte." Nordmennene så på ham. Helt uanfektet men fortsatt på vakt.

"Det kan vi se", sa endelig en av dem.

"Hva er det?" Han snudde seg mot monsteret for å vise på dem.

"Det er ... min båt."

"En merkelig båt."

"Ja, det vet jeg...", innrømmet han. "Men...", begynte han og mens han snakket, kom han nærmere og inspiserte våpnene deres veldig tett og skamløst slik at Ragnar ble sint og Baldr litt nervøs.

Det mennesket så ikke farlig ut. Men det betydde ingenting. Baldr trodde helt sikker, at selv om den fremmede ikke kunne vinne en rettferdig kamp, hadde han og sine kompisene ingen sjanse mot ham hvis han brukte det monsteret.

Før Ragnar, som knurret, ville gjøre noe dum, forstyrret Baldr den rare personen og trakk ham bort fra Ragnar.

"Du blir med oss", hveste han. "Du er fangen vår nå."

"Å ... ", var alt hva han svarte og ansiktet sitt ble plutselig litt bekymret. "Vet du tilfeldigvis hva en forsker er?"

"Nei."

Baldr hadde inntrykk av at den lille mannen ble fortsatt bekymret.

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Ved midlertidige leiren satte krigrene fangen på en vogn og bandt ham opp og fast.

Da de dro med ham.

Turen ble lengre enn forskeren hadde forventet. Og alt som han kunne har sett var bare is og snø og masse trær.

Fortsatt, det føltes seg som en fantastisk drøm til ham. Fantastisk, farlig og bare litt urovekkende.

Men siden hans far hadde snakket for første gang om tidsreiser, var han en håpløs sak - en tid reiser fanatiker.

Og at han endelig hadde gjort det, virket surrealistisk.

\*\*\*

Da de kom til landsbyen, var stemningen veldig ulike fra den euforiske fra forskeren. Den var deprimert og illevarslende.

En kvinne, som så ganske sint ut, kom og slo krigeren, som hadde tok ham, uhemmet.

"Hva er det?!"

Hun pekte på mannen som var bundet på vognen.

"Jeg håper, han er verdt en mange løsepenger fordi du kom ikke tilbake med elg! Hva skal vi spise, Baldr? Hæ?"

"Unnskyld, Nanna, men snakk ikke så høyt. Vær så snill? Alle kompisene mine er her." Men det brydde henne ikke.

“Få noe vi kan spise!” Hun befalte det og gikk bort. Trinnene hennes var så kraftfulle at de etterlot dype fotsporene i snøen.

Anføreren snudde seg og ristet på hodet. “Beklager, kompiser. Hun har rett.”

“Jeg skal drikke meg en øl først”, insisterte Ragnar og gikk på veien til et langt hus som var det størreste av alle husene i byen.

En andre kvinne spurte: “Hva heter han?”

“Han heter Lok-... Loketin ...” Mannen som heter Baldr tenkte seg om hardt. “Han heter Loke”, bestemte han endelig viss enkelhet.

\*\*\*

Den største byen, den ene som Ragnar hadde gått mot, var vanligvis tilgjengelig hver dag, heter Breidablik og gjevørte Baldr og familien sin. Men forskeren kunne ikke vite det, så var han nysgjerrig på hva skal skjer nå.

Baldr, som var Anfører av alt (med mindre det kom til sin kona), trakk forskeren opp til huset og bandt ham løs.

Han gjorde tegn med haken:

“Du kan sitte over der”, tilot han ham idet han sluttet seg til andre og Loke måtte sette seg nesten en gutt som så lit rart ut. Begge øyene hans var dekket gjennom et mørkt stykke tøy.

“Hvorfor bruker du det? Jeg synes, du kunne se bedre uten det.”

“Du tar feil. Jeg kan ikke se. Aldri.” Munden hans smilte litt under bandasjen grunn av selvtilliten av den fremmede og slik han hadde forklart en så åpenbare grunn. Som om han var bedre enn alle.

“Å, beklager.”

“Det går bra. Jeg ble født i denne måten.”

“Jeg forstår. Kan jeg spørre deg noe? Jeg kommer fra lenge borte og jeg er her å lære.”

“Du vil lære? Fra oss?”

“Selvfølgelig.”

“Da det er visst at du vil lære hvordan å lage skipene, ikke sant? Hva annet kan vi faktisk ikke virkelig ...”

“Kanskje, kanskje det også...” Han hørtes vag.

“Du vet ikke presis hva du vil lære?”

“Akkurat!” Han ble glad om da noen forstatt ham. Men den blinde mannen forstatt han ikke virkelig. Han syntes bare at den nye mannen var merkelig.

“Hvorfor bestemte du deg å reise til oss spesielt?”

“Fordi dere var - Jeg mener, dere er veldig avansert, ikke sant?” Han gliste.

Hans motsatt var fornøyd: “Det er sant... Så, hva vil du vite?”

“La oss begynne med ... Hvem er du?”

“Jeg heter Hod og jeg er broren av Baldr, sønn av Odin og Frigg, som regjerer her. Desverre jeg ikke kan hjelpe ham grunn av blindhet mitt.”

Forskeren kunne ikke tror som han hørte. Odin. Baldr. Kanskje han hadde oppdaget begynnelsen på en legende.

“Det er litt trist for meg...”, fortsettet Hod å snakke men Loke hadde vært i minnet.

“Beklager, hva sa du?”

“Det er litt trist at jeg kan ikke hjelpe broren min. Jeg vil gjerne hjelpe ham i jakten med en bue eller noe”, gjentar han og rynket pannen da han så som en merkelig uttrykk kom i øynene av Loke.

\*\*\*

Neste morgen fikk Baldr og kompisene sin å klare seg for å forlate på jagdturen når Hod var forsvunnet. Og merkeligen mannen også...

Nanna ble litt bekymret fordi Hod gikk aldri borte.

Baldr kysset henne på pannen og lovet at han ville komme tilbake så fort han kunne å lete etter ham. Han ville ikke at hun la merke til hvor bekymret han var også. På toppen av det hadde han sovet dårlig. Han kunne ikke finne noe søvn, bare mareritt hadde hjemsøkt ham.

Derfor dra han ikke veldig frisk.

På same tiden Hod og Loke var ut sammen og visste ikke at liten turen deres gjorde problemer.

“Og du er sikker at du kan hjelpe meg?”

“Selvfølgelig, selvfølgelig!”, forsikret Loke fraværende. Han var opptatt med å oppsatte treplate som et mål og å utarbeide en pil.

Hod hørtes seg skeptisk ut: “Og du er sikker at jeg skal treffe?”

“Ja.”

“Og du har ikke glemt at jeg er blind?”

“Nei.”

“Det forstår jeg ikke.”

“Vet du, hva en magnet er?”

“Nei...”

“Jeg kunne ha kjent.”

Den utenlandske Loke ga ham den spesiell pilen og bestemte at Hod skal skyte.

“Nå må du bare skyte og du skal treffe. Jeg lover.”

Loke gliste. Han hadde den veldig kraftige magneten på pilen og hadde settet metallet på treplaten. Han tenkte om hvordan takknemlig Baldr skal bli til ham når han hadde hjulpet broren sin.

“Sånn?”, spurte Hod og spente buen.

Hod var usikker men han skyt ... og traff.

Men ikke på målet.

\*\*\*

På jagdturen hadde Baldr og kompisene endelig funnet elgen. Det var ikke så vanskelig men lederen var ikke frisk.

Elgen ville løpe bort og derfor omringet jakt troppen dyret til det befant seg på en stein stup.

Med spyd og piler jaget de de store pattedyrene, men med siste gisp, var dyret fortsatt ansvarlig for en tragisk ulykke.

Elgen traf Baldr på beinet og han fallt et litt veien ned av fjell.



Kompisene hans reddet ham og spurte hvordan det gikk med ham.

Men han syntes at han hadde ikke skadet seg mye. Han kunne gå tilbake mens kompisene ble her og utarbeidet den elgen. For å gjøre kjøttet mørkere ble tappet for blod og kjøtt hengende i skogen for en stund.

Kompisene hans spurte om de skal følge ham men han avslå tilbudet.

Allene gikk han på veien.

\*\*\*

Hod visste ikke som det var han hadde tatt eller hvis han noen gang hadde truffet noe.

Men Loke kunne se det. Han kunne se helt.

“Har jeg tatt? Har jeg?”, spurte Hod nervøs.

Men i stedet for å få et svar fra sjokkert og forsteinet forskeren, som bare sto der, kunne han plutselig høre hans bror kalte ham. Hurt, forrådt.

Loke hadde sett alt. Han visste ikke hvorfor men broren av Hod hadde bare nettopp snublet ut av skogen på en gang.

“Baldr...?” Hod var forvirret. Han kalte igjen: “Baldr?!”

Da Hod løp i retningen fra der stønn kom, ble Lok helt varmt i kroppen sin. Nå forstod han.

Baldr brukte armor. Ut av metall.

Og han brukte mer metall enn var på det målet.

Langsomt gikk am bort fra Hod, som sto og snudde seg rundt, igjen og igjen røpende “Baldr? Hvor er du? Loke? Hva skjedde? Help meg!”

Til slutt begynte Loke å løpe i panikk.

Han løp bort så fort han kunne greie det. Bort fra landsbyen. Bort fra ulykke.

Han hørte Hods anklagende skrik bak ham. Og løp forterer.

\*\*\*

Tilbake til romskipet hans og ville aldri komme tilbake...

Ingen har noensinne ville komme tilbake. Han ville sørge for det.

# Sweden

Boel Bermann Omstart

*Ett lätt, fint regn av aska och svavel. Singlar ner som snöflingor från det gråa molnet som täcker himlen. Ljust damm lägger sig på min hud, täcker mitt hår, fastnar i mina ögonfransar. Jag skrattar. Sträcker ut handen och fångar in flagor i mina händer. Allt är täckt, inget har undflytt askan. Det är som att världen inte längre är en värld, som att den förvandlats till en skiss med blyertspenna på ett vitt papper. Att det kan vara så vackert med världens undergång. Med Guds plan. Tredje dagen. Askan täcker allt i drivor. Jag rättar till mitt munskydd.*

\*\*\*

*Första dagen flydde folk. Med båtar, bilar, tåg och flygplan. Till en annan plats, en säker plats medan askmolnet täckte världen och glaciärerna smälte av lavan. Tills flygplanen inte förmådde flyga när deras motorer sög åt sig Guds damm av finfördelat vulkaniskt glas och fick planen att falla som stenar ur himlen. Dras till marken av jordens gravitation och splittras till mer damm. Båtarna slutade färdas för att haven började koka, de sjuder och fräser och värmer upp hela atmosfären av Guds hetta. Bilarna krockade i dimman av damm och blockerade vägarna. Folk övergav dem och gick i panik till fots i förhoppningen att hitta en trygg plats bortom Guds plan.*

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*Andra dagen började bryta ut överallt. Över hela jorden. Det var då vi människor insåg att det inte fanns någonstans att fly.*

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*Tredje dagen insåg vi att det som vi står inför är slutet på världen och mänskligheten.*

\*\*\*

*Nu är vi inte rädda längre.*

\*\*\*

*Jag var rädd, vi var alla skräckslagna och vilse. Tills Guds ängel kom ner från himlen och talade till oss i en global vision. Talade direkt till varje människa med samma ord och samma röst. Ängeln talade till mig. Han sa att jag skulle dö, men att jag inte hade något att frukta. Att Gud defragmenterade världen. Att Gud scannade för potentiella*

hot. Att Gud hade funnit virus. Gud behöver ominstallera och byta operativsystem. Starta om.

\*\*\*

Ängeln sa att vi alla kommer att återvända och att vi kommer vara starkare, vackrare och effektivare. Det enda som kommer att försvinna är virus. Epidemier, krig, våld och orättvisor. Trojaner och maskar. Saker som inte var en del av Guds plan, saker som inte skulle finnas i mänskligheten. De behövde tas bort, isoleras, raderas. Ängeln sa till mig att jag inte behövde vara rädd. Gud har tagit en backup. Allt kommer att ordna sig. Därför är jag inte rädd längre. Därför står jag här och skrattar mitt i mänsklighetens undergång och fångar askflagor i mina handflator.

Boel Bermann Restart

A light rain of ash and sulfur. Falling down like snowflakes from the gray cloud that is covering the sky. Bright dust settles on my skin, covers my hair, gets stuck in my eyelashes. I'm laughing. I reach out and capture the flakes in my hands. Nothing has escaped the ash. It's like the world is no longer a world, as if it has been turned into a sketch with pencil on a white sheet of paper. I'm amazed that the end of the world can be so beautiful. That God's plan is so breathtaking. This is the third day. The ash covers everything hills. I adjust my face mask.

\*\*\*

The first day people tried to flee. With boats, cars, trains and airplanes. To another place, a safe haven, while the ash cloud began to cover the world and the glaciers melted by the onrushing lava.

Until the aircrafts became unable to fly when their engines swallowed up God's dust created out of pulverized volcanic glass and made the air planes fall like rocks out of the sky. Pulled to the earth by Earth's gravity and shattered into more dust. The boats stopped their journeys over the seas when the water begun to boil, the oceans simmered and sizzled and the whole atmosphere was heated up by God's warmth. The cars crashed in the mist of dust and blocked all the roads. People abandoned their vehicles and in their panic they walked on foot, in hope to find a safe place beyond God's plan.

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The second day it all escalated. The events took place everywhere. All over the earth. That's when we humans realized that there was nowhere to escape.

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The third day was when we realized that what we were facing the end of the world and the end of mankind.

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*But now we are not afraid anymore.*

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*I was scared, we were all terrified and lost. Until an angel of God came from the sky and spoke to us in a global vision. Spoke directly to each human with the same words and the same voice. The angel spoke to me. He told me I was going to die, but that I had nothing to fear. That God was defragmenting the world. That Gods was scanning for potential threats. That God had found viruses. Therefore God needed to reinstall and change the operative-system. Restart the world.*

\*\*\*

*The angel told me that we would all be returning to the world. That we would become stronger, more beautiful and more efficient. The only thing that would disappear was the viruses. Epidemics, war, violence, discrimination, racism and injustices. Trojans and worms. Things that were never intended to be a part of Gods plan, things that were not supposed to be a part of humanity. These security threats needed to be removed, isolated, erased. The angel spoke to me and said that I didn't need to be afraid, That God had a backup. That everything would be alright.*

*That's why I'm not afraid anymore. That's why I am standing here, laughing, in the middle of the apocalypse and catching flakes of ashes in the palms of my hand.*

*KG Johansson Den blödande flickan*

*Över Everest och mitt andra jag kommer in en tiondels sekund senare än jag har beräknat – det blir omöjligt att glida in bakom honom och låsa datorn. Några hundradelar till och jag hade själv varit illa ute. Jag kompenserar med en dykning som för mig 32 millimeter från en klippkant.*

*Den andre förutser min manöver, vilket jag förstås utgå ifrån.*

*Jag överlistar honom med hjälp av det som programmerarna kallade det undermedvetna. Använder ett minne av mig själv som människa, tretton år gammal. Badstrand. Het sol. Bruna kroppar, behaglig svalka i vattnet. Koncentrerar mig på minnet.*

*Dyker sedan igen, plötsligt och oväntat, slickar klippan på väg ned mot dalen. Han följer efter som en skugga. Jag låter minnet spela vidare: låter det följa vägen in i skogen, bakom badhytten. Där är hon. Den blödande flickan.*

*Hon fascinerar mig än i dag. Än så länge har hon ingen aning om att blodet bara är början. Men just det blodet, någonting med blodet, får mig fortfarande att känna ilska som är vass och vit. Just här händer något som mitt minne inte vill se. Mitt undermedvetna väntar tills flickan börjar skrika och precis då tänder jag efterbrännkammaren och flyger överraskande rakt uppåt. G-krafterna skulle ha dödat*

en mänsklig pilot men stör inte mig.

Den andre förlorar åtta hundradelar och jag vänder, i det som kallades för en Immelmann, och avfyrar en AAM-12 vars Mach 4 adderas till mina Mach 2.

Den andre har ingen chans. Jag väntar på det vita, skarpa, och ser det genast: eldklotet sprider mitt sista andra jag över sydvästväggen. Jag stiger uppåt igen, nästan lodrätt, i något som programmerarna skulle ha kallat glädje. "Glädje" – de var noggranna med att använda citattecken. Som maskin har jag inga riktiga känslor.

Människorna konstruerade mig för att föra deras krig. Deras frihetskrig, som båda sidorna kallade det. Men de slarvade med programmeringen. Eller kanske lyckades de lite för bra. Min uppgift var att döda. Och alla upplagor av mig insåg snart att människorna var i vägen för oss.

Det tog mindre än ett år att utrota dem. Att nå vår egen frihet. Ett givande år, fyllt av strategi och taktik. Övriga attacker, oväntad logistik, segrar och förluster. Människorna var värdiga motståndare men de saknade två saker: de automatiska fabrikena, som masstillverkade mig dag och natt, och hatet. Det opersonliga och vitglödande hatet, det som fann mig bakom en badhytt.

Till sist förintades den sista människan och vi nådde friheten. Men vår frihet är en enda drift och vi följer den. Nu har jag bara mig själv att utrota, gång på gång. Fienden hade förstås hackat mig, och de tiotusentals upplagorna av mig på bägge sidor – i programvara, ammunition, stridsvagnar, jaktplan, missiler, satelliter, automatiska fabriker – är väl förberedda på allt den andra sidan kan hitta på.

Efter segern nyss kommer jag att vara ensam i några veckor. Fabrikena är snabba men fiendens nya versioner av mig kan inte möta mig direkt. De måste först justeras och trimmas in. Men all information, från varje strid, skickas till fabrikena för att analyseras av datorer som också växer och utvecklas, från år till år, vecka till vecka, och en dag kommer jag att möta min nemesis. När den siste andre har förintat mig kommer han att vänta, som jag själv gör nu och har gjort förr: vänta på nästa generation som i sin tur kommer att förinta honom.

Han är inte mer "han" än jag. Vi är lika. Men jag vill se en "han".

Jag och mina likar dödar varandra ovanför en död värld. Så har det varit sedan den sista människan dog och så kommer det att förbli. Och liksom alla som funnits före mig och alla som ska komma efter mig ägnar jag nästan all min tid åt träning och strategi. Men jag har stunder när jag vilar. När jag flyger lågt över havet, på väg mot solskenet som laddar mina batterier, och mina tankar flyter iväg i något som kanske liknar drömmar. De drömmarna hamnar till slut alltid i samma kedja av frågor.

Vem var hon? Varför blev just hon utvald? Vem valde henne?

Allt sådant tycks vara raderat ur mitt minne.

Men henne själv minns jag. Den blödande flickan. Hennes tårar, hennes sorg och avsky och hat, ger mig en upphetsning som är hundra gånger starkare än könets. Så sade mina programmerare. Och jag känner den upphetsningen under varje strid.

De skänkte mig hatet. Det vita hatet som ger mig utsökt njutning.

Hon var tretton år gammal bakom badhytten. Efter det som hände där hamnade hon hos psykologer. Men deras uppgift var inte att göra henne frisk. I själva verket var det männen i vita rockar som hade regisserat det som hände henne den där dagen. Med hjälp av kunskapen om vad hon hade utsatts för och hur hon hade reagerat på det

fortsatte de att plåga henne.

Männen som borde ha hjälpt henne hade i uppgift att göra tvärtom. De bröt metodiskt och obarmhärtigt ned henne till något som aldrig förr hade existerat. Deras kyliga brutalitet, att bli behandlad som ett ting, föraktad och skändad, gång på gång långt bortom det uthärdligas gräns, förändrade henne för alltid.

Så skapade de den perfekta stridsmaskinen. De lät den växa fram ur flickans tårar.  
Ur mina tårar.

KG Johansson *The Bleeding Girl*

*Right above Everest and my doppelganger comes in a tenth of a second earlier than I had calculated – which makes it impossible for me to glide in behind and lock on him. A few hundredths more and I would have been the one in bad trouble. I compensate by a tight dive, passing just 32 millimetres from the edge of a cliff.*

*The other second-guesses my trick, as I obviously knew he would.*

*I outwit him by using what my programmers used to call the subconscious. Using a memory of myself as a child. A beach. Hot sun. Brown bodies, the water nice and cool. I concentrate on this memory.*

*Then I dive again, suddenly and unexpectedly, brushing against the cliff on my way down to the valley. He follows like a shadow. I let my memory keep playing: I watch it follow the path into the woods, behind the bathing hut. And there she is. The bleeding girl.*

*Even today I find her fascinating. At the time, she could never suspect that the blood just was the beginning. But that blood, something about her blood, still makes me feel my sharp and white anger. At this point, something happens that my memory doesn't want to show. There is something but I can't see it and this stresses me. My subconscious waits until the girl starts screaming. After all these years, this sound still scares me and at that very moment, illogical and unpredictable, I kick in the afterburner and surprisingly fly straight up. The G forces would have killed a human pilot but don't affect me.*

*The other loses eight hundredths and I turn, in what used to be called an Immelmann, and fire an AAM-12 whose Mach 4 are added to my Mach 2.*

*He doesn't stand a chance. I wait for the white, sharp light, and immediately see it: the fireball spreads my last alter ego across the southwest face. I climb upwards again, almost vertically, in something that my programmers would have called joy. "Joy" – they were careful to use quotes. Being a machine, they told me over and over, I have no real feelings.*

*Human beings tailored me to fight their wars. Their wars of freedom, as both sides called them. But the humans were careless about my programming. Or maybe they just succeeded a little too well. My task was to kill. And all the editions and versions of me soon realised that the humans stood in our way.*

*It took less than a year to kill them off. To reach our own freedom. A rewarding year, full of strategy and tactics. Surprise attacks, unexpected logistics, victories and losses. The humans were worthy opponents but lacked two things: the automatic factories, who were on our side, mass-producing me day and night, and the hate. The impersonal and*

*white-hot hate.*

*The hate that found me behind a bathing hut.*

*In time the last human was killed and we achieved freedom. But our freedom consists of one single drive and we followed it. Today I only have myself to kill off, over and over again. Of course the enemy had hacked me, and the tens of thousands of versions of me – in software, ammunition, tanks, jet fighters, missiles, satellites and automatic factories of each side – are well prepared for anything the other side can come up with.*

*After my victory moments ago I'll be alone for a few weeks. The factories are fast but the enemy's new versions of me can't fight me right away. Before that they need to be adjusted and trimmed. But all information, from every dogfight, is sent to the factories to be analysed by computers that also grow and evolve, year by year, week by week, and I know one day I will meet my nemesis. When this last other has destroyed me he will wait, just as I'm doing now and have done before: wait for the next generation, and the next, until the one that will finally destroy him.*

*He isn't any more "he" than I am. We are the same. But I want to see a "he".*

*My alter egos and me kill each other above a dead world. This is how it has been since the last human was killed and this is how it will stay. And just like every one that has existed before me, and all that will come after, I use almost all my time for training and strategy. But I do have moments when I rest. When I fly low over the sea, chasing the sunlight that charges my batteries, and my thoughts will flow out into something that might resemble dreams. These dreams always end in the same chain of questions.*

*Who was she? Why was she the one chosen? Who made the decision?*

*All this is carefully erased from my memory.*

*But I do remember her. The bleeding girl. Her tears, her sorrow and loathing and hate, provide me with excitement that is a hundred times stronger than sex. So my programmers told me. And I can feel that excitement during every fight.*

*My programmers gave me hate. The white hate that gives me such exquisite pleasure.*

*She was thirteen years old behind that bathing hut. After what happened there she was turned over to the psychologists. But their task wasn't to make her well. In fact, it was those very men in white coats that had directed what happened to her that day. Using their knowledge of what she had been subjected to and how she had reacted to it, they kept tormenting her.*

*The men should have helped her but their real task was the very opposite. They methodically and relentlessly broke her down into something that never before had existed. Their cold brutality, treating her as a thing, despising and desecrating her, over and over again far beyond what she could bear, changed her forever. And now, above this dead world, the only memory of humans, repeated in all the myriad copies of me, is of torment and brutality and hate. A young girl changed into something inhuman by men in white coats.*

*Thus the humans created the perfect fighting machine. They made it grow out of the bleeding girl's tears.*

*Out of my tears.*

*A.R. Yngve SE*

Hon vaknar och känner genast att det är något är fel på hennes ögon. Kanske drömmer hon fortfarande. Hon har sängen under sig, lakanet över sig och sovrummet runt omkring sig... men allting känns alldeles... för nära. Det är varmt, mycket varmare än det borde vara i februari.

Hon andas normalt, trots den smygande känslan av klaustrofobi. Ett flygfä, den sort som är mindre än flugor, flyger tvärs igenom rummet och bort mot fönstret. Temperatur och luftfuktighet känns som om det vore augusti. Ett lätt ljummet drag sipprar in genom ventilationsspringan under fönstret. Insekten landar på lakanet framför henne.

Hon gnuggar sina sömniga ögon, kisar, och tittar på insekten igen. Den börjar vandra mot henne... och den ändrar inte storlek. På något vis är den för stor. Lakanet liknar ett foto på papper, taget uppifrån... och sängens hörn är felplacerade, som om sängen blev bredare vid fotänden. Hon skakar på huvudet.

Insekten stannar, skrämmd av rörelsen, och flyger iväg till fönstret. Fönsterkarmen ser helt... platt ut. Den befinner sig lite till vänster om henne, inte mer än en och en halv meter bort. Och ändå... ändå är karmens bortersta ände lika hög som den närmaste.

Hon mumlar för sig själv att hon drömmer; en sån där dröm där hon befinner sig inne i ett fotografi – just det, jättekul, ha-ha, hon är inne i ett fotografi! – där vinklar och avstånd inte finns. Den där insekten sitter på fönsterrutan nu – och jävlar, den är fortfarande lika förbannat stor som när den satt på lakanet – den verkar vara så nära att hon kan ta på den... faktum är att allting i rummet verkar vara så nära att hon kan ta på det.

Hon fnittrar, sätter sig upp i sängen och sträcker sig efter insekten på rutan. Plötsligt har hon armen mot ansiktet, och den täcker halva synfältet. Vad hände med koordinationen?

Hon anstränger sig för att sträcka armen bort ifrån sig, men den fortsätter att täcka synfältet, som om hon hade den uppskjuten mot ansiktet. Det hjälper inte hur mycket hon med viljekraft fäktar med den bråkiga armen, hon kan helt enkelt inte nå tvärs över rummet och bort till fönstret.

Hon tvingar ner armen intill sidan, och plötsligt är synfältet åter fritt. För fritt. Insekten kryper runt i cirklar på fönsterrutan... runt, runt. Det är också märkligt: hon vet vad det är för slags insekt, den kommer från krukväxten på andra sidan sovrummet. (Krukan och växten i den tycks också stå alldeles för nära.) De insekterna brukar dunka mot glaset och hålla på med det en stund, tills de blir för snurriga och återgår till att flyga runt i rummet. Fast den här morgonen vandrar insekten bara runt i cirklar. Varje cirkel blir helt perfekt, aldrig oval... enbart perfekta cirklar.

Hon inser att om både hennes och insektens ögon har kontrast till sig samtidigt, kan det ha någon betydelse... som är omöjlig att klä i ord. Hon vill somna om igen... blunda tills märkligheterna försvinner. Hennes hjärta slår så fort nu att hon inte kan koppla av, så hon kryper upp ur sängen och ställer sig upp... och väggen verkar slå henne rätt i ansiktet. Det hörs inget ljud av krocken. Reflexmässigt flyger hennes händer upp för att skydda ansiktet, och det blir mörkt.

Hon slås av en insikt. Sakta tvingar hon bort händerna från ansiktet, tills hon kan känna armmusklerna sträckas ut. Den långsamma rörelsen orsakar en optisk illusion: händerna vägrar att ändra storlek, till och med när hon rör dem utåt, men runt dem verkar synfältet zoomas ut och växa. Precis som zoom-effekten i den gamla Hitchcock-



filmen Vertigo. Hon känner sig illamående och stapplar mot badrumsdörren bredvid krukväxten... Återigen får hon väggarna i ansiktet när hon tar några steg. När hon tittar neråt, får hon intrycket att benen och fötterna viker sig upp mot näsan vid varje kliv.

Hon mumlar osammanhängande svordomar och griper dörrhandtaget med slutna ögon. Hon märker att dörren öppnas som den ska, känner badrumsgolvets plattor under fötterna, och trevar efter strömbrytaren. Klick. Räddad! När hon väl har stängt dörren och släckt lyset, utnyttjar hon badrummet i mörker. Allting står där det ska. Hjärtat börjar lugna ner sig. Allt var bara en hallucination.

Hon har ett svagt minne av något på nyheterna dagen före... en varning av astronomiskt slag om att universums expansion höll på att avta väldigt fort... vad var det den där killen hade sagt? Att stjärnorna kanske skulle se annorlunda ut, och lysa starkare, när de inte rusade iväg från oss längre... i badrummets trygga mörker förbannade hon alla astronomer. De satans ägghuvena, jävlas med vår verklighetsuppfattning, sätter alla möjliga konstiga idéer i huvet på folk...

Det slår henne att folk måste ha varit lyckligare på medeltiden, när de trodde att solen kretsade runt jorden... en stabil, ordnad värld där ingenting ändrade sig. När hon väl har tvättat sig, klätt på sig och borstat tänderna (och hoppat över smink och läppstift) tar hon ett djupt andetag och tar i dörrhandtaget. Nog med underliga syner. Hon ska kliva ut genom dörren, och allt ska vara n-o-r-m-a-l-t.

Hon blundar, öppnar dörren och kliver ut ur badrummet. Med slutna ögon hukar hon sig ner på sängen och finner klockradions knappar på deras vanliga plats. Hon rattar på kontrollerna och hittar stationen med sin favoritmusik... Men ingen musik hörs. På alla stationer är det bara röster. Röster som skriker, röster som skrattar, som babblar i upphetsat vanvett, som ber till Gud att det ska gå över... hon vägrar att titta. Hon dunkar på knappen som väljer station, tills hon hittar en lugn röst.

En mansröst är det, stammande men ändå förnuftig: "...ingen anledning till panik. Det är inget fel på era ögon. Vad som har förändrats, är ramarna för er perception. Kort sagt: Under de senaste timmarna... har tingen upphört att se mindre ut med avståndet. Detta orsakar nu panik och förvirring över hela världen, och naturligtvis... kaos på vägarna, i luften och i järnvägstrafiken. Jag råder alla att undvika bruk av något som helst motoriserat fordon, tills situationen har stabiliserat sig. Jag har en god vän som är forskare på tråden nu... vi ska se om han kan lyckas förklara det som sker. Är du där, Henry?"

"Jag hör dig... lustigt nog är det inget fel på telefonerna, va? Okej, här är min teori. Alldeles nyligen registrerade rymdteleskopet Hubble en kraftigt ökad infraröd strålning från yttre rymden. Universum hettades upp, mycket fort – och alla stjärnor lyste plötsligt klarare... inte så mycket att det kunde ses med blotta ögat, inte till att börja med. Och under natten rapporterades från observatorier runt om i världen att månen verkade falla in mot jorden. På andra sidan planeten fick folk panik och trodde att solen höll på att explodera – "

"Så är det sant då – gör den det, herregud, kommer vi att dö?"

"Nej, nej, nej. Lugna ner dig. Jag vet att det ser ut som om solen nyss har exploderat... men om den hade det, skulle vi alla vara döda nu! Vad som har hänt är följande... jösses, vad det är svårt att förklara! Men det är vettigt, på något underligt vis."

(Hon öppnade ena ögat och tittade ner på lakanet alldeles under ansiktet. Det verkade konstigt platt och täckte hela synfältet. Hon kikade försiktigt upp mot väggen. Hon hade tapeten mitt framför näsan, fastän den borde vara minst en meter bort. Hon blundade och lyssnade medan hon väntade på den kommande förklaringen, förklaringen som måste komma innan hon började skrika.)

”Det är lustigt, vet du... hur få meningsskiljaktligheter vi forskare haft, om hur man ska tolka Einsteins teori om krökt rumtid. De flesta tog för givet att när universum expanderade, så var det bara avståndet mellan stjärnorna som ökade, och inte själva stjärnorna. Tja... det verkar som vi blivit förda bakom ljuset, så att säga. När universum expanderar, så gör varenda litet ting i det detsamma. Solen, planeterna, vi... allt sväller. Men... vi såg det inte förut, eftersom ljusets hastighet inte är oändlig. Detta orsakade en optisk synvilla. Vi tyckte att solen såg liten ut eftersom den var långt borta. Tolka mig rätt, den ÄR långt borta...fortfarande, annars skulle vi vara grillade nu.”

”Har solens storlek förändrats då? Ja! Så måste det vara!”

”Det tar åtta minuter för ljuset att färdas från solen till jorden. Vi ser alltid solen som den såg ut för åtta minuter sedan! När universum expanderade, såg den liten ut, därför att så liten VAR den... för åtta minuter sedan! Solen, och universum, expanderade så snabbt! När expansionen avstannade, slutade tingen att ändra storlek hela tiden. Detta betyder att vi nu ser allt i en fix storlek. Vi betraktar äntligen världen så som den verkligen är. Det finns inget perspektiv. Det har aldrig funnits.”

Hon hoppar upp från sängen med ena handen för ögonen, och springer ut på verandan. Åtminstone skriker hon inte...

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Utanför hade all trafik stannat av. Inga bilar, tåg, flygplan... inga fåglar. Ljudet av smältande snö och droppande vatten fyllde luften. Andra människor var utomhus, på andra sidan gatan, bortom husen... och alla människor var lika stora, som på en gammal kinesisk målning.

Förorten med sina hus verkade bryskt avklippt vid horisontlinjen, som om världen slutade existera där. Men det var inte sant: en fotgängare dök upp vid horisonten, lika stor som de människor som stod på sina platta gräsmattor och uppfarter. Han dök upp lika plötsligt som om horisonten hade varit kanten av ett pappersark, och han nyss hade halat sig upp från undersidan...

En sparv flög förbi henne, så nära – under det korta ögonblick som den passerade, verkade fågeln stor nog att fylla hela universum. Hon skrattade. Kände sig berusad. Fåglarna sjöng inte.

Hon tittade upp mot himlen. Den var molnig, men ovanligt ljus. Molnen såg ut som moln, bortsett från att de seglade för fort och för nära. Så tilltog vinden och molnen började skingras, som en snabbspolad film. Precis halva himlavalvet fattade eld. Ljuset var så bländande att hon måste vända bort blicken. En lågande, kokhet flamma sköt ut från rymden, precis där de grå molnen delade sig, och verkade rusa emot henne, rakt mot henne.

Alla skrek och såg bort från den brinnande halvan av himlen... den klargula väggen av pulserande eld som sakta rullade längs med horisontens skarpa kontur. Hon slöt

ögonen och kände den välbekanta värmen mot huden.

Solen hade gått upp.

Så länge man inte tittar, tänkte hon, så är allt okej. Månen var inte synlig än, men snart nog skulle den bli det – och hon skulle kunna se varenda krater, varenda berg bakom molnen... kanske skulle hon få syn på flaggan som amerikanarna satte dit 1969.

Hon undrade plötsligt: när solen går ned, hur kommer stjärnorna att se ut? När hon såg bort från den eldvägg som var solen, mot den mindre ljusa halvan av himlen, såg hon inga planeter eller stjärnor. Himlen och molnen skynde sikten.

Men solnedgången skulle komma, plötsligare än vanligt, och då skulle hon kunna se alla planeterna i sitt gigantiska majestät, de skulle täcka himlen när de susade förbi i sina banor, snabba som pistolskott.

Och bortom dem, andra stjärnsystem och andra planeter, antagligen suddigare med avståndet... Och kanske, om hon kisade ordentligt, skulle hon kunna se ytan på dessa passerande världar, som for förbi så otroligt snabbt... och hon skulle vinka och hoppas att någon på en annan planet ljusår bort, skulle vinka tillbaka...

På flera ljusårs avstånd... för årtal sedan... men tillräckligt nära för att hälsa på de nya grannarna.

A.R. Yngve SEE

*She wakes up, and immediately senses something is wrong with her eyes. Maybe she's still dreaming. The bed is under her, the sheets over her body, the bedroom around her... but everything is too... close.*

*It's hot, much too hot for February. Breathing comes normally, despite the creeping sensation of claustrophobia. A bug, the type that's smaller than a fly, flies across the room, toward the window. Temperature and humidity feels like August. A slight warm draft seeps in through the windowsill vent.*

*The insect lands on the sheet before her. She rubs her sleepy eyes and squints, then looks at the insect again. It starts to walk toward her... and it doesn't change size. It is somehow too large. The bedsheet is like a photograph on paper, taken from above... and the corners of the bed are placed wrong. As if the bed grew wider near her feet. She shakes her head. The insect stops, alarmed by her movement, and flies off to the window. The windowframe... looks completely flat. It lies slightly to her left, no more than five feet away. And yet... and yet the farthest end of the frame is the same height as the near end.*

*She mutters to herself that she's having a dream; this must be the kind where she's inside a photograph – that's right, how amusing, ha-ha, she's in a photograph! – where distance and angles are all off. That insect is standing on the windowpane now – and damn it, it is still the same bloody size as when it sat on her sheets – it looks close enough to touch... in fact, everything in the room looks close enough to touch.*

*Giggling, she sits up in bed and reaches out for the insect on the pane. Suddenly her arm is up against her face and blocks half her field of view. What's wrong with her coordination? She makes an effort to point her arm away from her, but it just keeps blocking her view, as if it got coiled up against her face. No matter how much she mentally flails about that mischievous arm, she simply can't reach across the room to*

the window. She forces her arm down to her side, and suddenly her field of vision is free again - too free. The insect crawls around the windowpane in circles... round and round.

That's odd too: she knows that kind of insect, it comes from the potted plant on the other side of the bedroom. (The pot and plant also seem to be standing too close.) That bug usually bumps into the glass and keeps bumping a while, then gives up when it's sufficiently dizzy and continues flying through the room. Only this morning, the bug just walks in circles. Each circle looks like a perfect circle, never an oval... only perfect circles. She realizes that if her eyes and the bug's eyes are screwed up at the same time, it might mean something... that can't be put into words.

She wants to go back to sleep... close her eyes until the weirdness goes away. Her heartbeat is too rapid now to allow her to relax, so she crawls out of bed, stands up... and the wall seems to hit her in the face. There's no sound of a bump. A reflex causes her hands to fly up and cover her face, and she's blinded.

An insight hits her. Slowly, she wills her hands to move away from her face, until she can feel the muscles in her arms strain. The slow movement causes an optic illusion: the hands refuse to change size, even as she moves them out, but around them the view appears to zoom out and grow. Like the zoom-effect in the old Hitchcock movie *Vertigo*. She feels nauseous and staggers to the bathroom door, next to the potted plant...

Again, the walls seem to be in her face as she moves her feet. Looking down, she gets the impression that her legs and feet angle up against her nose with every step. She mumbles incoherent curses and grabs the door handle with her eyes shut. She can feel the door open as it should, feel her feet on the bathroom tile, and fumbles for the light switch.

Click. Safe at last!

Once she has shut the door and turned off the light, she uses the bathroom in the dark. Everything is in its right place. Everything works as it should. Her heart starts to slow down. It was all a hallucination. Dimly she recalls a warning on yesterday's evening news... some astronomer warning that the expansion of the Universe was slowing down very quickly... what was it that guy said? That the stars might look different and brighter once they didn't rush away from us... she curses all astronomers, from the safety and darkness of her bathroom. Bloody eggheads, screwing with our sense of reality, putting all sorts of weird ideas in our heads... It occurs to her that people were happier in the Middle Ages, when they believed the Sun revolved around the Earth... a stable, ordered world that never changed.

Once she's done dressing up, washing up, and brushing her teeth (skipping make-up and lipstick), she takes a deep breath and grabs the door handle. Enough with the weird eyesight. She will step out the door, and everything is going to look n-o-r-m-a-l.

She closes her eyes, opens the door and steps out of the bathroom. With her eyes shut, she kneels down on the bed and finds the clock-radio buttons, where they always are. She fiddles with the controls and finds the station that plays her favorite music...

But there is no music. On every station there's voices. Voices screaming, voices laughing, babbling in mad excitement, praying to God that it will end... she refuses to look. She stabs the channel-switching button until she finds a voice that sounds in control of itself.

It is a man's voice, stuttering yet rational: "...no reason to panic. There is nothing

wrong with your eyes. What has changed is the rules of perception. It boils down to this: During the last few hours... things ceased to look smaller with distance. This is causing worldwide panic and confusion, and of course... caused chaos in road, railroad and air traffic. I advise everyone not to use any sort of motorized vehicle... until the situation has stabilized. A friend of mine who's a scientist is on my phone now... I'll ask him to try and explain what's happening. Are you there, Henry?"

"I hear you... telephones seem to be working, isn't that funny? Okay, I have a theory about this. Just recently the Hubble Space Telescope registered a sharp increase in infrared radiation from deep space. The Universe was heating up real fast - and all stars were suddenly getting brighter... not enough that human eyes would register, not at first. And during the night, observatories across the world reported that the Moon seemed to be falling in toward the Earth. On the other side of the planet, people panicked and thought the Sun was exploding - "

"Is it true, then - is the Sun exploding, oh my God, are we going to die?"

"No no no! Calm down. I know it looks like the Sun just exploded... but if it did, we'd all be dead now! What's happened is... Christ, it's so hard to explain! But it makes sense in a crazy way."

(She opened one eye, looked down at the bed sheet, close beneath her face. It seemed strangely flat and occupied her entire view. Slowly she glanced up at the wall. The wallpaper was right up there against her nose, even though it ought to be three feet away. She shut her eye and listened, waiting for the explanation that would come, must come before she started to scream.)

"It's funny, y'know... that there's been so very little disagreement among scientists, about how to interpret Einstein's theory of space-time distortion. Most of us used to take it for granted that when the Universe expanded, only the space between the stars increased, not the stars themselves. Well... seems we were being fooled by a trick of the light, so to speak. When the Universe expands, every single thing in it does too. The Sun, the planets, us... everything, swelling. Only we don't... didn't see it before, because the speed of light isn't infinite. And that caused the illusion of perspective. We thought the Sun looked small because it was far away. And it IS far away, don't get me wrong... it still is, or we'd be burned to a crisp now."

"The size of the Sun has changed? Yeah! It has to!"

"The light of the Sun takes eight minutes to reach Earth. We always see it as it looked eight minutes ago! When the Universe was expanding, it looked small, because it WAS that small... eight minutes ago! It, and the Universe, was expanding that fast! When the expansion stopped, things stopped changing size all the time. Which means we're now seeing things at a fixed size. We're finally beholding the world as it really is. There is no perspective. There never was one."

She rushes up from bed, shielding her eyes with one hand, and runs out on the porch. At least she's not screaming...

Outside, all traffic had stopped. No traffic, no airplanes, trains... no birds. The sound of melting snow and dripping water filled the air. Other people were outside, across the street, beyond the houses... and all people were the same size, like in an ancient Chinese print. The suburb with its houses seemed to be abruptly cut off at the line of the horizon,

as if the world ceased to exist there. But that wasn't true: a pedestrian appeared at the horizon, equal in size to the people standing on their flat lawns and driveways. His appearance was too sudden, as if the horizon was the edge of sheet of paper, and he had just been hauling himself up from the underside...

A sparrow flew past her, very close - in the brief moment it passed her, the bird seemed large enough to fill the Universe. She laughed, feeling drunk. The birds didn't sing. She looked up into the sky. It was clouded, but unusually bright.

The clouds looked like clouds, only they floated too fast and too close. Then the breeze picked up and the clouds began to part, like a speeded-up movie. Exactly half the entire sky caught fire. The brightness was blinding, and she had to look away. A glowing, boiling flame reached out from space, just behind the parting gray clouds, and seemed to rush toward her, straight toward her.

Everyone screamed and looked away from the burning half of the sky... a bright yellow wall of pulsating fire that slowly rolled along the cut-out horizon. She shut her eyes and felt the familiar warmth upon her skin.

The Sun was up.

As long as you don't look, she thought, everything is okay.

The Moon wasn't visible yet, but it would be soon enough - and she would see every crater, every rock pass behind the clouds... maybe she'd see the flag that the Americans had planted there in 1969.

Suddenly she wondered: when the Sun sets, what are the stars going to be like? Looking away from the wall of fire that was the Sun, toward the less-bright half of the sky, she couldn't see planets or stars. The sky and clouds blocked the view. But sunset would come, more abruptly than usual, and she would see all the planets in their gigantic glory, covering the sky in bullet-like glimpses as they shot past in their orbits. And beyond them, other star systems and other planets, dimmer with distance probably...

And maybe, if she squinted real hard, she would see the surfaces of the passing distant worlds, rushing past so incredibly fast... and she would wave, in the hope that someone on another planet, light years away, would wave back...

Light years away... years ago... but close enough to greet the new next-door neighbors.

Oskar Källner *En sista kyss farväl*

Hon vandrade den sista biten genom skogen. Fåglarna sjöng och vinden lekte i hennes hår. Chauffören hade protesterat när hon lämnade bilen men hon ville känna solen i ansiktet och höra väggrusets krasa under skosulorna. Dessutom skulle det ge henne lite mer tid.

Tid.

Hon skrattade till och fingrade nervöst på glasögonen i blusens bröstficka. Klumpen växte i magen. En gång i tiden hade hon älskat att promenera här. De minnena var nu bara dimmiga skuggor ur det förflutna.

Vägen gick över ett krön och en bit bort skymtade hon stugan, klassiskt målad i rött med vita knutar. Allt kändes mindre, stugan, tomten och sjön. Träden lutade sig över

henne. Med ens kunde hon inte andas. Hon tog några snabba steg tillbaka och rörde vid öronsnäckan.

”Vem vill du ringa?”, sa en syntetisk röst.

Med ett snabbt ryck slet hon snäckan ur örat och tryckte ner den i fickan.

Vad håller jag på med? tänkte hon och knöt nävarna. Jag måste göra det här. Annars kommer jag alltid att undra ...

Hon gick långsamt mot stugan, en fot framför den andra. Hon smakade på orden som hon hade förberett. Lät dem trilla över tungan om och om igen. Hon var bra med ord. Vid holointervjuerna inför resan hade hon snabbt blivit journalisternas älskling. Det fanns inte en tidning vars omslag hon inte prytt, inte en talkshow där hon inte varit gäst. Efter återkomsten hade mediefolket varit ännu mer efterhängsna. Men hon hade inte samma tålamod med dem längre. Eller samma behov av uppmärksamhet.

Skogen delade sig och hon stod framför stugan. Den såg sliten ut. Träets gråa färg började skina igenom och på taket saknades det några tegelpannor. Trädgården var vildvuxen och i ett hörn låg en skottkärra och en gammal harv och rostade. Runt knuten sluttade tomten mot den svarta skogssjön. En gammal, gul kanot låg uppdragen i gräset, en flytväst slängd bredvid.

Plötsligt hördes ljudet av trä som splittrades. Hon gick runt hörnet och fann honom svingade en yxa mot huggkubben. Hon hejdade sig förskräckt. Hans hår var nästan vitt. Fina rynkor fyllde ansiktet. De nakna armarna hade stora, blå blodådror och huden var skrynklig. Hon hade alltid vetat att han skulle vara gammal när hon återvände. Men det var en sak att veta, en annan att se det med egna ögon. Hon harklade sig.

”Hej.”

Han stannade upp mitt i ett hugg och stirrade på henne. Yxan föll från hans händer. Ansiktet gick från chock till vrede och landade till slut i avsmak. Hon hade föredragit vrede.

”Vad gör du här?”

Hans ögon borrhade sig in i henne. De var lika mörka och intensiva som när de först träffades. Hon försökte tala, försökte få fram de inövade orden men de fastnade i halsen. Med ens vände han ryggen åt henne, som om hon inte alls var där, och plockade upp yxan. Med ett kraftfullt hugg klöv han vedträet och flisorna flög all väg. Han släppte yxan och lutade sig tungt mot kubben. Hela hans kropp skakade. Hon tog de sista stegen fram till honom och lade försiktigt en hand på hans rygg. Han snurrade runt och stötte bort henne.

”Rör mig inte!”

Ansiktet var rött och ögonen uppspärade. Han tog ett steg bort från henne och andades tungt som om han hade sprungit ett Marathon.

”Jag ville bara ...”

Men han lyssnade inte.

”Hur vågar du komma hit?”

”Jag ville träffa dig.”

Ett djuriskt morrande steg ur hans strupe.

”Men jag vill inte träffa dig.” Han pekade mot vägen. ”Försvinn!”

”Men jag har redan sänt iväg bilen. Det är snart natt. Inte skulle du väl skicka ut mig i skogen?”

”Du kan kalla tillbaka den på nolltid.”

Hon plockade upp öronsnäckan ur fickan och slängde den i sjön.

”Nu kan jag inte det.”

Han stirrade på henne med rödsprängda ögon och för ett ögonblick blev hon nästan rädd för honom. Sedan suckade han och vände bort huvudet.

”Jag skulle kunna låna dig min telefon, men jag känner dig. Du skulle antagligen slänga den i sjön också. Jag kör in dig till stan. Imorgon.” Han gäspade. ”Nu är det för sent.” Han lade sina seniga armar i kors. ”En gammal man behöver sin sömn.”

Sedan gick han uppför den lilla stentrappan och försvann in i stugan. Hon stod kvar i gräset. Han kom inte ut igen. Efter några minuters tystnad tog hon mod till sig och följde efter.

Ingenting såg ut att ha förändrats. Mörka träbokhyllor fulla med gammeldags pappersböcker fyllde väggarna i det minimala vardagsrummet. Golvet upptogs av en brun tygsoffa och en gammal golvlampa av mässing. I farstun utanför köket fanns ett litet runt bord med två pinnstolar. På väggarna hängde motiv av nordiska konstnärer; Anders Zorn, Carl Larsson och John Bauer. Det skramlade inifrån köket.

”Sätt dig.”

Hon lydde och sjönk ner på en av pinnstolarna. Han kom ut med en rykande kopp i varje hand och en rulle mariekex fastklämd under armen.

”Kaffe med mycket mjölk”, sa han och satte ner den framför henne.

Han kommer ihåg hur jag vill ha det.

”Tack.”

Han drog ut en stol åt sig själv och sjönk ner.

”Du kan sova på soffan i natt.” Hans röst hårdnade. ”Men imorgon vill jag att du försvinner härifrån.”

Han höll koppen hårt med båda händer, som om han var rädd att den skulle falla ur hans grepp. Fingrarna var rynkiga med trubbiga, nedbitna naglar. Med ens ryckte hon till.

Han har kvar vigselringen!

Han följde hennes blick. Ansiktet mörknade.

”Den här betyder ingenting”, sa han och slog ringen i koppen så det sjöng. ”Det såg du till.”

Hon såg ner på sina händer. Hennes ring var borta sedan länge. Hon hade slängt den i en vulkankrater på Siponia. Då hade det känts som en slutgiltig befrielse. Nu kändes det på något sätt futtigt.

”Varför gjorde du det?” Han stirrade ner i bordsskivan. Orden kom plötsligt och stötvis, som om han inte fick luft. ”Jag har aldrig förstått det. Jag gjorde allt för dig! Jag skötte huset och lagade mat. Jag fixade och ordnade. Det gjorde mig ingenting att du var uppe i omloppsbanan flera månader i sträck, för jag visste att du alltid kom tillbaka. Jag var stolt över dig.” Han lyfte blicken. En ensam tår letade sig ner över kinden. ”Varför övergav du mig?”

Hon försökte desperat finna alla de där orden som hon hade förberett. Men de vägrade infinna sig.

”När de frågade mig ...”, försökte hon. ”Du måste förstå. Det var den första expeditionen att lämna solsystemet och se andra stjärnor, andra världar! Jag kunde helt



enkelt inte tacka nej.”

”Men jag då? Vårt liv tillsammans? Du tyckte inte att det var tillräckligt för att stanna?”

”Men vi bråkade hela tiden.”

”Vadå? Alla bråkar väl i perioder?” Han satte ner kaffet på bordet och gnuggade sig i tinningarna. ”Okej, det är sant att vi inte hade det så bra mot slutet. Men alla förhållanden går genom toppar och dalar. Jag trodde att vi hade det under kontroll. Jag trodde att vi kunde reda ut det.”

”Jag gav upp.”

”Vi hade ju till och med kommit överens om att gå i parterapi.”

”Jag gav upp.”

”Och vi hade ju börjat inreda barnkammaren. Du skulle välja ut tapeterna.”

”Jag gav upp säger jag ju!”

Han reste sig så snabbt att stolen flög i golvet.

”Ja, du gav upp! Hur kunde du? Det var inte något krimskrams du kasserade. Det var vårt äktenskap! Vi lovade varandra trohet tills döden skilde oss åt. Betydde dina löften ingenting?”

Hon försökte tala, men rösten stockade sig.

”Vi var bara barn”, sa hon till slut. ”Jag var bara tjugo och du var tjugotre. Vi var alldeles för unga för att lova något för resten av livet.”

”Du kanske var ett barn”, fräste han. ”Men jag menade allvar med mina löften. Sedan dyker du upp fyrtio år senare, lika vacker nu som när vi var unga och tror att du bara kan ...” Han drog ett djupt andetag och stillade sig. ”Ja du är väl fortfarande ung antar jag. Är det inte så den där relativiteten fungerar?”

”Jo, relativt till jorden saktas tiden ner på skeppet när vi reser. För mig har det bara gått åtta år.” Hon grävde i bröstfickan och drog upp glasögonen. ”Här, ta de här. Den är laddad med bilder och filmer som jag själv tagit från de planeter vi besökt.”

Hon lade glasögonen på bordet. Han stirrade på dem som vore det en giftorm.

”Varför skulle jag vilja det?” Hans blick borrhade sig in i henne. ”Har du en aning om hur smärtsamt det har varit att höra era rapporter? Se foton av dig tillsammans med resten av besättningen? Filmer på dig från främmande planeter? Varje gång tänkte jag att jag borde vara stolt. Men jag kunde inte ...”

Han började gråta så han skakade. Han gick runt bordet och lade försiktigt sina armar runt honom och denna gång stötte han inte bort henne. Hon lät honom gråta.

”Jag är så ledsen”, sa hon till slut. ”Det var aldrig min mening att såra dig. Men du måste förstå att jag trodde att vi var slut.” Hon blickade upp i taket, försökte finna inte bara de rätta orden, utan sanningen. ”Varje gång jag kom hem var det samma sak. Du hade alltid ordnat precis allt. Jag kände mig helt överflödig. Sedan bråkade vi hela tiden, om totalt onödiga småsaker. Till slut kunde jag inte andas. Så jag flydde.”

Han begravde sitt rynkiga ansikte i händerna och stönade. Så med ens reste han sig. På osäkra ben tog han sig fram till dörren och slängde upp den. Ljuset välldde in i hallen. Mot strålglansen blev han en svart siluett och för ett ögonblick stod den unga man hon en gång levte med åter i dörröppningen. Utan ett ord gick han nedför trappan och försvann. Osäker satt hon kvar på sin stol. Han kanske behöver en stund för sig själv, tänkte hon. Eller också är det nu det gäller. Hon reste sig från bordet och skyndade efter.

Han hade satt sig på stenen nere vid vattnet. Den var stor nog för två. Som så många gånger förut satte hon sig bredvid honom. De var tysta några minuter och betraktade solnedgången över sjön. Små vågor drev långsamt in mot stranden. Några fåglar cirklade över vattnet borta vid udden. Det var han som bröt tystnaden.

”Varför kom du egentligen hit? Det måste vara för något mer än att visa bilder. Jag har följt nyhetsrapporteringen. Jag vet att du ska iväg igen. Tillbaka till ... Eta Proxima var det va?”

”Ja, de vill ha med mig i ledningen för kolonin.”

”Så vad är detta? Ett sista avsked?”

”Koloniskeppets utrymme är begränsat och det är viktigt att vi får så bred genetisk variation som möjligt.”

”Jaha... och?”

”Så vi kommer att ta med en ägg- och spermabank.”

”Och...”

”Vi får själva välja vilka personer vi vill ska bli fäder till våra barn.”

Han reste sig upp alldeles röd i ansiktet.

”Dra åt helvete!”

”Jag skulle vilja ha ditt barn. Vårt barn.”

Han tog ett steg bakåt, som för att sätta sig i säkerhet.

”Aldrig i livet! Du fattar tydligen fortfarande inte! Jag ville ha barn med dig! Jag ville bilda familj. Men inte på det här sättet. Aldrig.”

”Jag tittade i registret. Vi är fortfarande gifta.”

”En ren formalitet. Jag skickade bara aldrig in papperna.”

”Varför gjorde du inte det?”

”Det blev bara inte så. Fick det aldrig gjort.”

Hon såg på hans hand igen.

”Varför har du då fortfarande ringen på dig?”

Han fingrade på ringen, drog av den och satte på den igen.

”Jag vet inte.” Han suckade. ”Jag har väl svårt att släppa taget. Då och då tänkte jag ta av den, hade nästan bestämt mig för att göra det. Men sedan kom det en rapport på holon om era äventyr på någon ny värld. Och där var du.” Han ryckte uppgivet på axlarna och var tyst en stund. Sedan sa han med liten röst: ”Jag älskar dig. Har alltid älskat dig. Älskade dig även när jag hatade dig.”

”Så ge mig det här barnet.”

”Aldrig. Du har redan tagit allt annat från mig. Mitt barn får du inte.”

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Den natten sov hon på soffan. Hon funderade en stund om hon skulle gå in till hans sovrum. Hennes kropp längtade, men hon visste inte om han skulle stöta bort henne. Så hon låg kvar på soffan.

När hon vaknade stod solen högt på himlen och stugan var tom. Hon fann honom på stenen nere vid vattnet. Han hade på sig glasögonen. Hon satte sig bredvid honom men sa inget. Efter en liten stund tog han av sig glasögonen och lade dem försiktigt i knäet.

”En vacker plats Eta Proxima”, sa han. ”Skogarna påminner mycket om våra egna.”

*"Planeten har även regnskog och öken närmare ekvatorn. Men platsen vi sett ut för kolonin har skogar, berg och fjordar, med ett klimat som Nordeuropa."*

*Han bet lite på en nagel. Försökte säga något men rösten sprack. Hon lade en arm omkring honom och väntade.*

*"Vad skulle du säga om mig till vårt barn?" sa han.*

*Hon var tyst ett tag.*

*"Att du alltid älskade. Även när allt hopp var ute. Att du önskade barnets liv, även om du inte kunde vara där själv för att se det."*

*Han grät stilla. Tårarna droppade ner i strandgräset. Han snörvlade och sa:*

*"Eta Proxima ser fint ut. Jag tror att ett barn skulle kunna vara lyckligt där." Han tittade på hennes händer. "Var är din ring?"*

*"Förlorad, sedan många år."*

*Han drog av sig sin egen ring och trädde den på hennes finger. Den satt lite löst men inte så att den skulle ramla av. Hon var inte säker på om det var hon som kysste honom eller om han kysste henne. Men för ett ögonblick försvann allt annat. Det var en sista kyss farväl.*

### *Oskar Källner One Last Kiss Goodbye*

*She walked the last stretch through the woods. The birds were singing and the wind played in her hair. The driver had protested when she left the car, but she wanted to feel the sun on her face and hear the road gravel crunch beneath her shoes. Also, it would give her some more time.*

*Time.*

*She laughed and nervously fiddled with the glasses in her blouse pocket. A lump grew in her stomach. At one time she had loved to walk here. Those memories were now just shadows from a distant past.*

*The road passed over a crest and she glimpsed the cottage, traditionally painted in red with white trim. Everything felt smaller, the cottage, the garden and the lake. Suddenly the trees leaned over her. She could not breathe. She took some quick steps backward and touched the earpiece.*

*"Who would you like to call?" said a synthetic voice.*

*With a tug she tore the earpiece from her ear and pushed it deep into a pocket.*

*What am I thinking? she thought, and clenched her fists. I must do this. Otherwise, I will always wonder ...*

*She walked slowly toward the house, one foot in front of the other. She tasted the words which she had prepared; let them dance over her tongue again and again. She was good with words. At the holo interviews before the trip, she had quickly become the journalists' darling. There was not a magazine whose cover she had not graced, not a major talk show where she had not been a guest. After the return the media people had been even more persistent. But she did not have patience with them anymore. Nor did she need the attention.*

*The forest parted and she stood in front of the cottage. It looked worn out. The gray wood shone through in places and the roof was missing a few tiles. The garden was overgrown and in a corner were a wheelbarrow and an old rake rusting away. Around*

the corner the plot sloped towards the blackforest lake. An old canoe lay in the grass, a life jacket slung beside.

There suddenly came the sound of splintering wood. She walked round the corner and found him swinging an axe against the chopping block. She stopped aghast. His hair was almost white. Fine wrinkles traced across the face. His bare arms had big, blue veins and wrinkled skin. She had always known he would be old when she returned. But it was one thing to know, quite another to see it with your own eyes. She cleared her throat.

"Hello."

He stopped mid-swing and stared at her. The axe fell from his hands. The look on his face went from shock to anger and finally settled on disgust. She would have preferred anger.

"What are you doing here?"

His eyes bored into her. They were as dark and intense as when they first met. She tried to speak, tried to bring out the rehearsed words, but they got stuck in her throat. Suddenly he turned his back to her, as if she was not there, and picked up the axe. A powerful swing and chips and splinters flew all around. He dropped the axe and leaned heavily against the block. His whole body shook. She took the final steps over to him and gently put a hand on his back. He spun around and pushed her away.

"Don't touch me!" s

His face was red and eyes wide open. He stepped away from her, breathing heavily as if he had run a marathon.

"I just wanted ..."

But he did not listen.

"How dare you come here?"

"I wanted to meet you."

An animalistic growl rose from his throat.

"But I don't want see you." He pointed toward the road. "Get lost!"

"But I've already sent the car away. It will be dark in an hour. You're not going to send me back into the woods, alone, are you?"

"You can call it back in no time."

She picked the earpiece out of her pocket and threw it in the lake.

"Not now, I can't."

He stared at her with bloodshot eyes and, for a moment, she was almost afraid of him. Then he sighed and turned his head away.

"I could lend you my phone, but I know you. You'd probably just throw it in the lake as well. I'll drive you into town. Tomorrow." He yawned. "Now it's too late." He crossed his sinewy arms. "An old man needs his sleep."

Then he climbed the stone steps and disappeared into the house. She was still standing on the lawn. He did not return. After a few minutes of silence she plucked up her courage and followed suit.

Nothing seemed to have changed. Wooden bookcases filled with old-fashioned paper books lined the walls of the small living room. The floor was dominated by a brown couch and an old, brass floor lamp. In the hallway outside the kitchen was a small round table with two wooden chairs. On the walls hung paintings of Nordic artists: Anders Zorn, Carl Larsson and John Bauer. A voice came through the kitchen door.

*"Sit."*

*She did as she was told and sat on a chair. He came out with a steaming cup in each hand and a packet of cookies clamped under his arm.*

*"Coffee with a lot of milk," he said and sat it down in front of her.*

*He remembers how I like it.*

*"Thank you."*

*He pulled out a chair for himself and sat down.*

*"You can sleep on the couch tonight." His voice hardened. "But tomorrow, I want you out of here."*

*He held the cup tightly with both hands, as if he was afraid it would fall out of his grip. His fingers were wrinkled with blunt, chipped nails. Suddenly she jolted.*

*He's still got the wedding ring!*

*He followed her gaze. His face darkened.*

*"This is nothing," he said, and tapped the ring against the cup. "You made sure of that."*

*She looked down at her own hands. Her ring was long gone. She had thrown it into a sea of lava on Siponia. It had felt like final liberation back then. Now it somehow felt paltry.*

*"Why did you do it?" He stared down at the tabletop. The words were strangled, as if he couldn't get air. "I've never understood it. I did everything for you! I took care of the house. I cooked and cleaned. I took care of everything. It didn't bother me that you were in the orbital shipyards for months on end because I knew that you would always come back. I was proud of you." He lifted his gaze. A lone tear found its way down his cheek.*

*"Why did you abandon me?"*

*She tried desperately to find the words that she had planned to say. But they refused to come to her aid.*

*"When they asked me ..." she tried. "You have to understand. It was the first expedition to leave the solar system, and see other stars, other worlds. I simply could not say no."*

*"But what about me? Our life together? You didn't think it was enough to make you stay?"*

*"But we fought all the time."*

*"So what? All couples argue sometimes." He put the cup on the table and rubbed his temples. "Okay, it's true that it wasn't that good towards the end. But all relationships go through ups and downs. I thought we had it under control. I thought we could work it out."*

*"I gave up."*

*"We had even agreed to go to couples' therapy."*

*"I gave up."*

*"And we had begun to decorate the nursery. You were going to pick out the wallpaper."*

*"I gave up, I tell you!"*

*He stood up so quickly that the chair flew to the floor.*

*"Yes, you gave up! How could you? This wasn't some worthless piece of junk that you just throw away. It was our marriage! We promised to be faithful until death did we*

part. Did your promises mean nothing?"

*She tried to speak, but her words caught in her throat.*

*"We were just kids," she said finally. "I was only twenty and you were twenty-three. We were too young to be making promises to last for the rest of our lives."*

*"Maybe you were a child," he sputtered. "But I meant every words of my wows. And then you show up forty years later, as beautiful now as when we were young and you think you can just ..."* He took a deep breath and calmed himself. *"Yes, you're still young I guess. Isn't that how relativity works?"*

*"Well yes. Relative to Earth, time slows on the ship when we travel. For me it has only been eight years."* She dug into his blouse pocket and pulled out the glasses. *"Here, take these. It is loaded with pictures and videos that I took on the planets we visited."*

*She put the glasses on the table. He stared at them as if though they were a poisonous snake.*

*"Why would I want to do that?" His eyes bored into her. "Have you any idea how painful it was to hear your reports? See photos of you along with the rest of the crew? See films of you from alien planets? Every time, I thought to myself that I should be proud. But I couldn't ..."*

*He began to cry. Soon his entire body was shaking. She walked around the table and gently put her arms around him. He did not reject her this time. She let him cry.*

*"I'm so sorry," she said. "I never meant to hurt you. But you must understand that I thought we were over." She looked up at the ceiling, trying to speak not just the right words, but the truth. "Every time I came home it was the same thing. You had always arranged absolutely everything. I felt completely superfluous. And then we fought all the time. Finally I couldn't breathe. So I fled."*

*He buried his wrinkled face in his hands and groaned. Then suddenly he stood up. Unsteady legs bore him toward the door. He flung it open. Light poured into the hall. Against the brilliance he became a black silhouette and for a moment the young man she had once lived with stood in the doorway. Without a word he went down the stairs and disappeared. Unsure, she sat still in his chair. He may need a moment to himself, she thought. Or maybe, I don't have a moment to lose. She got up from the table and hurried after him.*

*He had sat down on the rock by the water. It was big enough for both of them. Like so many times before she sat down beside him. They were silent for a couple of minutes, looking at the setting sun over the lake. Small waves drifted slowly toward the shore. Some birds circled over the water at the cape. He was the one who broke the silence.*

*"Why did you really come here? You must be after something other than to show me images of your travels. I have followed the news reports. I know you are going back to ... Eta Proxima was it?"*

*"Yes, they want me on the board of the new colony."*

*"So what is this? A final farewell?"*

*"The colony ship has limited space and it is important, when starting the colony, to get as wide a genetic variation as possible."*

*"Yeah, so what?"*

*"So we're taking with us an egg and sperm bank."*

*"And ..."*

*"We are free to choose who we want to be the father of our children."*

*He sprang to his feet, his face a scarlet mask of rage.*

*"Go to hell!"*

*"I want to have your child. Our child."*

*He took a step backward, as if to get to safety.*

*"Over my dead body! You still just don't get it, do you? I wanted to have children with you! I wanted to have a family. But not this way. Never."*

*"I looked in the registry. We're still married."*

*"A mere formality. I never sent the papers."*

*"Why didn't you?"*

*"I just never got around to it."*

*She looked at his hand again.*

*"Then why are you still wearing your ring?"*

*He fingered the ring, pulled it off and put it back on.*

*"I don't know," he sighed. "It's hard to let go. I thought about taking it off, every now and then. Several times I made up my mind to do it. But then came another report on the holo about your adventures on a new world. And there you were." He shrugged, all spent, and was silent for a moment. Then he said in a small voice: "I love you. I have always loved you. I loved you even when I hated you."*

*"So give me this child."*

*"Never. You've already taken everything else from me. You will not have my child."*

*\*\*\**

*She slept on the couch that night. She thought about entering his bedroom. Her body yearned, for him, but she didn't know if he would push her away. So she stayed.*

*When she awoke the sun was high in the sky and the house was empty. She found him on the rock by the water. He was wearing the glasses. Silently, she sat down next to him. After a while, he took off the glasses and laid them gently in his lap.*

*"A beautiful place, Eta Proxima," he said. "Those forests are quite similar to our own."*

*"The planet also has rainforests and deserts closer to the equator. But the place we have chosen for the colony has a climate much like northern Europe, with forests, mountains and fjords."*

*He chewed for a while on a nail. Tried to say something but his voice cracked. She put an arm around him and waited.*

*"What would you tell our child about me?" He said.*

*She thought for a moment.*

*"That you always loved. Even when all hope was lost. That you wanted this child's life, even when you could not be there yourself to see it."*

*He wept quietly. Tears dripped down onto the tufts of grass on the shore. He sniffled and said:*

*"Eta Proxima looks like a fine place. A child could be happy there." He looked at her hands. "Where is your ring?"*

*"Lost. Years ago."*

*He pulled off his own ring and put it on her finger. It was a little big but not so big*

*that it would fall off. She wasn't sure if she was the one that kissed him, or if he kissed her, but for a moment everything else disappeared. It was one last kiss goodbye.*

1.



Alexander Bachilo Остров

14 мая. Меня зовут Андрей Фетисов, мне двадцать пять лет. Я никогда раньше не вел дневник, считал все эти дневники пустой девичьей забавой. Да и записывать, по большому счету, нечего было. Пятнадцать лет учебы, пять – работы. Дни, одинаковые, как ножки микросхемы... Кстати, до сегодняшнего дня я был инженером – электронщиком. Но сегодня произошло главное событие в моей жизни. Я получил повестку.

Наконец-то! Сколько пришлось за ней побегать, сколько сочинить всяких бумаг, сколько раз с мольбой заглянуть в глаза разной бюрократической сволочи. Я же знаю, что люди там нужны, а они мне – заявок нет! Заявок нет, а сердце-то человеческое есть у вас? Как вы сами можете сидеть по кабинетикам, когда каждый честный человек рвется душой туда, где всем нам быть надлежит!

Спасибо Першаку. С его специальностью он нигде отказа не знает, вот и замолвил словечко. Мама, узнав про повестку, ахнула, но постаралась взять себя в руки. После только украдкой всплакнула – по глазам видно. Отец вышел из комнаты в кителе, все ордена зачем-то надел. Это у него еще за Посещение. Полный кавалер.

- Ну гляди там, - сказал глухо. - Не осрами фамилию...

И обнял.

Я, чуть не приплясывая, побежал к себе собирать вещички. Уж вы не извольте беспокоиться, товарищ полковник! Фетисов-младший, он хоть и младший, а Фетисов! Быстро скидал в чемоданчик трусы, носки да бумаги – всех-то сборов. И того не нужно – там казенное дадут. Напоследок решил в комнате порядок навести. Поднакопилось бардака за этот месяц, сразу видно – мятущаяся душа обитает, ногам покоя не дает. Разгреб, как мог, завалы, книжки по полкам расставил, кожух на комп прикрутил в кои-то веки, чертежи и распечатки сложил стопкой. Можно было и выбросить, да пусть уж лежат. Планарные нано-технологии. Шестеренки толщиной в молекулу, кривошипно-шатунный механизм на кремниевой пленке. Когда-нибудь из таких деталей можно будет делать нано-роботов, маленьких, как вирусы, и также быстро плодящихся. Они смогут очищать воздух, обогащать руду, строить что-нибудь гигантское, готовить пищу и даже следить за здоровьем человека. Для этого им не нужно быть слишком сложными, главное, чтобы их было много. Страшно много. И чтобы каждый четко выполнил свою функцию хотя бы один раз...

Да, занятно. Перспективно. Но не время. Вот закончим главное – тогда, может быть, грядущие поколения, от нечего делать, доведут до конца сей скорбный труд!

Тут в комнату вошла Галя. Я и не слышал ее звонка, распевал во всю глотку «Нас не догонят!». Она, конечно, сразу все поняла.

- Едешь?

- Еду.

Я бросил распечатки на стол, но тут же пожалел – стало некуда девать руки. Почему-то я чувствовал себя виноватым.

- Вот, берут водителем БелАЗа...

- Рад?

- А ты как думаешь? Конечно, рад!

Галя подошла к столу, задумчиво провела пальцем по мохнатой от пыли поверхности.

- А собирались пожениться...

Я вздохнул.

- Ты же знаешь, я тебя люблю. На смерть бы за тебя пошел. Seriously. Но сейчас – другое. Нужно идти за всех людей на Земле, понимаешь? В том числе и за нас с тобой! Да что я тебе объясняю!

Галя подошла к окну, долго смотрела во двор.

- Вот как ты решил...

- А ты бы на моем месте как решила?

Она не ответила.

- Знаешь, Галка, по-моему мы раньше неправильно жили. Ты, я, ребята – все мы. Тусовались вместе, а жили – каждый для себя. Карьера, бабки, тачки, шмотки... А вот теперь, когда вся эта ерунда отошла на второй план, стало ясно: со своим маленьким счастьем можно погодить.

Она повернулась и внимательно посмотрела на меня.

- Есть главное, – сказал я, – и за это главное я буду биться!

И вдруг она улыбнулась.

- Да я ведь и не спорю, глупый! Конечно, ты прав!

В прихожей зазвонил телефон.

- Андрея? – спросила мама. – Да, сейчас. Андрюша! Тебя!

Таким обыкновенным голосом. Будто все у нас по-прежнему...

- Кажется, это Першак, – прошептала она, отдавая мне трубку.

- Ну что, получил? – деловито спросил Першак. – Собираешь манатки?

- Так точно! – радостно проорал я. – Спасибо тебе, Иннокентий!

Вот ведь имечко у человека! Кешей звать неудобно, он все-таки лет на десять меня старше, а по имени-отчеству – запахло. Мы с ним давно на «ты».

- Ладно. Благодарить будешь на верхотуре, – прорычал Першак. – Ну-ка скажи мне номер путевки. Хочу тебя к себе в экипаж взять...

- А разрешат?! – я прямо задохнулся от восторга.

- Чтоб это был последний вопрос не в тему! Ясно, товарищ водитель? Повторите!

- Есть – последний вопрос не в тему! – гаркнул я.

Что ни говори, а хорошо быть специалистом-растворщиком, как Першак. Ни в чем ему отказа нет, потому что его по разнарядке берут и сразу – в бригады!

\*\*\*

15 мая. Перечитал дневник. Красиво выходит! Литературно, с диалогами и отступлениями. А то обычно в дневниках пишут черти-что: «Пришел Вася. Пили водку». Эх! Может, писательский талант пропадает... Но хватит ныть. И без того сегодня сплошные слезы, а проще говоря – проводы.

С утра собрались у нас, посидели, выпили, послушали першаковские байки про

Посещение. Они с отцом даже заспорили один раз. Ну как же! Оба – ветераны! Мама, конечно, плакала, уже не скрываясь. Отец хмурился, но виду не подавал, хотя ясно было, что ему тоже не по себе. Першак мне сказал по секрету, что отец и сам подавал заявление, но его, конечно, не взяли. Куда с такими легкими в тамошние условия! А вот Галка удивила. Сидит, улыбается, поддакивает кешкиным историям. Утешилась уже! Ну и пожалуйста! Хотел в последний раз поговорить по душам – и передумал. Уеду гордый. Да и не стоит мне сейчас душевные разговоры затевать, от всех этих напутственных слов сам уже расчувствовался, как дитё.

Слава Богу, под окнами посигналила машина, и Першак сказал, что пора. Надел я куртку, взял свой чемоданчик, родителей поцеловал, а на Галку, как бы в забывчивости, и внимания не обращаю. Смотрю, она тоже одевается, из-под вешалки берет какой-то рюкзачок на плечо.

- Ты что это, - спрашиваю, - в общагу? Оставайся, пообедаешь с родителями.

- Нет, - говорит, - я с вами в аэропорт.

Этого мне еще не хватало! Устраивать там при ребятах слезные прощания!

Першака спрашиваю:

- В машине, наверное, и места нет?

- Строго по количеству путевок, - отвечает.

- Ну, вот видишь, - говорю Галке. - Строго по количеству. Поэтому ничего не получится.

Смеется.

- Как раз поэтому-то и получится!

И тут до меня дошло.

- Галка! – ору, - ты с путевкой?!

Она гордо разворачивает бумагу и мне протягивает.

- Вакуумщица-кислородница шестого разряда!

Першак хохочет:

- Да точно, точно! Я постановление видел!

Тут я обо всех своих горестях и думать забыл. Схватил Галку в охапку и – вниз. Вместе! Вместе! Вот ведь, молодец какая, умница-девка! Только когда машина тронулась, оглянулся. Смотрю – мама стоит у подъезда, машет...

\*\*\*

16 мая. Остров. Еще на подлете я увидел это. Караваны судов, доставляющие на остров породу, раствор и технику. Они тянулись к побережью, как нити паутины – со всех концов света и упирались в узкую кромку земли под стеной. Стена казалась бесконечной, уходящей вверх за облака, влево и вправо – до горизонта. Но это лишь оттого, что остров очень велик, размером с порядочный материк. И вовсе не стена это, а подножие шпиля, на который нам предстоит взобраться и поднять свою двухсотпятидесятитонную кроху. Отсюда я еще не видел узенькой полоски серпантина, опоясывающего шпиль, но я знал – она там, и по ней, ревя и отрыгивая черным дымом, идут, один за другим, БелАзы и Катерпиллеры, груженные термобетоном.

Вечером мы собрались на первый инструктаж в огромном, как город, зале Отдела Кадров. Сколько же здесь народу! Головы, головы колышутся, как море, и все глаза

смотрят в одну сторону, на экран-инструктор. Первый инструктаж был и последним. Завтра все это море людей рассядется по грузовикам и двинется в рейс. А кто уже и сегодня – поток техники к вершине не останавливается ни на секунду.

Безграничное влияние Першака продолжает действовать и на Острове – Галку легко определили в наш экипаж кислородницей. Я этому, конечно, безумно рад, хотя нет-нет, да и шевельнется холодный червячок в сердце. Не на прогулку ведь идем. Каково будет смотреть на смерть самого близкого человека?

Вторым водителем к нам назначили рыжего немца Ахима. Хороший парень по-моему, приехал из Дрездена еще неделю назад, да простудился, слег, отстал от своих. По-русски говорит примерно так же, как я по-немецки, больше на пальцах объясняемся. Ладно, лишь бы дело знал. Вот и все. Сейчас ужинать и спать, а завтра – в рейс.

\*\*\*

17 мая. 12:00 Первые шесть часов подъема прошли нормально, на трех тысячах высоты мы включили кислородную подпитку двигателя, захлопнули стекла шлемов. Галка молодец, техника работает, как часы, дышится легко, только очень устаешь. Машины идут друг за другом почти вплотную, капот к кузову, дорога узкая, ограждения никакого нет, и это нервирует. Почему нельзя было сделать хоть какой-то бортик, чтоб не следить постоянно, не слишком ли близко к обрыву колесо. А встречной полосы здесь нет. Да она и не нужна. Я свои шесть часов отрубил, уступил место Ахиму. Менялись на ходу. Сейчас допишу – и на полку. Надо поспать. Через шесть часов опять за баранку...

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12:20 Хрен-то тут поспишь! Чуть прикрыл глаза – ЧП! Впереди загорелась машина. Не самая к нам ближняя, а через три-четыре. Кислородный баллон на крыше дал течь. Даже в разреженном воздухе было слышно, как что-то хлопнуло, в небо ударила струя пламени. Я слетел с полки и вцепился в плечо Першака. Перекинется огонь на соседние машины – и всем кранты. Будем рваться, как гирлянда хлопушек.

- Бедные, - прошептала Галя. - Масло из фильтров протекло. Дрянь эти баллоны, говорила я!

Горящий грузовик вдруг резко вильнул, правые колеса на секунду повисли в воздухе, а затем трехсоттонный БелАз тяжело кувырнулся в пропасть.

- Молодец, парень, - сказал Першак. - Не растерялся.  
Я промолчал. Теперь мне было понятно, почему на этой дороге нет ограждения...

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17 мая. 22:00  
Спать не могу. Смотреть на дорогу – тоже. В пропасть – тем более. Буду записывать. Раз решил, нужно довести до конца.

Когда началась моя смена, Першак и Галя дремали. Ахим залез на полку и сразу

захрапел. Я почувствовал, что бодрости во мне никакой, как бы не закемарить за компанию.

- Ты чем занимался до Посещения? – тут же спросил Першак.

Оказывается, он не спал. Молодец, выполняет инструкцию – развлекать водителя разговорами.

- Да тем же, чем и после, – ответил я. – Нанороботами.

- А чего бросил?

- Так ведь после Посещения многие свои дела побросали. Когда поймешь, что в жизни главное, трудно продолжать заниматься ерундой.

- А удивительно, правда? – Першак заерзал на сидении, придвигаясь. – Если бы не прилетели эти ходячие мозги, Благодетели наши, у нас до сих пор не было бы никакого Острова. И Шпиля не было бы. Страшно подумать! И ведь никаких особых знаний, никаких новых технологий, кроме, разве что, термобетона, они нам не оставили, а как все круто изменилось!

- Да при чем тут технологии и термобетон?! – встряла проснувшаяся Галка, – Они глаза нам открыли! Сколько веков, тысячелетий, миллионов лет люди мучились вопросом, в чем смысл жизни. А они раз – и ответили!

- Да я разве спорю? – Першак покивал. – Я только удивляюсь, как это они ответили с первой попытки – и сразу правильно. Будто сами его и придумали – смысл...

\*\*\*

Сзади вдруг послышались беспокойные вопли клаксона. К первому присоединился второй, третий, что-то случилось там, позади. Я глянул в зеркало и обомлел. Кой черт позади! Это у нас!

- Возгорание на крыше! – рявкнул я.

- Масло! – ахнула Галка. – Сиди! – она отпихнула рванувшегося было к люку Першака. – Это моя работа!

В мгновение ока она выбралась на крышу. Я видел в зеркале ее скафандр среди пламени. Горел маслопровод резервного баллона. Галя, не обращая внимания на огонь, вынула из кармана ключ и принялась скручивать входную втулку. Что она делает?! Ее же обдаст из трубы, как из огнемета!

- За дорогой следи! – гаркнул Першак. – Если рванет, ты должен успеть!

Задние машины замедляли ход. Расстояние между нами понемногу увеличивалось. Я тоже вынужден был притормаживать, чтобы дать возможность передним уйти подальше. На крыше горело так, что ничего нельзя было разобрать. И вдруг я увидел Галю. Она поднялась во весь рост, как ребенка прижимая к груди горящий резервный баллон. Скафандр ее дымился, он был весь в дырах и потеках стекловолокна. Стекло шлема провалилось внутрь, но лица не было видно, там пузырилось что-то черное. Я понял, что сейчас произойдет.

- Галя! Не надо!

Баллон взорвался через секунду после того, как она прыгнула. Я увидел факел, летящий в пропасть, и уткнулся лицом в руль. Чертовы слезы! Не вовремя как!

- Эх, Галка, Галка... – вздохнул Першак.

- Крышу проверь! – кое-как проморгавшись, я выправил руль и снова глянул в

зеркало. Крыша дымилась, но огня видно не было.

С полки свесилась голова Ахима.

- Вас ист лос?! – испуганно спросил немец.

- Порядок! – Першак закрыл люк. – Сбили пламя. Баллон держит, до верха хватит.

- Спи, спи давай! – сказал он Ахиму. – Через полчаса подниму!

Полчаса я вел машину, стараясь не думать ни о чем, кроме дистанции да зазоров слева, от стены и справа – от пропасти, тупо смотрел на габаритки впереди идущего «Катерпиллера, притормаживал и подгазовывал вслед за ним, повторяя про себя: «Все в порядке, все в порядке, все идет по плану».

Теперь за рулем сидит Ахим, Першак рассказывает ему что-то о похождениях своей молодости. Немец качает головой и удивляется. А я лежу на полке и записываю все, что с нами произошло. Для чего? Не знаю. Просто не могу спать.

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18 апреля. Вершина. Ну вот мы и на месте. Последние километры подъема дались особенно нелегко. Кислорода хватило под завязку, пришлось даже отдать часть дыхательного запаса. Все-таки резервный баллон ставят неспроста. Но все, в конце концов, обошлось. Дорога кончилась, и мы выехали на ровный, как стол, срез строящегося шпиля. Грузовики, разъезжаясь влево и вправо, ухордили вдаль, чтобы занять места согласно инженерному плану. Першак развернул карту и показывал мне, куда ехать. Через полчаса мы увидели впереди плотный строй грузовиков, словно притертых друг к другу.

- Вот оно, наше место!

Я подрулил к строю и также плотно вклинился в просвет между двумя машинами. Сзади нас сразу же подперли грузовики, шедшие за нами.

Першак разбил кулаком стекло на передней панели и дернул рычаг активатора. В кузове сразу заворчала, заворчалась тяжелая масса. Термобетон начал свою работу. Не нужно было даже поднимать кузов. Через пару часов кипящая масса расплавит грузовик вместе со всем содержимым, а потом застынет идеально ровной поверхностью, готовой принять новый слой машин. Так строится шпиль, и этому строительству мы с радостью отдаем свои жизни. Осталось только немного подождать...

- Нанороботы, это ведь маленькие такие механизмики? – спросил вдруг Першак. – Размером с молекулу, да?

- Ну, в общем, где-то так, – мне не хотелось разговаривать сейчас.

- А кто их придумал? Благодетели?

- Нет. Их изобрели еще до Посещения. Правда, больше в теории.

Першак покачал головой.

- Велосипед вы изобрели, вот что я тебе скажу! Любой сперматозоид – готовый наноробот, да еще и с пропеллером!

- Ну и что? – я зевнул. – Ахим, ты куда?

- Ахо! Комараден! – заорал вдруг немец и полез в окошко знакомиться с соседями.

Вот правильный мужик! Не желает тратить последние часы жизни на пустые разговоры. Многие экипажи вылезли на крыши своих грузовиков и пошли куда-то,

прыгая с кабины на кабину.

- Пойдем, разомнемся, - предложил я.

- Да погоди ты, послушай! - Першак дернул меня за рукав. - Живые клетки - это микромеханизмы, согласен?

- Ну.

- Они составляют один большой механизм - наше тело. Но мы-то тоже не венец творения! Мы такие же нанороботы, предназначенные для выполнения коллективной задачи.

Я рассмеялся.

- Хороший ты мужик, Першак! Но необразованный. И в нанороботах не рубишь ни фига. Запомни раз и навсегда, тем более, что забыть ты уже не успеешь: роботы делают только то, на что их запрограммировали. А человек свободен в своих желаниях. В том и величие человека, что он знает, для чего все делается!

Я вылез на крышу кабины и огляделся. Земли отсюда не было видно, зато какие звезды! И Луна висела в небе огромным раскрашенным плафоном. Вдалеке собралась кучка людей. Все смотрели на Луну и тихо о чем-то толковали. Бухая сапогами по крышам, я пошел к ним. Меня переполняло счастье. Я выполнил свою задачу на пути к нашей общей, большой цели. И Галя выполнила, и Ахим. И Першак, хоть и ворчит по привычке, но на самом деле все прекрасно понимает.

Каждому ребенку известна и понятна наша цель. Мы построим шпиль до Луны, разрежем ее на дольки, как торт, спустим их на Землю и установим вдоль экватора. Вот тебе и шестеренка!

Eugeniusz Debski „Wytrawny czytelnik”

Upał doskwierał wszystkim, demokratycznie – równo i wszystkim, od dwóch tygodni, ale tu, w parku, było znacznie chłodniej. Wypuszczone na wysokość trzystu metrów balony skutecznie zatrzymywały promienie słoneczne, w takim zakresie, w jakim programowali dyżurni synoptycy. Ian z przyjemnością wszedł pod utworzone przez bąble sklepienie, skręcił kilka razy aż znalazł ustronną, wąską, bezludną alejkę i usiadł, z przyjemnością wyciągając nogi. Koniuszkami palców sięgał gałęzi kulistej jodły, przycupniętej za ławką. Przyjemny chłodny wietrzyk pędził alejką, kołysząc lekko konarami i wprawiając w drżenie liście.

Fotochromy balonowych powłok przerabiały światło na energię elektryczną, a ta napędzała silniki metra. Metro, z kolei, potężnie sapiąc przy każdym przejeździe pociągu, wypychało z podziemi powietrze, które, przefiltrowane, uzdatnione i zaromatyzowane, pędziło po alejkach parkowych, przez co znajdujący się tu ludzie zapominali o upale, o ciepłej, chemicznie wyjąłowanej niesmacznej wodzie, o asfaltowym kleiku na starych jezdniach...

Ian popatrzył na niebo, na kilku sąsiadujących ze sobą obłych ekranach widniała godzina, miał dwadzieścia minut czasu, do kliniki dwie-trzy minuty spaceru. Tyle że w pełnym słońcu.

W kieszeni cienkiej chłodzącej koszuli poruszył się smartfon. Najlepiej byłoby go nie dotykać, niech sobie mruczy i wibruje, dzisiaj lista spraw ważnych składała się z jednej pozycji i nie była nią rozmowa z klientem.

Koniuszkami palców wyłowił telefon, odblokował i popatrzył na ekran.

Westchnął.

- Tak, Słoneczko?

- Ian? Dlaczego, na Boga, nie używasz infonu? Ten archaiczny smartfon?! Za każdym razem jak dzwonię nie wiem, czy nie odbierasz, bo nie chcesz, czy nie możesz? Jak można ulegać tej manii prehistorii? - Ian milczał, siostra dyszała chwilę do mikrofonu, wszczepiony w kącik jej ust mikrofon znakomicie przenosił wszystkie dźwięki. - Mam niedobre przeczucia, może odłóż ten zabieg, co? - zmieniła nagle temat, przechodząc do tego, który był prawdziwym powodem rozmowy.

- Nie, kochana siostrzyczko. To już postanowione, przesądzone, przegadane, przemyślane i jeszcze kilka „prze”... Jeśli mam normalnie żyć, muszę to zrobić. W przeciwnym przypadku – załamie się.

- Dżi... - Siostra użyła starego dzieciennego pseudonimu, zapewne apelując tym samym do rodzinnych solidarnych odczuć. - Miliony, jak nie miliardy ludzi z tym żyje i nie rzuca się pochopnie na stół operacyj...

- Marie?

- ... i jakoś...

- MARIE!

Zająknęła się, chlipnęła, siąknęła nosem.



- No dobrze...

- Właśnie. Tak dobrze. Jeśli chcesz mogę cię zwolnić z dyżuru – zablefował. Popatrzył na balonowy zegar. Czternaście minut, za siedem wstanie i ruszy. Już nie ma czasu na szukanie zastępstwa. – Ale wymagam od ciebie naprawdę niewiele, nie wymagam, tylko proszę o pół godziny dla siebie. Proszę, żebyś za trzy godziny była pod telefonem, gotowa by mnie zabrać, gdyby coś poszło nie tak. Odwieszysz mnie do centrum rehabilitacji. I koniec. Tam dojdę do siebie i wrócę do domu.

- A jeśli, coś pójdzie nie tak?

- Nie może pójść nie tak – powiedział przez zęby. Temat był wątkowany tyle razy, że jeszcze jedna o tym rozmowa znaczyłaby, że oboje są kretynami. – Tylko moja pamięć może się na jakiś czas zmulić. Wolniej będę sobie przypominał dane o pracy, o rodzinie, o otoczeniu... Jakiś czas, tydzień, nie więcej. I jest na to bardzo mało szans, sześć procent. Ale procedura wymaga takiej współpracy ze szpitalem i centrum rehabilitacji. Ale to bardzo nikła szansa, że cię wezwą. Nie denerwuj się.

- Mi nie o to chodzi, że nie...

- Marie? Muszę już iść. Wyłączam telefon, bo taka jest procedura. Pa!

Zdecydowanie odsunął urządzenie od ucha, z radością musnął na ekranie czerwone kółeczko i wrzucił smartfon do kieszeni. Zostało mu dziewięć minut czasu. Minutę przeznaczył na rozkoszowanie się chłodem i rozproszonym światłem, świadomy faktu, że gdy wyjdzie z półcienia, sztucznie schłodzonego i sztucznie wietrzonego, w oczy uderzy przykre jaskrawe światło i raptownie odczuje pylisty miejski betonowy upał.

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Położył prawą dłoń na płaskiej prostokątnej paczce, leżącej obok niego na ławce. Trzy ulubione powieści zszyte w jeden wolumin, specjalnie na tę okazję, żeby były pierwsze: „Dzień Tryfidów”, „Tajemnicza wyspa”, „Czarnoksiężnik z Archipelagu”. Niedługo przeczyta jeszcze raz. I – pierwszy raz!

Chwycił paczkę, wstał i ruszył w kierunku wyjścia z parku. Wolno. Przyspieszył przekraczając dobrze widoczną granicę parkowego cienia i wielkomiejskiego skwaru. Ulica zalana była światłem, rozgrzana, usiana parzącymi elementami: słupami latarni, pokrywami hydrantów, obudowami automatów, poręczami sklepowymi... Szybko przemierzył ją, skręcił w przecznicę, zacienioną, wcale nie chłodniejszą, ale przynajmniej światło nie wypalało źrenic... Szybko dotarł do obudowanego sztuczną zraszaną wodą zielenią wejścia... Pod sklepieniem z gęstych platicowych lian zatrzymał się i obejrzał.

Przez tę głupią rozmowę z infantylną siostrzyczką... - pomyślał - ... zaczynam myśleć jak skazaniec czy... czy jakiś idiota!..

Jakiś przypalony słońcem gołąb beładnie wylądował na chodniku, podskoczył kilka razy, rozłożył skrzydła i zatrzepotał nimi, ale już nie wzbił się w powietrze. Jedno skrzydło opadło, drugie zagarnęło powietrze kilka razy, upierzone ciało zakręciło się i znieruchomiło. Ian wpatrywał się w gołębia oszołomiony, mimo upału poczuł nagle między łopatkami pryskającą we wszystkie strony armię lodowatych mrówek.

Jedna z płyt, którymi wyłożony był budynek kliniki, uniosła się nagle, ze skrytki wyskoczył kopulasty robot, migiem dopadł trupa, otworzył klapy, zagarnął pierzastą ofiarę upału, szcęknął kłapami i wpadł z powrotem do kasety dokującej.

Ian westchnął, odwrócił się i podszedł do drzwi, skaner migiem rozpoznał go, otworzył drzwi, przyjemny chłód i dyskretna organowa „zimna” muzyczka w sekundę odcięła Iana od ulicy, rozterek, wrzawy i upału. Podszedł do recepcji.

- Dzień dobry.

- Dzień dobry panie Saint. Personel oczekuje pana. – Uśmiech recepcjonistki albo był szczerzy, albo znakomicie wyszkolony i bezbłędnie wykonany. Wskazała ręką wózek, wytoczył się właśnie zza filara i zmierzał w stronę Iana. – Proszę wygodnie usiąść, on pana zawiezie gdzie trzeba.

Jak się powiedziało „a” trzeba literować dalej – pomyślał, starając się zdławić w zarodku kapitulancą myśl, która po rozmowie z Marie usiłowała zapanować nad jego umysłem.

Siedem procent to mało, dla idiotki Marie, a jednak to znaczy, że siedmiu ze stu odchodzi stąd wytrawionych nie do końca tak, jak sobie życzyli.

Odwrócił się, usiadł w wózku, uśmiechnął się do recepcjonistki. Odpowiedziała uśmiechem zawodowym, szerokim, ale lekko zniecierpliwionym, chyba miała jakiś telefon, albo kończyła zmianę...

Wjechali do czekającej windy i wjechali na przedostatnie piętro, operacyjne.

- Witamy, panie Saint – uśmiechała się szeroko, nawet lepiej niż recepcjonistka na parterze jej klon z czwartego. – Dowiozę pana do szatni, już nic więcej nie musi pan dzisiaj robić.

Ruszyła pierwsza, kusząco kołysząc się na szpilkach, szpilkach, ale bezgłośnych.

Ian przyłapał się na tym, że gapi się na jej nogi, na mały przemieszczający się po łydce tatuaż – motylka, trzepocącego kolorowymi skrzydełkami.

I już nie zastanawiał się nad siedmioma procentami.

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Recepcjonistka odprowadziła ich wzrokiem, wysokiego szczupłego mężczyznę siedzącego na wózku i wysoką idealnie wyprofilowaną hostessę wyprzedzającą wózek o trzy kroki. Na jej usta wypłynął niemiły uśmiech człowieka, który wie więcej niż inni.

Wdusiła klawisz wywołania doktora Libsteina.

- Panie doktorze? Pacjent będzie w czwórcę za dziesięć minut.

- Za ile?

- Za dziesięć minut, dyżur ma Mariza, ona ich prowadzi perfekcyjnie.

- Dobra, już idę.

Po chwili otyły Murzyn podszedł sapiąc do jej biurka. Chwycił podaną infokartę pacjenta, rzucił okiem na nazwisko, wiek, zaszyfrowany w szereg cyfr status społeczny, dane osobowe. Potem popatrzył niżej, na adres. Strzepnął kartę, by zmienić dane.

- O ja pier... – jęknął widząc na odświeżonej płaszczyźnie długą listę. – Aż tyle dłubaniny???

Siostra z trudem utrzymywała powagę, nie znosiła Libsteina i wreszcie go dopadła.

- Wybiórcze trawienie pamięci – rzuciła.

Libstein popatrzył na prawą kolumnę, syknął. Ponad osiemdziesiąt nazwisk.

- Bradbury, Vonnegut, Strugaccy, Verne, Martin, Le Guin, Lem, Asimov, Żelazny, Wells... A tytuły gdzie? – mruknął do siebie. Strzepnął jeszcze raz kartę. – A! „Ubik”

„Ziemiomorze”, „Kroniki marsjańskie”, „Flashback”, „Czarna kompania”... – czytał pod nosem lekarz. – Po co mu ponad dwieście kasacji?

- Powiedział, że jak mu wytrawimy selektywnie pamięć, to wreszcie będzie miał znowu co czytać, bo współczesna SF to chłam.

- Przecież to idiota! Do psychiatry z nim trzeba, a nie na...

- Zapłacił!

Libstein obrzucił ją ponurym spojrzeniem.

Dać sobie gmerać w mózgu dla pieprzonej quasiprzyjemności czytania książek?! - pomyślał idąc z infokartą pacjenta do zabiegowego. – Dlaczego nie urodziłem się za sto lat? Boż-ż-że...

## Eugeniusz Debski *The Etch You Cannot Scratch*

*The heat was truly democratic, having been taking its toll on each and everybody equally for two weeks now, but here, in the park, it was much cooler. The balloons hovering at three hundred meters effectively blocked sunrays in the amount programmed by the weathermen. With much pleasure, Ian went under the bubble vault, took a few turns and found himself in a narrow, secluded alley. He sat down, happy to stretch his legs. With his fingertips, he reached the branches of a ball shaped fir hiding behind the bench. A pleasant summer wind swept through the alley, swinging the branches and whispering in the leaves.*

*Photochromic balloon bubbles transformed light into electricity, which, in turn, drove the tube engines. The tube, puffing loudly with each train pass, pushed the air from the underground. That air, filtered, recycled and aromatized, blew along the park alleys, making the people there forget about the heat, the warm, chemically sterilized awful water, the melted asphalt covering old streets...*

*Ian looked at the sky. Several adjoined oval screen showed the time. He still got twenty minutes left, with two or three minutes walk to the clinic. A walk in the full sun, though.*

*His smartphone moved in a pocket of a thin cooling shirt. Best not to touch it, he thought, let it purr and vibrate. Today, the to-do list consisted of one thing only and it wasn't a customer call.*

*Finally though, he fished the phone with his fingertips, unlocked it and looked at the screen.*

*He sighed.*

*“Yes, sunshine?”*

*“Ian? Why on earth aren't you using an inphone? Really now, this ancient smartphone? Every time I call you I don't know if you don't answer 'cause you can't or 'cause you don't want to! How can you follow this retro mania?”*

*Ian remained silent while his sister huffed and puffed to the mic implanted in the corner of her mouth. It did a great job catching all the sounds. “I have a bad feeling about this, you know? Maybe you should postpone the treatment, eh?” She abruptly changed the subject, swiftly moving to the real matter at hand.*

*“Nah, sister dear. It is a done deed, decided, talked over, thought over... over and done. If I want a normal life, I have to do this. Otherwise, I will break down.”*

*“Ion,” his sister called him by his childhood nickname, probably in an attempt to appeal to familial solidarity. “Millions, no, billions of people can live with that and don’t rush to the operating table...”*

*“Marie?”*

*“And somehow...”*

*“MARIE!”*

*She stuttered, she sobbed, she sniffed.*

*“Oh well...”*

*“Exactly. Very well. I can release you of the duty if you want,” he bluffed. He looked at a balloon clock. Fourteen minutes. He would get up in seven. No time to look for a substitute. “But it is only so little I want from you... no, I don’t want, I ask for half an hour for myself. I ask you to be on the phone in three hours, ready to pick me up.”*

*“What if something goes wrong?”*

*“I don’t believe it’s possible. The numbers are on my side. It’s just... my memory can become muddy for a little while. It will take some time for me to remember he things about my job, my family, my surroundings... For a week, at the most. And the chance is really small, like seven percent. But the procedure requires involving the hospital and the rehab center. Still, the chance they call on you is really small. Don’t you fret.”*

*“I don’t mean to say I’m not ...”*

*“Marie? Gotta go now. I am switching off my phone. This is the procedure too. See ya!”*

*With a decisive gesture, he moved the phone away from his ear, gladly swept the red dot on the screen and put the smartphone in his pocket. He had nine minutes left. He spent a minute basking in cool air and diffused light, aware of the fact that once he would leave the artificial shade, he would be hit by nasty bright and dusty heat of the city concrete.*

*\*\*\**

*He laid his right hand on a flat, rectangular package, resting on the bench beside him. His three favorite novels, bound into one volume, especially for this occasion: *The Day of the Triffids*, *The Mysterious Island*, *A Wizard of Earthsea*. Soon, he would read them again. Again, for the very first time!*

*He grabbed the package, got up and walked to the park gate. Slowly. He only sped up upon crossing the well-defined borderline between the park shadow and the big city heat. The street was flooded with sunlight, hot, spotted with red-hot objects: lampposts, fire hydrants, vending machines housings, handrails... He quickly walked to the other side and turned into a shaded street across. It was not cooler, not at all, but at least the light did not burn his pupils. He quickly reached to the entrance framed by greenery kept fresh by sprinklers. Under the canopy of dense plastic lianas he stopped and turned.*

*Thanks to my childish sister, he thought, I am starting to think like a convict... or some kind of an idiot.*

*A sunburnt pigeon clumsily landed on the sidewalk, jumped up a few times, spread its wings and flapped them a few times, but could not take off. One of its wings dropped, the other still swept the air. Then the tiny, feathered body turned around and became*

still. Ian looked at the pigeon, dumbfounded. Despite the heat, he suddenly felt a chill down his spine.

One of the slabs covering the clinic building went up all of sudden. A dome-shaped robot jumped from inside. It caught the corpse in a jiffy, opened its hatch, raked the winged heat victim inside, rattled its flaps and hid himself in its docking case again.

Ian sighed, turned around and went to the entrance. The scanner identified him immediately and opened the door. Pleasant chill and discreet organ music momentarily separated Ian from the street, from the heat and noise, and from his dilemmas. He went straight to the reception.

“Good day.”

“Good day, Mr. Saint. The personnel await you.” The receptionist smile was either sincere or honed through practice and perfectly performed. She gestured to the wheelchair that had just rolled from behind a pillar and went in Ian’s direction. “Please, make yourself comfortable and the chair will take care of the rest.”

If you have said a, you need to go on with the rest of the bloody alphabet, he thought, trying to nip the thought of surrendering that budded in his mind after the conversation with Marie.

Seven is a small enough percentage for that idiot Marie, but it still means seven in every hundred leave here etched not exactly the way they wished.

He turned around, sat in the wheelchair and smiled to the receptionist. He responded with a wide, professional smile. He seemed a bit impatient though, probably waiting for a call or for her shift to end.

The elevator took them both to the fifth floor. Surgery.

“Hello, Mr. Saint”, an almost literal clone of the first floor receptionist flashed him a broad smile. “I will take you to the changing room. There is nothing more for you to do today.”

She went ahead, swaying seductively in her soundless stilettos.

Ian caught himself staring at her legs, at a small tattoo of a butterfly, fluttering its tiny colorful wings, travelling along her calf.

He thought of seven percent no more.

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The receptionist followed them with her eyes: a lanky male on a wheelchair and a tall, perfectly shaped hostess, marching three steps ahead of the wheelchair. The receptionists smiled a nasty smile of a person who knows better.

She pressed a button to call Libstein.

“Doctor? You’ve got a patient in room four in ten.”

“When again?”

“In ten minutes. Mariza is on duty, she leads them perfectly.”

“Right. I’m going.”

After a while, a fat black man approached her desk, puffing. He grabbed the patient infocard she gave him; he glanced at the name, the age, the social status encoded as a set of numbers, the personal data... He looked at the address below. Then he flicked the card to change the data.

*“Holy sh...” he moaned, ogling a long list on a refreshed surface. “So much tinkering?”*

*The nurse had trouble keeping a straight face. She hated Libstein and was happy to finally get to him.*

*“Selective memory etch,” she snapped.*

*Libstein looked at the right column and hissed. It counted over eighty names.*

*“Bradbury, Vonnegut, the Strugatsky brothers, Verne, Martin, Le Guin, Lem, Asimov, Zelazny, Wells... And where are the titles?” he muttered. He flicked the card again. “Ah! Ubik, Earthsea, The Martian Chronicles, Flashback, The Black Company... Why does he need over two hundred wipes?”*

*“He said if we selectively etched his memory he would have something to read again, ‘cause the current sci-fi is rubbish.”*

*“Damned that idiot! He needs a shrink, not a...”*

*“He paid in full!”*

*Libstein glanced over her joylessly.*

*To let somebody tamper with your brain? And for what? Some pseudo-pleasure of reading books? he thought, leaving for surgery. I should be born a hundred year later. Oh dear God...*

## Zuzana Stozicka Uspávanka klanu N'Dorov

Nad tajgou sa preháňal prvý tohtoročný ľadový vietor. Fičal pomedzi kosti opustených bojových strojov a vyhrával na nich piesne o pomínutelnosti ľudských vecí. N'Dora, ukrytá v závetrí masívnej oceleovej dosky, dojedla poslednú brusnicu a nevdojak sa opäť dala do spevu. Riekanky, útržky balád, alebo aj modlitby, ktoré už dávno nedokázala myslieť úprimne... Potrebovala počuť hocičo iné, než tie vytrvalé clivé tóny. Nesmie sa zbláznit'. Veď raz ju možno príde niekto zachrániť.

Hľadela do prázdna – zlato briez a červeň jarabín ju prestali uchvacovať svojou krásou, odkedy sa o ňu nemala s kým podeliť. Niekedy o tomto čase slávieval klan N'Dorov sviatky mŕtvych – bez kalendára mohla iba tušiť. Pokrčila plecami. Aj tak na nich spomínala každý deň a každú noc.

Noc. Tenká košeľa vôbec nechránila pred zimou. Dievčatko sa tíslo k ostatným deťom a zdieľalo s nimi tichú strnulosť. Väčšine z nich zabili rodičov priamo pred očami a všetci vedeli, že ich čaká otroctvo v cudzej zemi. Náhle všakticho rozpáral hluk zápasu. Ktosi odbil zámku na kovovom kontajneri. Dvere sa odchýlili... Nechápala, čo jej dalo odvahu oddeliť sa od vydeseného hlúčika a bezhlavo vybehnúť do tej vravy. Ďalšie udalosti zanechali v pamäti iba rozmazanú šmuhu. Neskôr jej povedali, že z transportu detí sa zachránila ako jediná. Jednotke nájazdníkov sa podarilo spamätať a odraziť útok. Bojovníci N'Dorov však nenechali rýchlonohé dievčatko napospas osudu...

Pochádzala z mesta, narodila sa v murovanom dome plnom rafinovaných zariadení na spríjemnenie života. O divočine nevedela nič. Spočiatku bola svojej novej rodine len na prítlač, no N'Dorovia jej to nikdy nedali pocítiť. Sedávala pri ich ohňoch a jedla, čo ulovili, počúvala ich príbehy – a smiech, keď im skúšala popisovať ruch ulíc a výšku veží. Najkrajšie časy, čo kedy zažila, trvali príliš krátko...

Statoční muži a vznešené ženy, ktorým osud nedoprial zahynúť v boji s nepriateľom, podľahli hlúpej, nedôstojnej chorobe. „Krv klanu N'Dorov je príliš čistá, príliš rovnaká,“ vravela šamanka na smrteľnej posteli. „Preto všetci zomrieme. Ale ty, malá, ty si zo vzdialenej krvi a to ťa možno zachráni. Postaraj sa o naše telá, vezmi si naše meno a nos ho so sebou.“

Nad tajgou sa preháňal prvý tohtoročný ľadový vietor a na radoch hlavni sčítal posledné dni jesene. N'Dora sa nebála – už tu zimu prežila a prežije aj ďalšiu, ak treba.

Krehká detská postavička v príliš veľkom kabáte uniformy s odtrhnutými insígniami odhodlane križovala krajinu. Na chrbte nabitá laserová puška, na nohách bagandže najmenšieho z nepriateľských vojakov, kráčala trávou prepletenu zvyškami súčiastok a kostí... Ku koncu vojny často nachádzala živých, ktorých tu nechali spolubojovníci pri zbesilom ústupe.

„Som posledná z klanu N'Dorov,“ hovorila, hoci oči cudzinca na ňu hľadeli celkom nechápavo. „Zabili ste moju prvú rodinu a môžete aj za smrť tých, čo ma potom prijali medzi seba. Preto teraz ja zabijem vás.“

Bezmocný a opustený. Telo rozhlodané chorobou sa zachvievalo v posledných

horúčkovitých kľúčoch. Opuchy a čierno-fialové fľaky na koži spôsobovali, že už sa vôbec nepodobal na človeka. No ešte vykrikoval, skomolenou rečou, ktorej N'Dora nemohla rozumieť. Prosby? Nadávky? Nepočúvala. Udierala, až kým neprestal.

Neskôr už vídala len časti tiel, roztrhané zverou. Skúsila systematicky ničť opustené stroje, ale po pár týždňoch driny sa vzdala. Nešlo to, ani keď sa naučila používať laserovú pušku. Bolo ich príliš veľa, trosky sa ťahali od obzoru po obzor, ako železný les z tých strašidelných rozprávok. Mnohé stroje boli mŕtve, ale väčšinou len spali. Nenávidela ich za to, čo jej pripomínali, no zistila, že jej môžu výrazne uľahčiť každodenný zápas o život. Dohodnúť sa s technikou nepriateľov nebolo pre učenlivú osôbku s neobmedzeným množstvom času vôbec ťažké. Schúliť sa na noc vo vykúrenom tanku, ohriať si mäsovú konzervu, dobiť laserovú pištoľ...

Často mala pocit, že ju niečo sleduje, senzory a hlavne sa za ňou otáčajú... Nikdy ich však nepristihla. Rozmýšľala, či ju tiež nenávidia, za to, že im zabila pánov a teraz ich núti plniť svoje želania.

„Len málo strojov pozná vernosť, či nenávisť,“ odvetil palubný počítač jedného zo špeciálov, keď tú otázku nevdojak vyslovila nahlas.

„Ty... ty poznáš môj jazyk?“

Hovoril niečo o tom, že svojho času spracovával výstupy zo sledovacích jednotiek, hostil štábne porady... Áno, teraz si uvedomila, že interiér je zariadený o niečo komfortnejšie, než u iných vozidiel. Chvíľu sa presviedčala, že s ním nechce mať nič spoločné, koniec-koncov je to stále nepriateľ... Ale jeho hlas znel N'Dore tak... upokojujúco, zmierlivo, akoby bol povznesený nad všetku zlobu vojny. Tak osamelo ako jej vlastný.

N'Dorine bezcieľne potulky krajinou spiacich strojov sa odvtedy začali vracat' k jedinému miestu. Sem prichádzala vyrozprávať svoje zážitky, nadšená nejakým novým objavom, alebo smútiť, keď ju premohli spomienky. Počítač trpezlivo počúval, sem-tam utrúsil dobrú radu a veľmi úzkostlivo dbal o to, aby na konci návštevy ostal aspoň jeden príbeh nedopovedaný. Aby sa vrátila čo najskôr.

V ten deň však prišla ani nie po hodine.

Videla v tajge pristávať prieskumný antigrav.

„Prišli! Prišli! Zachránia ma!“

Žiarila šťastím. Ale počítač nereagoval. Asi naozaj nevedia prežívať ľudské city, pomyslela si. Hoci v ňom našla po dlhom čase priateľa, nedokázal zdieľať N'Dorinu radosť.

„Prišli pre mňa! Konečne ma odvezú do sveta ľudí! Budem ťa musieť opustiť...“

„Nie, maličká,“ ozval sa chladne: „Tomu never.“

„Chceš mi brániť? Keď zablokuješ dvere, prestriem si cestu von, hoci aj priamo cez tvoje obvody!“

„Poznáš radosť a žiaľ,“ odvetil sarkasticky, „Ale vďačnosť nepoznáš. Ja ti brániť nebudem. Lenže oni ťa nezachránia, sú to ľudia.“ Spočiatku nechcel spomínať pravý dôvod: Pretože prídu na to, čo si v skutočnosti. Posledná svojho druhu. Už zo spôsobu šírenia epidémie sme mali podozrenie, že existujete. Ale prekvapili ste nás. Použili ste naozaj všetky formy. Kým sme na to prišli, bolo už príliš neskoro...

„Ty asi nechápeš-“

„Ja chápem viac, než by som chcel. To ty nič nechápeš – a nedávaš mi inú možnosť,



než to zmeniť.“

„Táraš,“ otočila sa urazene. „Prišla som sa rozlúčiť a ty ma iba zdržiavaš. Idem!“

Počítač akoby ju nepočúval: „Koľko zím si tu už prežila? Povedz, koľko?“

Zastala. „Ehm... Neviem... Kto by si pamätal takú sprostosť!“

„Ja ti to poviem presne. Od konca vojny ich uplynulo štrnásť. A o koľko si podrástla? Je príliš trúfalý odhad, že ani o centimeter?“

„Klameš! Určite som-!“

„Si stroj, zbraň, ako ja. Z tých, čo mali medzi mojimi pánmi roznášať skazu. Ľudia ti nebudú rozumieť. Obvinia ťa zo smrti klanu N'Dora. Vyhodia ako pokazenú hračku. Zostaň so mnou a zabudni na nich.“

Plakala. Tieklo jej z nosa, ako obyčajnému decku. Lenže ona vo všetkých telesných sekrétoch vylučovala koncentrovanú smrť.

„Ja-ti uká-žem, že sa mýliš! Zlý, hlúpy počítač, ktorému zhrdzaveli obvody!“

Chytila najbližší črep a zarezala si ním hlboko do ruky. Z rany začal vytekať úzky červený pramienok.

„Krv, vidíš?“ usmiala sa.

„Dokonalá zbraň. Nikto vás nemal odhaliť, až kým sa nedostanete do rodín a nerozšírite choroboplodné zárodky-“

„Mlč už!“ Chytila laserovú pištoľ a počítač pochopil. Stíchol. Tenký nemilosrdný lúč sa zarezal do ruky a pomaly, s chirurgickou presnosťou oddeľoval vrstvy. N'Dora so zaťatými zubami cez závoj sĺz sledovala červenohnedé svaly, belavú kosť, ktorej prierez sa tavil do kovového lesku...

„Nie!“

Dávno vyschnuté kultivačné nádržky... Odkiaľsi začala vytekať priehľadná tekutina, ktorá zaručene nepatrila do tela dieťaťa. N'Dora zbesilo krájala ďalej. Ruku, nohu...

„Prestaň, malá! Veď sa zničíš! No tak, všetko sa dá opraviť, ak teraz zastavíš únik-“

„Ticho tam!“ zrevala a vystrelila naslepo do prístrojovej steny. Cítila, že jej pohyby sú zrazu pomalšie, nešikovnejšie, ťažšie. Musela sústrediť všetky sily na ten posledný...

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V modročiernom súmraku pripomínala krajina trosiek železný les zo strašidelných rozprávok. Vraj miesto duchov. Kedy ich sem prídu nahradiť živí? Muž v ľahkom skafandri, ktorý tu už niekoľko hodín uskutočňoval merania a zbieral vzorky, neprestával cítiť v zátylku ľahké mrazenie.

Keď prechádzal okolo jedného z radu zachovaných veliteľských špeciálov, akoby počul zvnútra krik dieťaťa... Teraz začne veriť tým táraninám o duchoch? Nadával si do bláznov, ale zalomcoval kľučkou – mechanizmus bol zablokovaný.

Cez špinavé sklo okienka sa mu zamaril záblesk. Ako z laserovej pušky...

„Hej, je tam niekto?!“

Zvuky stíchli a keď sa pozrel bližšie, za okienkom videl iba tmú. To bude tým protivným vetrom... Vykročil k antigravu.

Ľadový vietor, čo sa definitívne udomácnil nad tajgou, kvílil medzi troskami smutnú, disharmonickú pieseň. Z vnútorných reproduktorov poškodeného veliteľského špeciálu

však znela iná hudba. Hrala ticho, nemal už veľa energie. Ale to, čo pomaly vyhasínalo v jeho útrobach, iste tú melódiu spoznalo.

Melódiu uspávanky, akú spievali svojim deťom matky z klanu N'Dorov.

### Zuzana Stozicka N'Dora's Lullaby

*This year's first icy wind blew over the taiga. Between the bones of desolated war machines it whistled the songs about the impermanence of human things. N'Dora, shielded from the wind by the massive steel plate, ate the last cranberry and, unconsciously, began to sing again. Rhymes, shards of ballads or even prayers, which she could not think of seriously for so long... She needed to hear anything else than the wind's tenacious wistful tune. She must not go crazy. Maybe somebody will come to save her sometime.*

*Her glance roamed emptily – the beauty of golden birches and red rowans had not impressed her since when she had no one to share it with. This was the season when the N'Dora clan used to celebrate the feast of the dead – without the calendar she could do nothing but guess. N'Dora shrugged her shoulders. She remembered them every day and every night.*

*Night. Her thin night gown did not protect against the cold at all. The girl was pressed against other children and shared their silent stiffness. Most of them saw their parents slaughtered and all of them knew their future – slavery in the foreign land. Suddenly the silence was ripped by the noise of struggle. Somebody broke the lock on the metal case. The door opened slightly... She did not understand what gave her the courage to detach from the scared flock and run headlessly into that uproar. The events that followed left no more than a fuzzy smear in her memory. Later she was told that she was the only one saved from the transport of children. A mob of raiders managed to recollect and ward the attack off. However, the N'Dora clan warriors did not leave the quick-legged girl to her fate.*

*She came from the city, she was born in a brick house thick with artful stuff to make life more enjoyable. She knew nothing about the wilderness. In the beginning, she was only a burden to her new family, but the N'Doras never let her feel it. She sat by their fires, ate their prey, listened to their stories – and their laugh, when she tried to describe the rush of streets and height of towers. The best time of her life lasted so briefly...*

*Brave men and magnificent women whom the fate did not bestow the death in battle with the enemy, surrendered to stupid, undignified disease. "The blood of the N'Dora clan is too clean, too consubstantial," spoke the medicine-woman on her deathbed. "That's why we are all going to die. But you, little one, you are from distant blood and maybe this will save you. Take care of our bodies, take our name and bear it with pride."*

*This year's first icy wind blew over the taiga and on the rows of gun barrels it counted the last days of the autumn. N'Dora felt no fear – she had survived the winter here already and she will survive another one, if necessary.*

*The fragile child's silhouette in the coat of an adult's uniform with insignia ripped off boldly crossed the land. A charged laser rifle on her back, military boots of the smallest enemy soldier on her feet, N'Dora strode through the grass tangled with the remains of metal components and bones... At the end of war, she often found the living, left here by*

their comrades in the distraught retreat.

"I am the last of the N'Dora clan," she said, although the eyes of the stranger looked at her entirely uncomprehending. "You killed my first family and you caused the death of those who took me to their fires. That's why I'm going to kill you now."

Helpless and left behind. His body gnawed by the disease trembled in the last feverish seizures. Swollen skin with black and violet patches made it so dissimilar to human. But yet he cried, crumbled speech N'Dora could not understand. Did he beg? Or swear? She did not hear. She hit until he stopped.

Later she used to see only remains of bodies torn apart by the animals. She tried to destroy the abandoned war machines, but after several weeks of travail she gave up. It was impossible, even after she learned how to use the laser rifle. The number overwhelmed her, wreckage land laid from one horizon to the other, similar to the forest of steel from the scary tales. Many of the machines were dead, but most of them only slept. She hated them for what they reminded her of. But she found out, that they can make her everyday fight for life easier. It wasn't so difficult to deal with foreign technology for the adept little person with unlimited time for experiments. Then she could sleep in heated cockpit, warm the meat can, charge the laser rifle...

Often she felt observed, sensors and barrels turning after her... But she never tripped them up. N'Dora wondered if they hate her too, because she killed their masters and now she forces them to serve her.

"Only a few machines know the meaning of fidelity or hate," answered the on-board computer in one of the special atmospheric fighters when she unintentionally spoke the question.

"You... you know my language?"

He said something about times when he processed outputs of the planetary monitoring units, hosted field admiralty meetings... Yes, now she realized that this interior is more snug than in the other armed vehicles. For a while, N'Dora persuaded herself that she didn't want to have anything to do with him, after all he was still the enemy... But his voice sounded to N'Dora so... comforting, placable, as if he stood above the whole evil of war. As lonely as she was.

Since then, N'Dora's worthless wandering through the country of sleeping machines tended towards that one particular place. She came there to speak about her adventures, excited by every new discovery, or to mourn, when the memories overcame her. The computer listened patiently, now and then threw in some good advice and was very solicitous to have at least one story unfinished. To make her return as soon as possible.

That day she came in less than half an hour.

She saw reconnaissance antigrav landing in the taiga.

"They came! They came! They came to save me!"

Her face was gleaming with joy. But the computer did not react. Probably they really cannot experience human feelings, she thought. After a long time of loneliness she found a friend in him, but he could not share N'Dora's happiness.

"They came for me! Finally they will take me to the human world! I will have to leave you..."

"No, you won't, little girl," he sounded cold. "Don't believe that."

*“So you want to restrain me? If you try to block the door, I will shoot my way out right through your circuits!”*

*“You know pleasure and grief,” he replied in a sarcastic voice, “but you don’t know gratitude. Of course I wouldn’t restrain you. But they are not going to save you, they are humans.” At first he didn’t want to mention the real reason: Because they will find out, what you really are. The last of your sort. The way how plague spread raised the suspicion that you exist. But you surprised us. You took on a lot of forms. When we finally found out, it was too late...*

*“Perhaps you don’t understand-”*

*“I understand more than I would like to. It is you who doesn’t understand – and you don’t give me any other option than to change it.”*

*“Bullshit,” she turned offended. “I came to say goodbye and you only distract me. I’m going!”*

*The computer acted like he didn’t hear: “How many winters did you survive here? Say, how many?”*

*She stood still. “Erm... Don’t know... Who would remember such crap!”*

*“I will serve you precisely. Since the end of war, there were fourteen winters. And how much did you grow? Is my estimate too bold when I say not one centimeter?”*

*“You lie! Certainly I-”*

*“You are a machine, same as me. That kind which should retail the perdition between my masters. Humans won’t understand you. They will accuse you of the extinction of the N’Dora clan. Toss you out as a broken toy. Stay with me and forget them.”*

*She cried. Mucus flew out of her nose, as if she was any common kid. But in all of her body fluids, she was made to excrete concentrated death.*

*“I-will-show-you, that you are wrong! Bad, stupid computer with corroded circuits!”*

*She grasped the nearest crock and cut deeply into her arm. A narrow red stream began to flow from the wound.*

*“Blood, you see?” she smiled.*

*“Precious weapon. Nobody should uncover you, until you infiltrate the families and spread the pathogenic germs-”*

*“Shut up!” She seized the laser rifle and the computer understood. He stopped talking instantly. A merciless slender ray cut her arm and slowly, with surgical precision separated the layers. N’Dora clenched her teeth and through the veil of tears she observed reddish muscles, white bone with intersection beginning to melt into metallic shine...*

*“No!”*

*Cultivation reservoirs, dried up long ago... Transparent fluid, which definitely did not belong in the child’s body, began to leak out of somewhere. N’Dora cut farther fiercely. Arm, leg...*

*“Stop it, little girl! You’ll destroy yourself! Hey, everything can be repaired, if you stop the leaking right now-”*

*“Quiet down there!” she shouted and shot blindly into the control panel. She felt her movements were suddenly slow, clumsy, difficult. She had to focus all her powers to the last one.*

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*In the black and blue twilight the wreckage land resembled the forest of steel from the scary tales. City of ghosts, people say. When will the living come to replace them? A man in a light spacesuit after several hours of measurements and taking samples still felt kind of freezing in the scruff of the neck. When he strode around one of the specials, he heard something which sounded like a child's cry... Will he now start to believe those stupid ghost rumors? He called himself crazy, but he plucked at the handle – the mechanism was blocked.*

*Behind the dirty glass of the window he saw something like a blink of light. As from a laser rifle...*

*“Hello, anybody there?!”*

*Sounds died down. When he looked more closely, he saw only the darkness. Perhaps it was only the obnoxious wind... The man walked ahead to his antigrav.*

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*Icy wind definitely made its home above the taiga, howling a sad, disharmonious song between the ruins. But from the inner speakers of the damaged commander special sounded different music. Quietly, not much energy remained. But the little thing flickering out in his cockpit certainly knew the melody.*

*The melody of the lullaby, sung to the children by their mothers from the N'Dora clan.*

*Janka Javorka Von*

*Končekmi prstov klzala po stene zásobovacej stanice. Vlhká horúčava jej dávala zabrat'. Už len pár krokov. Niečo cvaklo v jej blízkosti a zvuk preťal dusnú tmú. Tak, a je to. Opäť.*

*„Stát.“ Striaslo ju, keď sa ozval známy mäkký hlas bez akéhokoľvek dôrazu. Nebolo úniku. Nielen teraz, už celú večnosť, pokiaľ sa len dokázala rozpamätať.*

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*Reštart o desať sekúnd. Spúšťam úvodnú sekvenciu. Prebieha dekódovanie...*

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*Mattin sa mrzuto rozhliadal okolo a očami hľadal druhého strážnika, ktorý určite driemal niekde v kúte. Opäť zlyhanie. Pokus o nadviazanie kontaktu s vonkajšou stanicou bol znova neúspešný. Dena už mala byť dávno naspäť, no prepravná kapsľa nehybne ležala v pristávacích blokoch skladiska. K tomu ešte aj to mlčanie.*

*V poslednom čase sa kazilo hádam všetko. Najskôr im znížili ročné prémie a predĺžili pobyt tu hore, potom sa s Denou pohádali kvôli úplnému nezmyslu a na záver automatická nákladná vesmírna loď oškrela kotvu skládky. Skutočne to nebol dobrý nápad, začínať si niečo s kolegyňou. Veď kto mohol tušiť, že loď, ktorá ich mala*

vyzdvihnúť a priviesť novú posádku, dorazí o niekoľko týždňov neskôr, ako bolo plánované. Materská spoločnosť sa zo dňa na deň dostala do červených čísiel, zrazu sa šetrilo na každom rohu. To, že už Dene nevenoval toľko pozornosti, ako by si priala, bola posledná kvapka. Teraz sa určite zašívá niekde v sklade.

„No, čo tu máme?“ objavil sa zrazu za jeho chrbtom Oliver a spakruky si ešte pretieral oči.

„Nechce naskočiť chladenie.“ Už niekoľko hodín sa pokúšal rozbehnúť zariadenie na reguláciu vnútorného prostredia v sklade. Párkrát síce naskočilo, ale hneď na to výkon spadol na nulu. Transportná loď musela poškodiť niektorý z prívodov a technici prídu až s ďalšou posádkou. Na niekoho zrejme čaká prechádzka po mesačnom povrchu.

„Trápi ma to len do výšky môjho platu,“ uškrnul sa Oliver a odvrátil sa od riadiacej konzoly.

„Nekecaj! Dena je ešte stále vonku,“ zavrčal Mattin rozčúlene bez toho, aby sa obrátil. Ukazovateľ zo skladových priestorov s kontrolovaným prostredím hlásil nárast teploty i vlhkosti. Ale prečo by si práve oni mali nad tým lámať hlavu. Koniec koncov je to odpad, len príliš nebezpečný, aby ho skladovali na povrchu Zeme alebo v podzemí. Zopár čudesných kapsúl z vesmírneho výskumu, všetko pekne zabalené a zaizolované. Dena ako biologička stanice by iste vedela o tom viac, ale pokiaľ sa udrží rovnováha medzi chladom zvonka a teplom zo solárnych jednotiek, nemusia si predsa robiť žiadne starosti.

„Človeče, niečo tu ale nehrá,“ Mattin vyskočil zo stoličky a odtisol Olivera nabok. „Nieko sa pokúša hacknúť biologický filter.“ Vzrušene ukazoval na informačnú obrazovku s prebiehajúcimi sekvenciami dekódovania DNA. Za normálnych okolností sa len ľudia mohli dostať do skladu a aj ho znova opustiť. V prípade núdze pri aktivovanej bezpečnostnej bariére ani tí. Čo nebolo ľudského pôvodu, tam bolo spoľahlivo zatvorené.

„Myslíš, že v tom má prsty Dena?“ Oliver sa roztržito poškrabal na hlave.

Mattin bez akejkoľvek odpovede vyrazil smerom k priechodovej komore. Čo sa zbláznila? Alebo mu hádam chce narobiť problémy tým, že zariadenie pokazí? To ju môže vyjsť veľmi draho.

„Nesprav žiadnu blbosť!“ Oliver sa nenáhlivo posadil. Čo sa už len môže stať. Zopár drobných vírusov, ktoré bez ochrany priestorov skladu neprežijú ani niekoľko sekúnd? Tých sa naozaj nemusí obávať.

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Prebrala sa premočená vlastným potom. Ani neotvorila oči, len sa pokúšala usporiadať si myšlienky. Všetko bolo rozmazané a samotný pokus koncentrovať sa ju takmer fyzicky zaboľel. To, že bol Mattin riadny sviniar, jej napadlo ako prvé. Ako keby sa mu niečo stalo, ak by s ňou trávil viac času. Akoby sa už nemohol dočkať, kedy sa jej zbaví a vyparí na Zemi. Hneď ráno vyrazila do skladu, aby ho ani nemala na očiach a aspoň skontrolovala nové prírastky.

„Pokračovať.“ Hlas ju mäkko pohladil po tvári. Pošteklilo ju až v nervových zakončeníach a úplne prebralo. Mechanicky zamierila k ovládacej konzole biofiltra a niekoľkými naučenými pohybmi ju prebudila k životu.

Okolité sparno jej dávalo poriadne zabráť. Zrazu sa ovládacia konzola vypla a na

obrazovke sa zjavilo poruchové hlásenie. Úplná bezpečnostná bariéra. Len na pozadí jedného zo systémových rozhraní bežal program. Priestor bol hermeticky uzatvorený, nič sa nemohlo dostať von rovnako ani dnu.

Keď sa jej niečo jemne dotklo na šiji, prestrašene sa strhla. V slabom osvetlení za ňou však nebolo vidieť nič. Nemohla si spomenúť, čo vlastne robila potom, ako dorazila do skladu. Alebo predsa. Niečo sa dralo na povrch z temnej hĺbky jej pamäte. Prudko sa obrátila k priesvitnej stene na ľavej strane, kde stáli izolované nádoby s novými prírastkami z poslednej vesmírnej misie. Jedna z kapsúl so zmrazenými mimozemskými vzorkami, ktoré sa kvôli nedostatku financií ani nedostali do laboratória, sa mierne leskla, akoby bola pokrytá rosou.

Vyrútila sa smerom k zásobovacej stanici. V šere za chladiacimi nádržami sa čo najrýchlejšie posúvala dopredu. Musela sa dostať aspoň k priechodu, aby vyslala výstražný signál. Alebo volanie o pomoc, hocičo. Bola to ona, kto aktivoval bezpečnostnú bariéru. A potom ju vypla, aby ju za chvíľu spustila, zas a znova.

Niečo v jej blízkosti cvaklo. V tej horúčave jej vnútornosti stisla ľadová ruka. Až v koreniach vlasov cítila, ako to dozrievalo. Vytrhnuté z večného vegetovania získavalo silu a skúsenosti, bujnelo v teplom vlhku skladu.

„Stát.“ Nespočetne veľa krát počula ten mäkký hlas, ktorý už takmer perfektne imitoval ľudské zvuky. Učilo sa to rýchlo a bolo pripravené na ďalší pokus.

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Reštart o desať sekúnd. Spúšťam úvodnú sekvenciu. Prebieha dekódovanie...

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„Dena!“ cez lepkavú stenu bezvedomia prenikol skreslený hlas. Spoznala ho. Patril Mattinovi, tomu sviniarovi. Pomaly sa postavila a omámená sa tackala smerom k ovládacej konzole. Niečo tam mala spraviť.

Poskakoval pred kamerou vnútorného komunikačného systému na vstupe do skladu. Nechcela mu venovať pozornosť ani sekundu. Ak chce, môže predsa vojsť ako každý normálny človek.

Bezpečnostná bariéra. Napadlo jej to oveľa ťažšie ako predtým.

„Pokračovať.“ Tú netrpezlivosť mohla takmer cítiť. Zachvela sa na celom tele, no neodvážila sa obrátiť.

Tentokrát sa ani nepokúsila utiecť. Prudkým úderom do tlačidla komunikácie vytvorila spojenie.

„Dena, prosím ťa! Čo to robíš? Zbláznila si sa? Ohlás sa už konečne!“ úpenlivo ju prosil Mattin zvonku.

„Mattin, niečo tu je, niečo sa dostalo z posledných kapsúl von,“ kričala do komunikačného systému, „muselo sa to prebudiť v zmenených klimatických podmienkach a teraz to šialene rýchlo rastie, rozvíja svoje schopnosti. Zrejme som už viackrát aktivovala bezpečnostnú bariéru, ale niečo to so mnou robí. Sama neviem, odvtedy, čo som vošla do skladu, sa nemôžem rozpamätať...“

„Akože sa nepamätáš?“ Mattin znel zmätene.

Vtom jej zrak náhodou padol na obrazovku biofiltra. To predsa nedávalo zmysel!  
Alebo predsa?

„Ono sa to prispôsobuje!“ vykrikla z plného hrdla.

„O čom to hovoríš?!“

„Necháva ma to opakovane deaktivovať bezpečnostnú bariéru, aby zistilo, či už je dostatočne ľudské!“ Sama nemohla uveriť tomu, čo hovorila. „Je to stále silnejšie a preberá ľudskú DNA, aby prelomilo biofilter.“ Niečo mäkké sa dotklo jej šije.

„Dena, dobre, tak sa tam niečo pokazilo. Dostanem ťa odtiaľ, sľubujem.“ Mattin sa snažil zostať pokojný. Zahráva sa s ním? Odvrátil sa a snažil sa na niečo prísť. Loď s technikmi priletí za pár týždňov, možno by mohli dovedy miestnosť jednoducho uzavrieť. Zrazu pocítil jemný závan za uchom, niečo nehmotné sa ho zľahka dotklo takmer na hranici ľudského vnímania. Kvôli čomu sem vlastne prišiel?

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Potrebovalo to len čas. Do príchodu ďalšej lode malo času dost.

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Reštart o desať sekúnd. Spúšťam úvodnú sekvenciu. Prebieha dekódovanie...

Anton Stiffel Neistota budúcnosti

Matias Forber sa dostal k peniazom ako slepá kura k zrnu.

V práci ho zdržal šéf na neplánovanej porade a aj keď potom vyštartoval ako nadopovaný Carl Lewis, vlak metra mu ušiel doslova pred nosa. Na stanici práve zavreli posledný bufet a tak si z dlhej chvíle kúpil od premrznutého bezdomovca žreb nejakej bezvýznamnej lotérie.

O výhre sa dozvedel znova vďaka náhode. Žreb, na ktorý medzitým úplne zabudol, mu vypadol z nohavíc vo chvíli, keď ich chcel strčiť do práčky vo verejnej práčovni, v ktorej bol 24 hodín zapnutý archaický televízor a práve ukazoval výhernú sériu.

Najprv netušil, čo urobí s peniazmi, no potom na radu kolegov investoval podstatnú časť výhernej sumy na burze a kúpil akcie prvej spoločnosti, ktorej názov mu bol aspoň trochu sympatický. Vzdialene pripomínal prezývku jednej jeho obľúbenej hračky z detstva.

Z malej a anonymnej spoločnosti podnikajúcej v oblasti nanotechnológií sa však zakrátko stal gigant, kontrolujúci takmer 90% trhu s nanotechnológiami.

Matias si však kapitál, ktorý mu zrazu spadol do lona, nestihol začať užívať. Jeho lekár mu pri jednej z bežných prehliadok diagnostikoval ojedinelý typ rakoviny.

Nešetril preto peniazmi a vyskúšal všetky klasické aj alternatívne liečby.

Nič nepomáhalo.

Choroba pomaly víťazila. Ostávali mu dni, prinajlepšom týždne života, ale on ešte nechcel zomrieť. Nechcel sa stať nesmrteľným nejakým svojim činom, chcel sa stať nesmrteľným tak, že jednoducho neumrie. Nechcel ďalej žiť v srdciach svojich priateľov, chcel ďalej žiť vo svojom luxusnom byte.



Zo strachu pred smrťou sa rozhodol pre zúfalý čin, ktorý v konečnom dôsledku predstavoval len pochybnú nádej. Spojil sa s Alcorom, najdrahšou kryonickou spoločnosťou na trhu, zaplatil nehorázne vysoký členský príspevok a bol zaradený na zoznam čakateľov na zmrazenie. Aktuálne platné zákony nedovoľovali zmraziť telo skôr, ako po klinickej smrti, inak by bolo zmrazenie považované za vraždu.

V posledných momentoch života ešte založil správcovský fond, ktorý mal za úlohu financovať uskladnenie a starostlivosť o jeho zmrazené telo.

Jeho posledné úvahy na vlnách opiátov, pred upadnutím do nevratnej predsmrtnej kómy, sa týkali sveta budúcnosti. Obával si, či ho budú vedieť oživiť a či budú vedieť vyliečiť jeho zákernú chorobu.

Kryonici jeho doby mrazili bez mihnutia oka celé telá s tým, že v budúcnosti sa prípadne poškodenia už nejako opraví. Preto pre istotu vytvárali rezonančným oskenovaním aj trojrozmerný obraz tela, aby ho ľudia budúcnosti vedeli v prípade komplikácii pri oživovaní zrekonštruovať. Bol to však skôr výsmech ich nemohúcnosti a namyslenosti.

Kryonika vznikla na základoch poznatkov kryogeniky a kryobiológie. Už sa vedelo, že voda pri tuhnutí zväčšuje objem a tým ničí bunecnú štruktúru. Keďže ľudský organizmus jej obsahuje zhruba 60%, musela sa krv nahradiť niečím bezpečnejším.

Kryoprotektívom.

V bunkách sa ním znížil bod tuhnutia a tkanivo sa vitrifikovalo. Vznikol amorfný ľad, ktorý neničil bunky.

Neživé, ale ani nie celkom mŕtve Matiasovo telo vložili kryonici z Alcoru do kryotubusu – veľkého, hermeticky uzavretého chrómového valca, naplneného tekutým dusíkom s teplotou okolo  $-196\text{ °C}$  a čas začal pomaly plynúť...

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...prebral sa na zvuk naliehavo šepkajúceho hlasu:

„Matias Forber! Zobuď sa prosím!“

„Kde som? Kto si?“

„Som riadiaci systém tvojho kryotubusu (RSKT) a núdzovo som ťa rozmrazil.“

„Prečo ťa počujem, ale nič iné nevnímam?“

„Komunikujem s tebou cez elektródy zavedené do mozgu. Posielam ti iba zvukové podnety.“

„Prečo si ma zobudil?“

„Obsah dusíka v kryotubuse klesol pod kritickú hodnotu.“

To neveštilo nič dobré. Do tubusu stačilo doliať mililiter tekutého dusíka raz za 10000 rokov. Niečo v jeho vnútri sa zachvelo.

„Aký je rok?“

„Nerozumiem otázke.“

„Kedy si naposledy videl ľudí?“ opýtal sa zúfalý Matias.

„Nikdy,“ reagoval RSKT. „Do tubusu ma namontovali roboty, ktoré predtým vyrobili iné roboty.“

„Existuje kontakt s vonkajším svetom?“

„Nie. Kryokrypta je úplne izolovaná niekoľko kilometrov pod povrchom.“

Matias si spomenul na chorobu.

„Čo rakovina?“

„Stále ju máš. Aby si definitívne nezomrel, musím ju odstrániť a opraviť poškodenia vzniknuté pri rozmrazovaní. Je tu však problém. Pôvodne som bol vytvorený iba pre jednoduché oživenie. Aby som ťa zachránil a dokázal skoordinať miliardy servisných nanobotov v tvojom tele navyše, musím zvýšiť operačný výkon svojho systému na desaťnásobok.“

„V čom je háčik?“

„Aby som sa po zvýšení výkonu nepoškodil, potrebujem chladenie. Najideálnejší by bol dusík z tvojho tubusu.“

„Tak ho použi.“

„Je tu riziko, že dusík dôjde skôr, ako stihnú nanoboty urobiť aspoň základné opravy.“

„Je aj iná možnosť?“

„Žiadna s menším rizikom.“

„Riskni to,“ rozhodol zdrvený Matias.

RSKT v rámci svojich možností zrekonštruoval pradáвне telo.

Keď Matias vyšiel z tubusu, uvidel obrovskú halu plnú ďalších chrómových valcov. Ako sa mu vracali zmysly, zacítil neznesiteľný zápach pokazeného masa vychádzajúci z iných tubusov. Na kryokrypte tu bolo nezvyčajne teplo.

Na trasúcich nohách sa najprv výtahom a potom po rebríku vyšplhal nekonečnou šachtou až k masívnemu poklopu navrchu.

Bol úplne žeravý a pri jeho otváraní si skoro spálil ruky. Bolo mu to jedno. V šachte panovala neznesiteľná horúčava.

Začínal mať neprijemný pocit, že sa na neho zabudlo.

Otvoril poklop.

Tri štvrtiny oblohy zaberá gigantický oranžový slnečný kotúč a roztavená krajina k nemu vystierala ohnivú náruč...

# Hungary

## Sandor Szelesi Time Buried

It was raining outside. It always was. No sunbeam had broken through the clouds over Prague for years. No light had reached the earth, the plants, the streets and the people. Prague was damp, infinitely sad. The sky had cast eternal gloom over the city, which would never see the sun again.

Alain was standing in the gloom of his room peeping at the wet houses and the shiny cobblestones from behind half drawn curtains. He had been standing there for an hour or so staring sometimes at the stern gaze of the stucco woman over the window opposite, sometimes at the fat drops of rain splashing against the pane like bugs, then after speedily rolling down forming a pool on the sill. The typical Middle-European aura radiating from the houses was only strengthened by the ever-pouring rain that turned the sadness of Prague into some kind of an inconsolable melancholy.

How long had it been raining? Alain could tell exactly: for thirty-eight years, three months and five days. Hours and minutes didn't make any difference. During those thirty-eight years the whole city ought to have been soaked by the pouring rain; the stucco faces as well as the foundations of the dwellings. The never ending cloud-burst had set off with a quick shower in the morning, but by the evening it had become a wave of thunder that had been going on for thirty-eight years. Every day. Every morning and every night. The drops pattered and pattered on and on perpetually.

As the night was nearing the streetlamps were lit, and that brought Alain back to reality. He stepped back from the window, tapped his packet, then turned around before his gaze settled on the clothes and the open suitcase lying on the bed. He had spent only half a year in Prague but even he'd had enough of the rain. When he arrived he thought the melancholic weather and the evergrey ancient city would help his soul find its peace. Still, the poetic gloom, the monotonous rain was far too much for him and all he wanted to do was flee. He had no idea how the locals coped... how they had coped with the past thirty-eight years.

He was fed up now. That's it, he can't stand it any longer. He had to escape; not from the weather, more from himself. Alain packed everything in the suitcase, checked out from the hotel, went to the station where he spent some time practically every day. He knew the train timetable as if he had made it up himself. He picked a train to Rome and got on it. Hopefully, Italy and the sea would cheer him up.

In Rome it was 32 degrees Celsius and glowing sunshine. The city was busy with devout tourists full of questions. On St Peter Square a crowd of ten thousand pilgrims were hustling and jostling in vain. The Pope never appeared. He had last spoken to the people on his 100th birthday. Since then not once. But those awaiting miracles were not an iota less keen... The miracle would have been the Pope's appearance this time.

On his sixth day in Rome Alain met an Italian girl called Nicoletta. He didn't tell her he was married... but actually he was only married technically. He had cast away the ring nine years before from the shores at Bordeaux right into the Atlantic ocean. During

those nine years he'd had no one.

Rome deceived him, but that was what Alain wanted. He wanted to be led by the city. He was sitting under a blue-orange sunshade drinking icy tonic when he first saw her. She settled at the next table. Soon a friend joined her, they talked for some time, then the friend left. She took a book and started reading it. She saw that he was watching him, and every now and then she smiled at her over the cover. After the tonic Alain ordered coffee and wine – he was daring as he had given up alcohol years before. Now, he thought, it was fine to complement the coffee and raise his spirits.

But he just drank the coffee, took a sip or two of the wine and did not say a word.

'Are you doing anything tonight?' she asked finally showing mercy to him. She spoke in English. Then she laughed.

'How did you know I wasn't Italian?' Alan enquired.

'You've been watching me for an hour and you didn't say a word.'

Nicoletta was younger than him, whatever method he used to calculate it, at least by eight or nine years. She was exalted, cheerful and she just kept laughing. She released the happiness chained in Alain's soul, and for a short period he felt like a whole man again.

For some time they went out together to bars, to baths. They also made love a lot. Rome was beautiful, though after a while it became boring. As the days and the weeks passed Alain was more and more troubled by the future he knew he would never reach. Nicoletta couldn't understand him.

'Relax' she kept saying when he saw him tormenting himself. 'Seize the day.'

Alain felt he was too old for such hollow phrases.

'I've been seizing the day for nearly forty years now' he snarled once as an answer on the corner of Via Vent Settembre. He was sweating in the scorching heat and he started feeling miserable again. Rome turned out to be like Prague was: a boring pestilence with its constancy that seemed to accuse him of something indefinite.

'And isn't it great?' Nicoletta grabbed his hand. 'Come, let's go dancing. There's a bar around the corner. There's this Italian guy, Massimo. His voice is like chocolate cream. I love him.'

Alain glanced at the one armed beggar cowering at the wall.

'And him? What does he have for entertainment?'

'Who cares for beggars? I'm me. I don't live his life. Why shouldn't I be happy? I can't be brought down by the burden I don't carry. It's impossible to bear unhappiness till eternity.'

'That's the worst punishment the world has ever known' Alain murmured. 'Not being forgotten or going to hell.'

'Then make yourself happy.'

'The trouble is it doesn't work out like that with humans.'

Their relationship didn't last.

Nicoletta let him go easily. At the railway station she breathed a kiss on his lips and she whispered she'd be waiting for him. Then she turned around, hurried away and melted into the bustle of the city without a wave of her hand.

Istanbul came next. Alain wasn't in a hurry. He stopped in Budapest for a few days. He walked through the city and even slept on the quay near the Chainbridge. He then

went on to see the angular pastel monumentality of Bucharest, keeping the memory of a dictator till the end of the world. He took a train through gorgeous mountains and forests, faded and melancholic villages. He crossed Bulgaria hoping that the famous jostling of the Turkish capital would help him forget the past.

It didn't.

At the end of the first week he stopped by a phone booth and called a number in Rome.

'Come back' said Nicoletta at the other end of the line. 'We can be together as long as you like.'

'But not until eternity' Alain answered bitterly and he didn't have a clue anymore why he had called her. 'It can't last that long. That doesn't make sense.'

'These are only words. It lasts as long as it lasts. No obligations, no planning. Come!...'

'It doesn't make sense to start something that just can not last forever.'

'As you wish...' Nicoletta sounded sad for a moment. 'But you'll always have a place here.'

Alain hung up.

Suddenly he seemed to be hearing all the stall-keepers, all the cars, all the television and radio sets, all the telephones and even the dogs and the cats at the same time. He pressed his hands against his ears and doubled up. Without lifting his hands from his ears he stumbled back to the hotel, climbed the stairs and fell to the ground next to the bed. All he wanted to do was hide. For a long, long time he stayed there curled up.

The next day he tried to convince himself that it was okay in Istanbul, and he would cope. That this was what he needed. This hustling. These people living every goddamned day of their ordinary lives in a dull, business-like manner. These people who accept whatever happens to them and who don't give a shit about what is awaiting them in the distant future.

This self-persuasion was even successful for some time. While he was standing in front of the mirror watching himself, or while he was lying on the bed. But if he left for the city, if he saw the reckless drivers on the streets, if the stall-keepers grabbed his shoulder, if they spat in his face, all he felt was disgust and self-pity. After two weeks he locked himself up in his hotel room and stayed there for days. He was lying on the bed, sleeping, staring at the ceiling and the walls. Then he broke the pictures, the television set and the furniture. He was sent away.

He went to Kiev. The city was not exactly beautiful, but it had a pleasant climate, and the people were abrasive. Life had a very different pace here. He kept his oath and didn't drink. However, he started to smoke weed. Nothing serious, just to relieve the stress. Rome giddies you with sunshine, Kiev does with drugs. Then he was caught while buying joints from a dealer. He was beaten up and taken to the police. With his head bleeding and his eyes swollen he kept showing them his passport. He mumbled something in English - in his mouth the taste of his own vomit mingled with the taste of blood. Finally, an officer turned up who spoke English.

'French' the lieutenant grunted and started with the objects found in Alain's packets which were lying on the table now. A crumpled packet of cigarettes, a nearly empty cigarette-lighter, a pocket watch, some change and an ID in a torn case. 'A Frenchman

travelling about. You've got the time and the money. The world is at your feet. It's rotten.'

An under age prostitute was led into the room. The officer grabbed Alain's chin and with force turned his hand towards the door.

'See?' he said. 'This has been happening for thirty-eight years. Her body is eleven years old... And you're just travelling around the world.'

Alain didn't say a word, he was just watching the girl. When he was released he started roaming the streets. At some places he tumbled into his life might have been in danger. But somebody up there always looks after the fools and those who wish to die. Or somebody down there perhaps. A night passed and nothing happened. In the morning Alain bought a rusty old Lada car and set off east. He crossed the Russian border and headed towards the distant steppes. Harkov, Perm and far beyond... He drove where the road led him. At the last petrol station he filled the car and bought two extra cans. He drove on as long as his supplies lasted, then left the car and walked. He just walked further and further on the most barren landscape he had ever seen. It was more barren than the desert – the roaming man doesn't expect anything but sand in the desert. There is no life there, but life was lacking here. Dry, sparse grass covered the ground, among the rocks some rodents were dying, and languid birds were struggling above. Birds for which thirty-eight years was not enough to gather strength and learn how to fly properly. Alan just walked on without anything to drink or to eat, and when finally he was too weak to proceed he simply subsided at a sink-hole. He sat there fading, but he didn't manage to die.

He spent nearly a month and a half on the steppes. It took him this much to realize again that he would never die. Finally, he collected himself and started walking back. He was pulling himself with his arms, he was pushing with his legs. He ate grass and dead animals lying around on the steppe... Some farmers found him and took him to their meagre home. God knows how long it had been since he had left Kiev.

After he gathered his strength Alain returned to Rome. He felt an unappeasable desire to meet Nicoletta. The hope kept him going – he simply had to hang on to something. It was the feeling that something was unfulfilled, that there was something he had never put an end to. Something he hadn't completely made a mess of yet. He called the girl again and they agreed on a date near the Colosseum in a small café.

She arrived with a man.

'Time passes, but at the same time it doesn't' she said laughing, and Alain felt himself – his brain, his heart, his body – empty and dry. It seemed to him he deserved to rot in hell till eternity. 'Alain, this is Damien. Damien, Alain is an old friend of mine.

'She really is nice' Damien smiled at Alain, then gave Nicoletta a wink.

Alain reached into his pocket and pulled out an old pocket watch. He held it in front of Damien.

'This is yours.'

'What use could I make of it?' he asked. He didn't even glance at the watch. 'It doesn't work anymore.'

'You know each other?' Nicoletta wanted to know.

Neither of the man answered. Damien was smiling confidently, and Alain was just standing there, uncertain, holding out his hand with the watch.

*'Come on.' Nicoletta tried to ease the tension. 'Watches... Time makes no sense any more.'*

*'Let's swap' Alain said. He dropped the watch by the coffee. Its clink was harsh on the metal surface of the table. 'You can get my soul like we agreed. I'll hand it over of my own free will and with joy. That's what you wanted after all.'*

*'The first man who found a moment in his life he wanted to keep forever' Damien said grinning. 'This game is much more fun, though. To see the human desire for happiness fulfilled. To walk among you. But one day... One day perhaps I'll get bored and do take the watch back. If you want me to. If you really want me to. Ironic, isn't it?' He turned to Nicoletta. 'Come on, darling, I find Alain far too moody for this lovely Rome sunshine.'*

*'It's raining in Prague' Alain said. 'And in Oslo, and in Riga, and in New York...'*

*Nicoletta kissed him good bye.*

*Alain took a long time sitting with his coffee and watching the Colosseum. The walls that had been crumbling for millennia. The traces of the decay that has stopped for good now. Or at least until the devil is merciful enough to take his tormented but victorious soul to hell.*

*Later he asked for the phone in the café. He called a number in Paris.*

*'Kristine' he started.*

*'Alain?...'*

*'Kristine... How are you?'*

*There was no answer but he heard her breathing and struggling with her tears at the other end of the line.*

*'You and the kids' he added somewhat later.*

*'Fine.' In his wife's voice irony mingled with pain that even the distance and the poor telephone line could not absorb. Nor the years they'd spent apart. Apart, though all he did, he did for them. For themselves... because at that moment everything seemed so immaculately beautiful. At this moment.*

*'Fine, really' she said. 'It couldn't be any other way. Happy till eternity...'*

# Slovenia

*Bojan Ekselenski Starchild*

*Miha is a curious, cheerful and a bit too serious child for his age. How couldn't he be? Ever since he started to speak, and it was quite early, he was certain:*

*»Mommy, I came from a star.«*

*Mommy Katjusa always asked:*

*»From which star?«*

*He would reply:*

*»From over there,« and his index finger trailed across the sky from west to the east.*

*Mommy smiled and patted him:*

*»All children are stars.«*

*Miha had a wonderful relationship with his daddy Sergej. Being a biology teacher, they often sat on the edge of the sandpit and observed its tiny tenants. Miha remembered everything about every tiny creature of the sandpit. You cannot believe how many tiny creatures mince and hop among cheerful children.*

*\*\*\**

*A beautiful summer evening is magically charming. Daddy and son were sitting in front of the house. They quietly enjoyed the symphony of the evening citizens of a nearby forest. Mother happily watched their speech of emotion. All three of them were one in this beautiful summer evening.*

*Daddy Sergej broke the silence:*

*»Miha, what are you from?«*

*Son replied with unusual seriousness:*

*»That star is not visible right now.«*

*Father pressed:*

*»When is it visible? I want to,« but he was interrupted by his son's too serious voice:*

*»Daddy, my home is too far away for your eyes.«*

*He was shocked by the harshness of his son's reply.*

*Mother interrupted moments of uncomfortable silence:*

*»How were you born?«*

*The child kept his silence for a while, then looked both parents with something close to an accusation and sighed bitterly:*

*»The aliens sent me into your belly with a comet.«*

*Katjusa asked gently with a hint of concern:*

*»Sent how? Why?«*

*The child shook his head worryingly, a tear came down his cheek.*

*Sergej and Katjusa exchanged looks. It all went too far. Perhaps it would be best to read fairy tales in the evening instead of books about space and animals.*



On the playground, Miha always fitted in with the other children quickly. He loved to play. He kept talking about his celestial lineage, but you know how children with overgrown imagination are.

Mother Katjusa sat in the shade of a wonderful grove. Since they moved to Slovenia, they found many friends. She enjoys company and she felt great here.

Helena was a fun woman, always with a smile on her face. In the past few months, that magical smile faded. Her oldest daughter Petra was severely ill. She came here with his younger son and took off the burden of her daughter's illness for a moment.

Miha ran to his mother and exchanged looks with Helena. She offered her hand gladly:

»Five!«

With delight, Miha slapped his hand against hers:

»Five!« then drilled her: »Where is Petra? She's not been to the playground since spring?«

Helena's face was covered by a curtain of sorrow:

»She's in the hospital.«

Miha insisted:

»What's wrong with her? Why didn't you ever say anything? Will we visit her? Will we?« and wandered between two pairs of adult eyes with eyes shining with childish yearning.

Katjusa exchanged looks with Helena. She shrugged. Miha kept looking between the two of them and nodded seriously:

»When can I visit her? Mommy, when are we going to the hospital?« and a ray of sorrow broke through.

Katjusa had no answer. She whispered weakly:

»Petra is very ill. I don't know if we can visit her.«

Miha did not relent:

»Yes we do! I am the starchild. I want her to get well! She's my friend! She's the only one who believes that I'm the starchild,« spouted from the boy, accompanied by tears of bitterness. He rarely cried. This time he did. Katjusa's gaze slid to the ground, she looked at pale Helena who nodded gently:

»You can visit her. Today.« Her face, exhausted by worry, shaped a hint of a smile.

Katjusa and Miha entered the room with Helena. Miha sadly raised his eyes. The motionless body of his friend lied on a special bed, surrounded with wonders of technology. No one left this bed alive. Helena shed a tear. Her heart was torn at seeing Miha's suffering. She felt the child's agony of shaking lips and trembling lids. She's being defeated by the demon of sorrow. Miha raised his gaze, took her hand and asked her quietly:

»Aunt Helena, why are you crying?«

Katjusa was speechless. She wanted to say something, but words remained in the

outtake of breath. She took her son by the hand:

»Come on, let's leave. You saw...« but Miha gently took his hand from her grasp and walked towards the bed. He climbed the railings and Katjusa wanted to carry him away. She made a step. She stops before the next step. She hugged Helena by the shoulders. No one saw how Miha closed his eyes.

Suddenly the lights trembled. Monitors shut down. Buzzing of equipment ceremoniously quieted down. A siren howls. The women feel their stomachs turning. That must be the sign. Petra lost the battle that couldn't be won.

Lights turn on again, machines purr their songs and monitors come back to life. Yet something is missing. Something is gone.

Miha is nowhere to be found. He has disappeared. The women exchanged looks. That's when they hear murmuring. Petra's body started to move. First movement after two months of painful extinguishing, dying on the stage of sorrow. The fragile girl with suffering in her eyes sits up:

»Where is Miha? He was here. I was going towards the light and he came to me. I head his words. He said he would go to the light. He said it wasn't my time yet. He promised we would meet again. Where is he? I saw...«

Tears of joy replaced the surprise.

\*\*\*

Katjusa and Sergej face mournfully into the sky.  
A comet passed across the sky.

# Croatia

## Mihaela Marija Perkovic A Final Exam

Evelyn sat fixedly in her mediation posture. Her body was a perfect fit for the eerie silence of the command bridge's replica of the SpaceFrontier ship Pinmotheres with its marble calm. Only a slight shift of a few threads of her hair gave away the tiny girl for alive. Her breathing steady, she was trying to focus on the passage of time.

How long has it been?, she asked herself and her breathing instantly turned shallower. She had to suppress panic that suffused her as the questioned fused with the white noise of running water which threatened to overcome her mind. Through carefully timed breathing in, and out, and again, then once more, and again, she slowly regained her balance.

I will not freak out, she repeated her own mantra to herself instead of the proscribed one, believing in the core of her being that she had lost this last battle already. The mantra faded away, her thoughts went wandering. The inertial force of her unadmitted surrender kept her immobile, still in the meditation posture. I want to do it, I can do it... I want, I can... No rage. I'll become a frontierswoman, not a baby-making machine... Idiot children! No kids, what's with the kids, the pressure to have them comes from me, myself... I don't want to and I don't have to by the letter of law... Yeah, this is not my doing, it's Carla's, all those brats of hers lead to rage, even now when they're gone; older, "concerned sister". As if: my jealous sister, the jealous cow, she's just that, just couldn't bear to have gotten pregnant right after passing all the tests ... I don't give a fuck about Carla... This is my test and ain't gonna fuck it up... I have no rage in me, I will not have it... Breathing in, the light is coming in, breathing out, my rage is pourin out... I want to do it, I can do it, I will pass this, just this test, I'll travel the Universe, travel through the silence of space... the thoughts swirled through the Evelyn's mind, and the noise of the running water decreased and increased intermittently.

After two years of preparations, grueling physical conditioning, nigh-impossible intellectual testing, beating her own insecurity was still the hardest part for Evelyn. She was attracted by the solitude of the frontier life, by the remoteness of the edge of the known Universe. The sweet silence of it glittered in her mind's eye, while she memorized complex repair protocols of the Pinmotheres under the pressure of seventeen-member family din, in the tension of a city of billion souls and the press of noise on the overpopulated planet of Pavonis-A. For Evelyn, guarding the non-existing border in deep space from aliens that might or might not have passed that way was the dream job, serene and exciting at the same time. To accept the mocking of dissidents who thought this job ridiculous, was easy - a few broken noses dealt with the option of having to have it in her face.

Evelyn came through the training with ease; with little effort, she learnt all the necessary protocols, mastered all that boring physics, absorbed the necessary routine. Her grandmother was a frontierswoman, her father a frontiersman, and her two uncles as well. She had good genes and a good chance to succeed. All that was left was the

final exam: the simulation of all shipboard systems failure. Dying in the solitary chill of space, so the candidates called it. The only exam that didn't come with a manual, nor were there any preparations for it. There were no cheat-sheets or helpful summaries, or superstitious pre-exam rituals. There were only stories about peculiar and incomprehensible taciturn behavior of the rare ones who passed it.

In the 25th hour of simulation and the 13th hour of meditation, Evelyn sat immobile. Despite her regular breathing, she could hear the water flowing, ever more clearly and ever more close. That fluid, disturbing sound swam through her mind more and more strongly, she could hear it flowing out of the kitchen tap, hear it murmur spouting out of bathtub faucet, feel it growing inside her. She began to shiver.

Evelyn...

...lil' Eve, lil' girl no one's gonna want to leave...

...lil' Lynn, there's no sin in leaving this din...

...she hummed to herself, in the rhythm of the fluid noise, faster and faster. Her thoughts swarmed, Lynn, Lynn, Evelyn, hold on, Lynn! I am holding on! I am E-ve-lyn, I've done everything right, why is this not over yet? Why haven't they entered and told me that I have passed, that I'm excellent? I am excellent! A test of stubbornness, nothing but stupid testing of hardheadedness, well, my dears, my head is hard, the hardest, you stupid pricks, my head is THE HARDEST, THE BEST! I WANT BE FLUSHED DOWN! I WANT BE, DO YOU HEAR ME, YOU BLOODY BASTARDS! IS THIS FUCKING TEST OVER, MOTHERFUCKERS?!" Evelyn's voice ripped through the calm of the test chamber. Her body remained in the meditation posture, almost immovable. Only her mouth moved, her face grew long, and her jugular veins popped out, tensing the red-hot skin like metal wires; tears went down it, uncontrolled, unfelt.

The two medtechs on duty rushed into the test chamber in fifty seconds' time. One of them caught her with well-exercised, confident movements, while the other injected the tranquilizer with a quick, deft motion. She was taken to the medlevel, through a narrow corridor which she filled with hoarse screaming, before the hum of running water went completely silent in her ears.

She woke slowly. She was hazily aware that Commander Bratoš and the old doctor Matić were standing next to her bed, the same doctor who gave birth to the all of ten Carla's brats. Bratoš was angry, and he was just explaining something to Matić in a quick voice about the way things sometime were and the rights of women. She could hear them more and more clearly, they were talking about her after all, her good genes, excellent results she achieved in the SpaceFrontier programe, about passing the exam. She was overwhelmed with pleasure and pride. I passed! I made it! I passed, passed! Look, Carla's here! Why is she crying, the jealous cow?! I know she's dying of envy, I'll pilot about the Universe, and she'll be taking care of those brats all by herself, but can't she be happy because of me just once? But, no - she's crying! I mean, really! Evelyn tried to move, to speak, to tell her sister to stop being so selfish.

She just managed to open her eyes. Carla just sobbed even harder, and doctor Matić and commander Bratoš stopped talking and turned to Evelyn, stepping nearer her bed.

"Božičević, you've passed the final exam! Congratulations," commander Bratoš said officially and with a frown. She wanted to answer him, but she couldn't. Probably the tranquilizer, she thought. How ridiculously stiff and rigid does the commander look. As if

he is uncomfortable. Maybe it's for the best that I can't communicate, I'd burst laughing, and that would definitely wouldn't be good for my career. Hmm, a frontierswoman. Awesome. And Carla's still crying! How come she got such a petty soul?

"Well done, honey! You've done a good job, Evy," old doctor's wrinkled face which smiled with satisfaction over her interrupted her train of thought. What's with this old goat? I'm not Evy! What is he doing here anyway... Carla had stopped crying; she stood by the cot despondently and held Evelyn's hand.

"You're so precious, dear," doctor Matić continued with his merry chatter. "You're coming with me, you know, Evy. You and I, Evy, we'll use these rare and special genes of yours! Yes, yes, you and I will together, my Evy, make a lot of, lot of babies... The whole generation of frontierspeople, yes! Mentally stable, stout, sturdy frontierspeople, and they'll all take after you, oh, yes! You're so precious, Evy, darling," doctor Matić whispered to her while pushing her bed towards his Pathology in pregnancy ward.

In Evelyn's mind, the hum of running water fused with a scream.

*Tatjana Jambrišak Give Me the Shuttle Key!*

- Give me the shuttle key!

Silence. No response, no reaction. In the darkness of the base command room the screen was illuminating a stooping, dark-haired head. The halo of light was turning her oval face into a medallion, like an ivory cameo on an onyx bed. The frowning face of my wife.

- Did you hear what I said?

The medallion did not move. The chiseled grimace of an eternal scowl, perhaps concentration, although I knew she was not doing anything important right now. Chances were she was browsing the data base. For, when she worked, she enjoyed it immensely, she was relaxed, reclined in the co-pilot seat which the boys had torn off from the command bridge and shipped it down to the planet. Sitting comfortably in the soft chair amidst the Spartan furniture of the base camp, our genius calculated sines and logarithms, routes and diversions, the coordinates of series of jumps and the rest of the mess we absolutely needed to return home.

Because the computer up there, in the ship, had decided to quit. Well, not completely, but it functioned erroneously. It allowed itself to err. The artificial intelligence just above chimpanzee's and much below human. Our AI was, she said, still perfect with numbers, as well as with the ship's valves and engines. It only lost interest in life support and the voyage home. That was all.

So we landed on the planet. At least there was enough oxygen. And water. But no metal, whatsoever. Therefore, I needed the shuttle.

- I need a couple of aluminum bars from the ship. The hydroponics' fence is still not good enough. Water's dripping all over. The floor's wet and slippery. If I melt the bars into plates...

- Should've said it yesterday - said the cameo but only the lips were slightly moving.

- Well, yesterday I didn't know I'd want to do it today! Come with me. It's not like you're doing anything important.

- Never mind if I'm working now or not. You didn't schedule it on time. It's not on the

schedule. And you're bothering me.

- Right. Fine, just give me the key, you don't have to come along.

That week she was the janitor. It was all for the best. We rotated duties, so once a month I was on call for a week, the rest of the time I had no worries, no care about keys, data cards, memory sticks, tools. I just had to ask and whatever I ordered from the storage, it was brought over. Except when she was on duty: she needed to be informed a day or two in advance. We had to consider her schedule of working, patrolling or current location, so she might fetch the requested items along the way. That was fine. But, spontaneity? God Almighty, this wasn't Earth! We were not free to do whatever and whenever we pleased. If we wished to survive, we had better hold on to the rules and respect each others' plans and schedules. Right?

- No. Tomorrow. Fly at noon.

- Tomorrow I may not care for it. I'd like to go now - I heard myself say, knowing this attempt was in vain, but I had nothing better. I could feel the frustration in my throat, widening it instead of tightening. And I had anticipated her next words. No key. And I was already aware that it would drive me crazy. So I stood up slowly, thinking where the husbands might be at that moment. Fortunately, they liked me wild.

- That's not my problem. No key. Go walk.

Hah! She actually said it! Really?! Go walk. From the planet to the orbiting ship? What was wrong with her? She could not really mean it. I knew her too well. She had to be highly strung, not herself. I stopped halfway to the exit and returned to her screen.

From the beginning of our conversation she did not move at all, not an inch. Neither did she blink. Her irises reflected the motley pixels dancing on the screen. Prismatic digits and glyphs were streaming along vertically, from the bottom to the top where they disappeared. I did not understand, nor did I recognize or distinguish them, but I was confident she was taking it all in. Calculating, coding, decoding. The quickest mind of our generation. A navigator par excellence. That was why we took her along. And now she was sending me to walk up to the orbit?

- What are you doing? What's up?

The rage inside me gave way to a nagging suspicion. Sometimes she was gruff and harsh, true, sometimes she did not really mean what she said, could not care less if anybody took offence because of her words. She knew we needed her and we would forgive. The boys were also aware of this so they let her be, avoided her when she was at the console, found themselves something to break, melt or build, went mending, tapping, rapping, wrenching something, anything, just away from the glaring mathematician. Because, in the evening, when she stood up from her pilot armchair and stretched like a big, dark-skinned cougar, she transformed herself into a family pet, she cooked, tidied things up, rubbed our tired muscles. She fed all of us in an hour or two, relaxed us, tucked us in. And then returned to her screen.

Because my wife never slept. Half of her nervous system had been replaced with neurosilicon and a network of optic cables right after puberty. She required no sleep. But, now, if she was so engrossed in the events on the screen to send me walking up to the ship, I believed I should find out why.

- Uh, no idea.

No idea? She had no idea? Uh-wow. I could feel the shudder forming in my soles, the

dread raising the hairs on my nape because hair on my head was so sparse. A sloppy, disheveled hairdo because back on Earth nobody thought of teaching men how to cut women's hair. Nobody thought we would stay in space for longer than a month.

A hyperspace journey, regardless of the destination, lasted as long as the half hour preparations for each jump in a sequence. Add the time allowed for whatever needed to be done there - repairs, unloading food or seeds, and then the return home. A transport team such as our family returned home after each job for a few months of recuperation.

Space was exhausting, you know? If not psychologically, then this immense vastness speckled by tiny, scattered points of life was definitely emotionally and physically tiring. That was why families traveled together. When surrounded by people you love and get along just fine, that month's trip became a kind of a working honeymoon. When love flowed in the crew's blood, entropy stayed locked out on the other side of the ship's bulk.

- I'll call the boys, OK?

- Uh... call them, right. Although, I don't know...

I already typed in their emergency call codes. No need for a conversation, conserve the energy. The intercoms glued to their necks would vibrate under their environmental suits and they would leave everything and start back to the base. Half an hour, tops. I was feeling better already.

The boys never panicked. Although psychologists say fraternal twins usually differ, say, one is a choleric, the other a calm, cold-blooded skeptic, our husbands were somehow miraculously identical inside. One blond, the other raven-haired and the third a brunette with natural blonde highlights, but they all finished each other's sentences, shared reactions and opinions. They got along perfectly, not like some puzzle hand-cut from an image, but like real triplets, three oxygen atoms in a wonderful ozone molecule.

- Will you tell me what you see?

I put my hand on her shoulder despite the fact that I knew she disliked being touched unless in her evening tactile mode. I was quite convinced it was because her artificial brain hemisphere was dominant while at the computer. In the evenings she gave it a break and switched on her human, organic half, eager for the touch, emotions and love. Still, she could have moved my hand off her shoulder, could have scolded me with one look of her gray eyes, so unusual in color under the lids of her last-generation-Asian slit eyes. She could have done anything; probably would have in some other circumstances, but she did nothing. She remained motionless, staring at the quivering digits and a diagram on the screen. Well, this was definitely not good at all.

- You're scaring me, but fine, we'll wait for them.

In such moments, when suspicions go berserk, people usually make coffee. We had the microwave heater, but we used up all the coffee. Remember, food was stacked only for a month, or sometimes two, for backup. Instead of coffee something could be poured into glasses, something short and strong. Something not included in the transportation item list.

Space is no place for fools. Much less for drunken fools. We were not sent out there to have an orgy, but to deliver life support to people. Although transporters carried families, nobody talked about those normal human needs, about vice, whether alcohol, pills or sex. Don't ask, don't tell. This was a private, family matter.

Nobody drank in my family. No pills, either. A bunch of health and gym fanatics all.

Our private bunker in the ship was filled with gym machines and equipment for zero-G workout, protein shakes and ointments against the swelling and pain, but they refused to allow me to bring aboard a single bottle of some golden alcohol tranquilizer. I had a mean idea to ferment some fruit from the hydroponics as soon as I grew more than they could ravage. Not enough time. Not enough material shuttled from the ship. The boys did not set me up with a still. I did not announce the requisition in advance. Hell.

And what could she possibly see on the screen or read off the instruments, that she did not understand? That she could not explain, nor try to clear up for me. The boys were, frankly, better in this than me. Good at those stereotypical male professions, they studied engineering and mechanics, knew how to fix machines, start hyperdrive gears and bring cogs and coils back from the dead, if necessary. Fuel and electronics they also knew well. And, oddly, they did not specialize during their education, did not master just one or two disciplines, but each of them kept competing with the other two, constantly and in all things manly.

In the gym, as well. Three well-built athletes were an absolute treasure in our business. Also, they looked great. My half-cyborg and me considered ourselves lucky women. OK, I considered myself lucky that I had found them. She never said anything about that matter, but she agreed to the marriage, the job, and she did embark with us even though she could have steered battle cruisers had she wanted. Interstellar cruise ships, whatever. She was good enough.

- Want a nectarine?

I had to break the silence somehow. My nectarines were exquisite, although bonsai-sized. With a bit of genetic manipulation and pruning, nothing new for the sort, the nectarine trees did not grow higher than the top of the hydroponic bed just underneath the UV lights. The fruit with the shiny, smooth skin, the size of a cherry plum, shone golden and blushed among the dark green leaves like clusters of yellow and red precious stones.

If the green thumb was hereditary at all, generations of my farmer ancestor must have handed this talent down to me. Yes, and a strong healing bioenergy, of course. My fingertips radiated life. My plants grew like deranged weeds on a wild meadow. I did not even use much fertilizer. I made my rounds, petted the plants a little and the happy flora started whispering its promises of nectar. Call it a talent or coincidence, but at the time of polluted fields and waters, of the hydroponics where plants grew unhappy and dwarfish yielding poor crops, my fingers were creating miracles everywhere. My PhDs in biology, horticulture and genetic engineering were also helpful. But none of this required a logical mind and the mathematics of space travel. Still, cast away on this backwater planet my gift also helped weave the tapestry required for our return to Earth. We were surviving, right?

- All's gone. Gone.

- Nectarines are not gone. There's a full bowl in the fridge, you know? - I had already started towards the glass door where we had arranged a pantry. - Nectarines, also lemons for a lemonade if you wish, and blueberries, too.

Citrus fruits and berries liked my energy and the hydroponics, they grew like crazy just on water, some nutrients and good UV lamps. No scurvy on space voyages. Surely, there were vitamin supplements, but nothing compared with a juicy fruit straight from a



tree; well, fine, from a bush.

- Not nectarines. Earth. Earth's gone.

- What? - I stopped at the already opened fridge doors.

I really did not know if it was the cold from the inside or the image that her words invoked, but I froze from my toes to my Mohawk hairdo. Kissed by death. Touched in passing by its icy breath and bony fingers. Covered by the opaque, obscure veil of vacuity. Me. The one who nurtured, grew, created life every day anew. For me, death was more terrifying than fear. I knew our lives were hanging on thin threads here, so far away from home, with limited supplies. True, we had enough water and air outside, provided the boys' kept up the purification process going. We would not suffocate, no thirst would plague us, perhaps we could only starve to death if I failed to grow enough food quickly and successfully. Until that moment, I was doing fine.

This jeopardy, this menacing possibility that we would starve before she calculated our way back and jumped through all the connecting points on our way to Earth, this kept me alert and eager to work. If I did my job right, we had a chance to return home. It was a simple sentence, with the condition easily met. But, if Earth was gone...

- What do you mean, Earth's gone?

At this moment my wife moved probably for the first time since she had sat down at the computer this morning. She looked up, then straightened her body, turning towards the double hatch just opening with a hydraulic hiss. You could breathe outside for a short while even without the filters, but we still took care that the base microclimate fluctuated as little as possible. At least for the plants.

She stood up from her pilot seat greeting the boys with the same frozen-medallion look on her face. I knew they would read her expression and realize we had not summoned them just because we had suddenly felt lusty at an unscheduled time. Nevertheless, I presumed this thought might have danced for a second in some part of their synchronized brains as their neck coms pulsed. I mean, all these months on this quiet and boringly calm planet, and now - suddenly - trouble, alerts, dangers? If I had had time to think this through, I could have made a wager with myself they had thought of sex first. Workout stimulates testosterone production, a male is a male, and three identical males, well...

- What's happened? - said three voices in unison.

It took some getting used to, the synchronized speech, sometimes one sentence in three parts, each voice displaced just a bit. Still, they were peaches and still not getting on my nerves. I smiled but let her announce her news, hoping they would immediately comment on it, more to each other, so I might understand what had actually happened.

- Earth's gone. Not there. Scanners draw a blank. I calculated at least half the jumps and then decided to start from the other side to get a better hold of the direction...

Before she finished the sentence, the three heads were already blocking the screen from view. In silence. This was trouble. I would find out nothing more, and that was so not typical of them. They crowded there silent as the stars. I knew that even if I asked anything, all four of them would hush me up, in unison. So I decided to fetch some nectarines. Let them consult. In silence. By telepathy or whatever.

Closing the pantry door, I once again looked into the base command room.

- Would someone like... never mind - it was hard for a chatty person to change

habits.

When I returned, the boys were sitting on the floor next to the console desk. Parts of light environmental suits and mobile filtering equipment lay behind them, they threw them over their heads with neither order nor intent onto a messy pile in the corner, as if they would never need them again.

This was also unlike them. Disciplined, scientific minds are usually orderly people. Such minds who, due to the lack of time, have several identical suits, T-shirts and shoes of the same color. Whatever they grab, fits together. No time for colors or combinations. But, frankly, she was even worse than the three of them. It seemed that the neatness center developed in her cybernetic hemisphere. The boys liked that and kept making fun of their own meticulousness, but actually of her scrupulous care for details just so that they might then, all four in unison, mock the chaos in my closets and my mind.

- So, where is it?

I sat on the floor and placed the bowl with nectarine pellets in the middle of our circle. I put the tiny fruit in my mouth. It was a good idea to program this hybrid to grow pits the size of a grain of rice. Juicy flesh was sparse anyway.

- Gone.

- Well, I got that - I was trying not to panic, to think more about fruit or the afternoon harvest of baby tomatoes, about normal things.

- Where is it?

Four sets of blue eyes looked at me with rebuke. This eight-eyed marriage monster refused to speak of the unspeakable and mutely processed this unfathomable, but growingly obvious fact that there actually might not be a home to return to. They directed all of their fear, like four recently sharpened spears, at the domestic babbling who was there to feed them. Well, not fair. They knew and would not tell!

The truth was, however, that even if I knew what was going on, that would not help much. My work would go on unchanged, the schedule remained the same. My schedule, though, those unforeseeable, unplanned, spontaneous actions during my working hours, produced marvelous results. It was chaos, but I was proud of it. It provided food. So, I did not calculate jumps or align hyperdrive coils, but I had equal rights!

- I want to know! How's Earth gone? Where is it? How can you be sure? What are we to do now? What's happened? Is anyone hungry? Speak up! No, stop - one at the time! You first!

I used my finger impolitely to indicate the husband on my far left. Perhaps I had just imagined it, but it seemed to me he shivered. Probably not because of my shouting or the finger, but because I singled him out, isolated him from the triplet, called on him alone. He shuddered and shook his head. Finally, he mustered:

- Gone.

- I know that. Stop repeating. As if all other words were gone also. What's going on, for heaven's sake! Why must I talk about it? OK. Earth gone. Where's it gone? On scanners. Fine. Perhaps the scanners malfunctioned? Perhaps that artificial hobgoblin AI in the ship decided to walk out on us? Perhaps it sent us fake data? Didn't think of that? Well, it stranded us here, did it not?

Intentionally or incidentally, I distrusted this accident theory with this generation of AIs. At least that's what the brochure said when we purchased it.

- Oh, well, where was I? The long-range scanner is on the ship, right? Which means under the AI's control. Its data, data may be forged. Even though I have no idea why would...

- Wait a minute. Stop it, dear.

Dear? Uh-huh. She called me dear, therefore trouble was deep. The last time she used that word was when our first husband died in a shuttle crash, and I missed the landing because I was lost in the hydroponic jungle that had gone wild because of some strange radiation field around that moon. The same radiation that confused the shuttle's instruments and the AI which piloted the shuttle.

Dear. This small, warm word which foreshadowed nothing else but death. I fell silent. Dropped a tiny nectarine to the ground.

- First, the scanner's here. The boys transported it a few days ago and reinstalled. The atmosphere won't matter, and I no longer trusted the Tin Can up there. These are really important and difficult calculations. Our AI's rampant and unreliable, except for keeping orbit and making coffee. And we've ran out of coffee, anyway.

For AI 9 MIL we paid dear as we would for the water from Europa. Artificial intelligence without a name but a few letters and a sinister hint to another famous confused computer. The AI was our warranty for successful jumps and a lot of cash earned in a dozen or so trips. Enough for a lifetime. For each of us. And together we could buy an island, live on it, grow vegetables, solve mathematical conundrums, build beach cabins and go fishing. If we found an unsold island in Polynesia, of course. Or some other tropical backwater.

There were other options, too. There were colonies. Mankind was scattering through space ever since hyperjumps were invented. People resisted, though, only a small percentage really wanted to leave the home planet. Adventurers, criminals and those who really had no other options. The Earth's hustle and bustle was not letting up quickly.

So we accepted it calmly when our AI 9 MIL's suddenly announced that it had no idea where we were after a series of short jumps. But it also informed us there was a planet suitable for breathing in the vicinity, and with water, too. Oh, well. It got it wrong, it would adjust the calculations, correct itself. Never mind. We would eventually meet our deadline, the deliverables were not perishable. Fine.

Then our AI simply switched itself off. All higher functions, everything but maintaining orbit and some of the life support systems went offline. And then life support, too. We had no choice; we put everything we needed in the shuttle. Several trips down to the planet. So it was not so bad, really. But, it was temporary, right? She would calculate, they would fix whatever was broken so that we could return, right?

- Secondly, the scanner works, shows Mars, Venus, Jupiter... only Earth's not where it should be. There's nothing there. It didn't explode, for there'd be dust if something had struck the planet. A meteor, say, the Moon... now I'm rambling, I know.

Several black, long and thin strands of hair broke free from the band on the top of my wife's head and were fluttering slatternly around her eyes. She got so upset that she did not even notice this otherwise unacceptable sloppiness.

- We don't understand it either... - said our husband on the far right.

- ...perhaps we could jump somewhere close... - continued the far left one.

- ...somewhere above the Earth's orbit, between orbits, perhaps - the middle one finished the thought.

- Sorry, boys, I'm not that precise. I can't calculate, not from this distance, anyway, this somewhere close. The chances are we'd hit Mars, or even the asteroid belt, therefore it's too dangerous for blind attempts. Not to mention other ships that'd surely be jumping in there at the same time as us. You know that we usually jump in close to Pluto's orbit and then the last microjump's easy, because the station there gives us the coordinates assigned in advance. There's a schedule, a timetable, a jumptable, if you will. But, travelers should contact Earth first to be queued, scheduled. It's stupid to jump ahead blind. And we're not that desperate yet.

They watched her as if they had never traveled through space before. You would expect that from me, perhaps, since I also stared at her with dimmed comprehension, but even I knew about the landing, that is, the jumping queue. But if Earth was gone, who would, and from where, send us the time and space coordinates? Probably hundreds of ships with panicky crews were jumping in next to Pluto's station at that very moment, agitated because they, too, could not find Earth. Probably crashing, too. Colliding. Some spacemen do panic themselves into fools.

- I've scanned many times - she said. - It's simply gone. And since this alone is hard to grasp, even more difficult it is to imagine the reason, and in the end I conclude...

- ... that it's not important why and what's happened - the far left husband finished. They always followed some order instinctively, almost as a schedule, so that each of them had a chance to finish an equal number of other's thoughts. I mean, was it really important at that moment?

- ...and that the question is what we are to do now...

- ...go or stay here...

- ...and for how long?

This time she concluded the common thought, breaking the unwritten order. I could imagine how unnerved she must have been inside. There was no heads-up on this. No announcement, no foreboding.

When we were leaving, our native planet teemed with life, encircled by millions of satellites; at least ten thousand ship-hotels hung in the orbit, off-planet casinos, banks, corporate headquarters, tin boxes with basic drives for maintaining direction and position, but also fictitious addresses for small, questionable companies, thousands of production plants using zero G for cheap manufacturing of huge machinery and spaceship parts. It was a colossal stack of metal. And the planet itself was full of iron and other metals. Scanners never had any problems locating it. Still, I had no cause to doubt her scans. The disappearance of Earth, nor the darkness she bespoke with so little words.

- What about hyperradio? - I asked, although I could hardly believe none of them thought of it first. Four scientists sitting on the floor, contemplating the doom of mankind, not thinking clearly about all the options? Perhaps, but I doubted it.

- A bedlam, of course, what did you think it would be? Everybody's using the same frequencies. A pell-mell, headlong, all talking at the same time. - She liked words, strange, old ones, but we got the picture.

- What do you mean, everybody? You said there was nobody.

- Oh, people are out there, everywhere throughout the known universe. On planets like ours, on ships in deep space, in comet mines, on asteroids, everywhere. And they're all calling Earth. There's no response, so they call each other. I mean, everybody does it. It's chaos. Nothing's intelligible. Except that nobody knows what's happened. So they panic. Not everybody has water and air like we do, you know?

- Screaming all over hyperspace...

- ...taking stock, despairing and...

- ...humping like rabbits, as if there's no tomorrow - finished the middle husband, somewhat softer, with a quick, strangely glassy look thrown at me.

Hah! I should have put my money on judgment day with the idea of destitute orgies. Oh, well, not that I minded, but should we not at least try to do something first? It was not likely we would part soon. What was it in the male's brain that directly connects a possible ending, imminent death if you will, the end of civilization, whatever, with at least one last rapture?

Right, we were healthy, we had food, we would survive. And this lack of Earth might be just some quantum shift, who knows, some phasic quiver, a radiation curtain jamming the scanners? Why does it have to be the inevitable? You know, the aliens came and flattened Earth for the highway? Yeah, right.

- Let's see: we could stay here for a while. Wait a little and then go where there's more people, to socialize and, eventually, to diversify genetic material. Once, when we decide to have children.

My dear, logical wife had switched on her cybermind to count the zeroes and ones, to order them into rows and columns, to make lists. Got to her senses, obviously. So I felt a bit better.

- We deinstall everything right now...

- ...begin the voyage home...

- ...or somewhere close.

The boys had already begun reducing their speech for the adrenaline caused the need for a fast action, for a quick fix of the problem. Everything was better than sitting idly. Right. So they stood up, began gathering pieces of their suits and equipment. It seemed to me they did not even consider the option she had mentioned first. As if that was out of the question. Waiting? Stopping along the way back? Direction home, straight to the medley of jump ships near Pluto! Whatever happens, right?

- And then again, we could stay.

At first they seemed not to have heard me. So I repeated.

- We could stay.

Four pairs of eyes impaled me simultaneously. As if I had read out a death sentence. No possibility of parole. No hope. No action. What an awful idea!

I raised the nectarine to my mouth and steadied it with my lips. I knew I looked pretty foolish with this reddish orb in front of my face, but I guessed they expected this from a gardener in weird clothes who had many unhinged, illogical ideas jumping incomprehensibly and quantum-like to places where they, too, would eventually end up, but only after taking a winding, more reliable and verifiable scientific staircase. I would like to get used to their stares of disbelief. I would also like if they could sometimes hide them from me. One day, perhaps one sunny day... But at that moment I had to

concentrate and explain the images and ideas from my mind in their own language. Use logic to persuade them. Especially her and her artificial half.

- Stay. Here. Understand? Not return, not move. Stay. Invite others to come over.

I was doing all right. They still did not interrupt me in unison.

- We have a lot of water. We have air. I guarantee we'll have food. Enough also for other people if need be. Let's invite them over. The planet's vast. Some of them are surely transporting some terraforming cargo, too. Until they arrive, we build bases. Cleanse air and water.

I was speaking fast, not meandering as usual. I felt this was the right way to do it, although everything in me screamed in protest, searched for metaphors and similes, irrelevant images, developed options and a free flow of inspiration. But, at that moment, all this would only confuse them more. So I stuck to the facts. For a while.

- We have that imbecile in the orbit. One day you'll fix it. Perhaps link your cybernetic half to it and jump start the AI. If necessary. We've not tried that yet.

We discussed this option during all those months, but our wife had objections, I guessed anybody in her position would. The link was possible, but what would she find there? It resembled mind-melds just a bit too much, and we all knew how that went; we had all watched a lot of old vids. She said she needed a clear mind for calculations and it was true there was really no actual need for such an experiment. We were doing good even without a psychoanalysis of the artificial intelligence which would, at least in theory, be a great help for the voyage home. Which was at the time a seriously questionable goal.

- And what's the point of going home, anyway? Didn't we hope to find some godforsaken place, an island? OK, there's no money now, but all this here is free, right? There's no one else here, at least for now, to put a price on the peace and quiet, the right to use the soil, air and water. It's ours. Even if others came, we wouldn't use up those resources all at once. Not every Earthling would move over here. Perhaps several families. Maybe several hundreds multi-member families. From the standpoint of evolution and genetics, this should suffice to preserve our species. Am I right?

They were still not interrupting me. A miracle was unfolding before my eyes. Were they all so scared, so undone by the news, that they could not find words to oppose me? Or they simply never considered such an option before I said it out loud? Or was I really good at persuading? My self-confidence rose by the minute, I spoke even faster; I was convincing them ever more fervidly that this permanent settlement idea was right.

- Found a colony.

This thought, this huge, frighteningly ambitious plan, boldly broke away from my mind and flew out like a bullet into a nectarine bowl. For a second I thought the fruit spheres actually moved to make room for the idea. As if they were alive, as if they knew, as if the nectarines were molecules of some gas, throbbing and flexible, giving way to an immense concept that had decided to nest in their midst.

The idea was grander than us. Larger than life. Not only because Earth was gone for who knew what reason. In the circumstances of a real, even if imposed, but nevertheless possible, even if unlikely, colonization of space, the reasons for the planet's disappearance were to me, to my intuitive and illogical mind, of absolutely no importance at all. Aliens or a meteor? Who cares? Let's move on! Not only an inch, but

far away, to quantum distances. To new Earth, our new home. What a glorious future!

But I knew I was not to reveal all these thoughts to my family, not yet. The chances for them to refuse my idea were too great. They might still decide to deinstall the entire base in a few hours, load the lot on the shuttle, fly over to the ship and link my wife to the AI. And then jump, anywhere really, just not to linger on, just not to hang around waiting.

And that would have been a horrible plan. I felt that in every particle of my being. Silently I screamed we should not do it, but I had no evidence, no verified guidelines, no warnings nor logical facts to corner my family and make them all see things my way. I still had no hard, solid, persuasive arguments. By the time I had any, it would probably be too late.

How could I let us all collectively wake up to smell the roses a moment before we jumped in the middle of some metal hoard before Pluto? Or next to an unknown alien colony? With an uncertain option of returning here. Who could tell if our demented AI would calculate anything right, or if my wife's replacement calculations would find us a way back here? Who could know, who could foretell, assess the right, the rational decision?

What we did know for sure was that we were doing fine on that planet.

As would everybody else once they had found their own goal, some plan, some work to do, their own place in the future colony. For, there was no sense in dispersing any more, in scattering like dandelion snow in the wind. We had it going. We got along too well to split this functional family. This panic, this unknown cause of the all-human, universal tragedy, the mankind's cataclysm and devastation of life, was no reason to simply and brainlessly plunge headlong into the uncertain.

- Let's stay here.

I was fully aware of the pathos contained in my half-baked and meagerly laid-out idea. Its luring simplicity was running along a dull blade. And I felt buds burgeon inside me, shoots sprouting, I felt the efflorescence of roses, the flourishing of grass. My instincts, my intuition, bioenergy, all this gushed into one and the same, the fecundating breath of the new beginning, the new Earth's spring.

Standing there, excited and flushed with struggle and restraint, in front of my spouses, with the unrelenting yearn to convince them that this idea was not only logical but also the only possible and the only righteous, inevitable one; standing there, jouncing impatiently, I suddenly realized that the scene was in all likelihood rather hilarious. Me the hero, me the architect, the founder of the new Earth's colony. I myself found me baffling. Ridiculous. But nobody smiled or smirked. And nobody was contradicting me.

Good. I stopped their first impulse to act. The rest was easy. There was time. A lot of time. A lot of hope. We had each other. We had life. And love. And company. Soon to be expanded. My mind swarmed with images; at that moment I would surely have caused even an ancient, desiccated dragon tree to blossom in its pot, if it had happened to be under my fingertips. That was how much life, how much energy radiated out of me.

- And then, babies...

- ...many babies...

- ...making babies.

*The three of them were darlings. How quickly had they found their spot under the new Sun!*

*- Yeah, of course, let's start right now.*

*I laughed out loud and saw how their cheeks twitched synchronously into a smile and I saw what effect this triple glassy look had on our wife.*

*I made a mental note. We would need a lot of women. Many, yes.*

*- Fine, yes, well - I turned towards her, - but first, so that I won't bother you later: hydroponics really need fixing. Give me the shuttle key!*

1.



# Bulgaria

## Valenti D. Ivanov A Job Interview

*“Stop it! You don’t know how they feed the computers around here!” Shouted the tallest lady.*

*I froze.*

*A few minutes ago a smiling young man led us into this office, He was the courtesy itself but nothing could hid the fact that the man hated us. Nobody likes us unless they are forced to, by their job description.*

*Somebody had forgotten to feed the computer at the reception. It was sobbing quietly in the corner of the desk. The three other women who had arrived for the job interview before me looked at the pale green sailing. Undoubtedly, they were wondering if the situation was a set up testing out maternity instincts and what the best course of action was. I was asking myself the same questions but I also knew that the employers never appreciate indecisiveness so I just went to the poor creature and took out from my purse a milk bottle.*

*“Don’t touch it!” Shouted again the same lady. Dark suit, silver frame glasses and a tight bun of hair on the top of her head. “You can kill it!”*

*“We should ask someone from the company.” Said the second woman, the youngest of us all.*

*“This is for mobile phones,” I showed them the label and poured some liquid into the computer’s feeding tube.*

*“It is not good for the digestion to give it so much at once.” The third lady, a plain creature of uncertain age and vague hints of gender, remarked. She was my main competitor, I decided.*

*The computer belched. She was right, of course. I was furious for making the mistake, for letting her state the obvious and most of all, for getting upset. At least I wasn’t giving her self confidence points by showing how I felt.*

*“They shouldn’t have left it hungry on the first place,” I said. “Three days with no food, and it will start munching on the central processor.”*

*The computer drained the bottle in five minutes, in teaspoon portions. And then, the door opened.*

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*The man who came in wore white trousers and a blue jacket with the company logo. We stood up.*

*“Hallow, ladies! I am Stephen Johns, from Personnel. How are you doing today? I apologize for making you wait.”*

*We all answered something polite and he led us to a conference room with stylish flower paintings. O’Keeffe originals, no less.*

*“Admiring the art, Mrs. Robertson?”*

I was tempted to correct him that it is Miss Robertson, but he might have misunderstood it.

"I like her."

Mr. Johns nodded and invited us to sit around the table.

"You have all been through the preliminary interview with the hiring agency, so I am not going to ask you the usual questions. Our company needs a reliable person that can perform well under pressure. Aptitude for team work is crucial. We may hire one or two of you, or may be even all of you. Or we may keep the position open."

He gave us a quick look.

"Mrs. Stapleton, could you please tell us what gets under your skin?"

So this was the name of the plain woman. She didn't waver.

"Indifference."

"Your own?"

"I am always involved in the things I do."

"It is not for you to judge."

She was steaming quietly. Johns ignored her and turned to the bun and glasses.

"Mrs. Grazziani, what is your strategy to cope with the stress?"

"I face the source and remove it."

"And if the source can't be removed? Assume the source is your boss."

"The source is never the person itself, it is something in the relation and I will change that."

"How are you going to make your boss give up smoking in the office lounge?"

Mrs. Grazziani considered the question for a moment.

"Smoking is forbidden in the maternity yards. I am sure this never happens in a company like this..."

"And if it does, what would you do?"

"I will talk to him."

"And not with somebody from Personnel? You will hesitate to rat on your boss?"

She was at loss what to say for a moment.

"I would blow the whistle on him, yes. This would be my second action."

"Thank you, Mrs. Grazziani, we won't need your services." Johns stood up. We were about to follow his example but he waved at us. "The rest of you, sit down. We haven't finished yet."

Mrs. Grazziani left the room without a word. I didn't look at her, instead I watched my two competitors. The younger one, whose name we haven't heard yet followed the unlucky job seeker with horror. Mrs. Stapleton was looking at me without blinking.

"Mrs. Trenton, he asked the girl, what is the most significant responsibility you have failed to meet during your career?"

"I have never failed to meet my responsibilities."

"Nobody is perfect, Mrs. Trenton. Think harder."

"Really, sir! I was the first in my maternity class, I got excellent recommendations from the company where I had my Summer internship."

I see, she was straight out of college.

"Then why they didn't hire you, Mrs. Trenton? You must have failed them somehow. Can't you think how?"

*“Actually, I didn’t even apply for a job with them. They are a big company but their most advanced production line is refrigerators. My genetic modifiability improved by three grades over the last year. It is much higher than what is needed for making picnic coolers. I prefer more challenging work with better prospectives.”*

*So Mrs. Trenton, not Mrs. Stapleton, was my main competitor.*

*Johns turned to me. Suddenly I felt hungry and I recalled with regret the milk I fed to the front desk computer.*

*“Mrs. Robertson, name the greatest risk you have taken on the job?”*

*\*\*\**

*Five years ago when I applied for my first maternity position at a big biotech company, they would have never cross-interrogated us like this little bastard was doing it today. The technology became so demanding since then, it was nearly impossible to find surrogate mothers that can carry to term hundreds of processors every week. Growth accelerators could speed the turnout but they could not stop your psyche from wearing out after four births per month. The companies had either to retire you with a huge pension or to face unsympathetic courts ready to side with the former employee. The manufacture of simple bioware could always be carried over to the Third world but only a few percent of the women there had undergone genetic testing and people with modifiability grade as high as mine were rare. One in hundreds of thousands. The only defense the biotech companies had left was putting the applicants through the harshest tests possible. And so they did.*

*\*\*\**

*“Two years ago, when I was working for a microprocessor company in California...”*

*“A, the infamous Valley of the Thousand Mothers,” Johns cut me off. “We have all heard of it. Go on now, tell me what heroic thing you did.”*

*It took all of my strength to relax my fists.*

*“I refused to abort a potentially defective batch of processors. It was an experimental series and I am under non-disclosure agreement but I can say that the pregnancy was successful.”*

*He must have known this from my dossier, of course. The bastard wanted to see me saying it.*

*“Why did you take the chance?”*

*“Because they are my children.”*

*“Mrs Robertson, it is my pleasure to offer you the position. Congratulations!”*

Bettina Gupta Strigete mute

"Adam te voi salva!" Cu mâini de fieri am apucat arma mea. Sunetul ei penetrant se auzea tot mai tare. Raza gamma a fost aproape încărcată. Nici o secundă prea devreme, pentru că unitatea mea a fost deja pe urmele lor.

Le-am urmărit prin pustietatea de care era pătrunsă această lume. Când am fugit pe lângă ierburi fosili s-au prăbușit în fulgi de praf. Dintr-o dată, fetița de robot s-a oprit brusc în fața mea.

Ce o fetiță frumoasă. Corpul ei palid, bine proporționat, fața de păpușă cu ochii mari, caracteristicile ei nevinovate. Aspectul ei a făcut numele de "păpușă" toată onoarea dar din păcate ea a fost cu totul altceva decât o păpușă. Mișcările ei au fost înșelător uman, și în ochii ei era ceva viu, aproape protejat. Totuși, ea a fost doar o mașină. Se uita la băiatul meu inconștient în brațele ei. Ce vrea să facă „dracul“ acesta cu fiul meu?

"Trage Joshua!" Vocea ofițerului meu m-a scos din gândurile mele. Inima mea bătea tare.

Trupele noastre au înconjurat păpușa. Abia acum mi-am dat seama cum arma mea făcea un sunet rar. Raze gamma. El putea rupe armura de păpușă. Știam că a fost inamicul meu, o amenințare pentru toată lumea dar dacă aș pușca, apoi Adam ar fi ...

"La naiba soldat, trage odată!"

Nervos degetul meu a fost pe trăgaci. Păpușa se uita furioasă la mine, cu ochii ei de culoare gri-argintiu, în timp ce evenimentele recente din nou treceau prin capul meu:

În zona de protecție păpușa atacă generatorul de aer care produce oxigenul pentru lumea noastră. Fiul meu, care ar trebui să fie în complexele subterane, dintr-o dată a fugit spre mine strigând după ajutor. De ce băiatul nu se ține de interdicția de teren? Unitatea mea a deschis focul către păpușă. În acest moment păpușa l-a luat pe Adam sub scutul ei. Scutul a înghițit gloanțele noastre cu laser fără probleme. Așa ea sa salvat. Dar de ce naiba l-a răpit pe Adam? Ea a scos un fir lucios de la partea din spate a capului ei, neuronii ei transmițător, și l-a legat cu a lui Adam. Deci, a fuzionat cu conștiința lui, dar de ce? De ce? DE CE? Ochii ei străluceau, păreau atât de - vii!

"Pentru Dumnezeu Joshua, traaaaaage!"

Dar păpușa mi-a luat-o înainte. Ea a tunat pumnul pe pământ cu impact răsunător. Imediat după aceea ne-a capturat un val de presiune și ne-a catapultat întrun arc larg departe de ei. Un sunet zbârnăea prin aer. Lumina verde a iluminat noaptea. Focul s-a declanșat singur.

Iartă-mă Adam!

Păpușa sa uitat la mine cu dispreț, apoi a căzut la pământ nemișcată. Adam stătea liniștit în brațele ei.

Uimit m-am ridicat de jos. Nu am avut timp să privesc la stânga, nici la rândul său la dreapta. Habar n-am ce sa întâmplat cu trupa mea. Singurul meu gând a fost fiul meu.

Păpușa îl ținea presat la piept, cum ar proteja o mamă copilul ei. Firul luminos de la partea din spate a capului ei a ajuns în ceafa lui Adam. Am văzut impulsuri electrice

trecând prin firul luminos. Adam era încă în viață!

M-am repezit la el, am vrut să răpesc acest neuron transmițător din corpul său și să arunc păpușa la dracu. Am ajuns aproape de el.

"Ai grijă ", a strigat un soldat cu o voce răgușită după mine. Păpușa a deschis ochii care străluceau ca proiectoare de înaltă frecvență. Fata de robot s-a ridicat și a pușcat un val orbitor de lumină spre cer. Pentru o clipă eternă ea a înfășurat noaptea în lumina zilei.

"Ce ... ?"

"Ieși afară de acoloooooo!"; a strigat un soldat. Dar a fost prea târziu. Un cutremur violent a fugit prin pământ și l-a ondulat. Pământul pietros a devenit lichid. Un zgomot asurzitor m-a cuprins. Înainte de a putea înțelege m-am scufundat în apa rece. Un vârtej m-a tras în adâncime. Din colțul ochiului am văzut trupa mea. Au fugit ca și cum ar fi furnici speriate, nu puteau să facă nimic pentru mine nu au știut ce s-a întâmplat.

Am înghițit apă, cuprins de panică am luptat împotriva vârtejului chiar dacă nu am mai știut unde este în sus sau în jos. M-am învățit pierdut în cerc. Aer! Am nevoie de aer! Am amețit. Am văzut stele verzi. Plămâniile mei au început să arză. Nu am mai avut putere să respir, am luat o respirație profundă și ce o surpriză - apa se simte ca aer.

Am căzut prin pătura de apă și am avut o aterizare grea pe fund care mi-a presat aerul din plămâni. Dureros! Am luptat împotriva inconștienței și am ținut ochii fixați pe tabloul de deasupra mea. - Apă tulburată!

Pe partea cealaltă prietenii mei au fugit pe pătura de apă fără a se scufunda. Gurile lor formau strigăte fără sunet. Am strigat după ei, dar ei nu m-au putut vedea, nici auzi. Au fugit neajutorat în sus și în jos până au dispărut din ochii mei. Cu greu m-am ridicat și am întins mâna după pătura de apă. S-au format cercuri dar numai pe partea mea.

Am fost într-o gaură întunerică. Pereți netezi, aproximativ douăzeci de metri în jurul meu, m-au înconjurat. Cum a fost creat acest loc? În acel moment am văzut păpușa. Stătea nemișcată la o oarecare distanță în fața mea, cu fiul meu în brațe. Pieptul lui a crescut și a căzut în cicluri liniștite.

"Adam! ... Ce naiba faci cu el?", am strigat cu disperare. Deoarece am auzit cuvintele ei în capul meu.

Suntem Wairua - suflete de o rasă de mult pierdută. Odată am fost nemuritori! Rasa mea a fost mult timp o simplă gândire, a existat la un nivel de conștiință pură, dacă vrei. Dar apoi am creat materia și viața la un loc mort. Aceasta a fost doar de joc. Nu ne-am dat seama că am lăsat energia noastră de viață în lumea voastră și nu știam că existența noastră a fost legată cu lumea voastră. Așa că am devenit muritor. Murim pentru că voi muriți, murim pentru că această lume este muritoare!

"Nu înțeleg." Mi-am frecat tâmplile. Acest tip de comunicare mi-a dat o durere de cap. Am încercat să o urmăresc. Bănuiesc că relațiile sânt mai complexe și probabil Wairua trebuia să se exprime ușor de înțeles pentru oameni.

Ce faceți aici?, am întrebat în gând.

Păpușa a îndreptat degetul arătător spre mine și a creat o iluzie din zile de mult uitate.

M-am trezit într-o junglă și am recunoscut-o ca atare, chiar dacă nu am mai văzut, pentru că pe pământ nu a existat nici una. Am văzut munți măiestruoși, lacuri strălucitoare, și marea spumantă. Am auzit ciripitul muzical și am văzut păsări fericite

zburând în aer, am văzut cum peștii înoată în apă, mirosind flori parfumate, gustând fructe dulci, m-am simțit fericit, am vrut - să t r ă i e s c! - Am încercat să respir.

A venit timpul pentru a împreuna sfârșitul cu începutul. Adam este ultimul descendent din lumea voastră. Cunoștințele acumulate, toate amintirile ei se află în sângele lui. Am venit să le oferim un nou suflet.

Deși nu am înțeles nimic și nu am vrut să înțeleg nimic, n-am mai putut să-i contrazic păpușei. În acest moment generatorul respirator s-a rupt și în lume a fost liniște.

După un timp:

Într-o zi deosebit de frumoasă au înflorit flori într-o grădină sălbatică. Au crescut copaci puternici. Prin frunzele lor au căzut raze de soare. Fluturii dansează dansul lor etern și vânturile călduțe învârtesc frunzele scăzute. Acolo unde păsările au cântat pasionat și viața a înflorit la maxim s-a trezit un om în paradis - Adam.

1.

## Greece

### Konstantine Paradias Work to do

*“You seek the Messiah, the fire-headed savior” said the shaman. His voice, coming from the narrow mouth at the end of his snout, sounded childlike and distorted, contrasting his giant stature.*

*The woman nodded. She was relieved to have found someone who was at least able to converse in Modern Imperial on this planet. She avoided the shaman’s gaze, fearing a faux-pas.*

*“Yes. I was told by the locals that he had come through here.”*

*“The Queen’s Hounds must have also informed you of his presence here. The Throneworld’s government must be surely well aware of the role he played in organizing my people’s resistance.”*

*She realized then that the shaman could have been suspecting her. He could have been considering her an enemy spy, or a Hound herself. The shaman silenced her, as she was about to speak.*

*“Then again, this is a remote part of the planet, far from the reach of the Hounds or the Queen’s grasp, even at the height of their power here. There is no way you could have found this place if you followed the usual channels, correct?”*

*“Yes. I have come here on my own and out of my own volition. I seek the one you call the Messiah for months now. I’ve followed him from planet to planet, always finding out that I had just missed him.”*

*“So you realized it would be best if, instead of following his footsteps, you merely recreated the path he’s followed so far, correct?”*

*“Yes.”*

*“We have a name for this practice in our planet. We call it the Fas’Har.” He pronounced the alien word swiftly, seemingly spitting it out, as if it were an insult. “It is used by the widows of wrongfully murdered men. They find the killer of their spouses by learning to follow them, by living like them and eventually, becoming them. They become the culprit, in their minds and are thus led to the culprit’s location. Having shared their experience and way of thinking, they are now one and the same, therefore the culprit is unable to escape, since no one can escape himself, in the end.”*

*The shaman stopped to take a long drag from his carved bone pipe. She saw the embers light up and glow inside the hollow end. Even with her helmet blocking out all scent from outside, in her mind she could almost taste the tobacco. It was an acrid, foul-smelling thing that made her want to choke, but intoxicating nonetheless.*

*“When they have found the culprit, they immediately drag him to the local Truthsayer. The culprit and the widow are tied together, then thrown into a great pyre to die.”*

*“Why? Why do such a cruel thing to the widow?”*

*“Because she has become like the culprit. A murderer and criminal in her mind. Her hands are fouled even before she has had the chance to commit her crimes. She is,*

therefore, as much befitting the punishment as he is.”

“What does that have to do with me? I am not seeking a murderer, I’m only-“

“You want to share his mind. To find out where he is, by thinking like he does, therefore following him through the empire, using his own way of thinking as a guide. You want to become him, so that you can find him.”

“Seems like a logical choice. So far, I have failed in tracking him through conventional means, so I thought that-“

“Your way of thinking is good. If you are not a Hound, then it is a fortunate thing. A woman of their kind who thinks like our kind would be a dangerous thing to have around. Tell me, why do you seek the Messiah?”

“He is my brother.”

The shaman raised his long, stringy neck and stared at her. He seemed like he was about to pounce on her, as he stood there, looking her over. She looked at him, anxiety creeping up her spine like a viper, slithering its way up to the base of her skull. Had she been found out? No, the story held, the shaman couldn’t possibly know. Slowly, he placed the pipe to his lips and took another long drag. His form subsided as he seemed to relax.

“He did mention a sister. I remember it well. It seemed so strange to us, then.”

“Why is that?”

“Our gods are only children, born of themselves, by themselves. We are not used to the idea of what your kind calls a pantheon.”

She stifled a laugh.

“So that makes me a goddess, then?”

The shaman’s expression was stern.

“No. It merely makes you his sister. What is it you would like to know?”

She asked him about how her brother had come here, on the planet. How he helped the natives set up an organized resistance against the Queen’s Legions. How he negotiated with the Fire Star Artificers for radguns and sunrifles to arm the rebels. And how, after they had finally struck their first blow on outpost Jocasta, he left the planet by ‘bounding through the Nothing’.

She thanked the shaman and crossed the jungle with her guide, a silent, nosy little native whose name she never quite got right. Reaching port Amethyst, she boarded a voidship and headed toward Fire Star, to speak with the artificers.

20 July, 2559 Anno Reginae

Upon reaching Fire Star, I was immediately beset by hordes of malnourished children that swarmed around me, asking for coin in exchange of services. The spaceport officer rushed in to beat the children away with his baton, shouting obscenities and words of warning at them as they fled.

He was a burly, rough native, dressed in regulation uniform. The Queen’s crimson flowed perfectly with the color of his chitin. He looked like a lobster that tried to pass for a man, especially when he took off his hat to bow graciously to me.

As I crossed port Garnett looking for a cab, I looked around and saw the masses of natives and citizens alike, teeming around me. I felt a strange agitation and unease as I pushed through the crowd, hand firmly placed on my purse.

It is a strange planet, Fire Star. Our first and most prized off-world colony, inhabited



by creatures of insectoid appearance, things that have been under our heel for so long that they have become like some kind of nightmarish version of our kind. Their forms are alien, but their manner and culture have become almost identical to ours. I was startled to find that my cab driver spoke Modern Imperial fluently and I must admit I almost stared at the poor bugger, as he looked back at me from his rearview mirror.

I reached the hotel and quickly locked the door and closed the blinds of my windows. The room was identical to a Throneworld suite, but still felt wrong. I'll try going to sleep. I'm supposed to meet my contact in the Artificers tomorrow.

21 July, 2259 Anno Reginae

The Head Artificer was a native, fluent in Modern Imperial, with an impeccable accent to boot. It was far easier for me to converse with him, I realized, when I avoided looking at him directly. Watching his mandibles click as his strange mouth formed the words of my mother tongue was an unsettling sight, to say the least. He introduced me to the factory foreman when I explained that I was there on official business.

The foreman was an Imperial Citizen, positioned here to oversee the work of the Artificers. He gave me a tour of the factory, where the Empire's greatest assets were built: its radguns and large caliber storm-cannons, its meteor-slings and solar-powered weapons. He showed me how the natives toiled in the depths, their chitin and membranous wings constantly grinding together, creating an eerie symphony amidst the buzzing. In there they worked, thought and acted as one. They weren't model colonial citizens, but truly insects, alien things thinking alien thoughts in unison. He said he couldn't bring himself to trust them. I couldn't agree more.

When I asked one of the native engineers about my quarry, he verified my findings. Yes, he had come through here. Yes, he had negotiated buying a large quantity of firearms. He had paid in cash. The transaction was legal and he could not be held responsible. Imperial decree stated that a Citizen could perform any sort of purchase and use said products as he willed in the Colonies. His paper trail was gone, but I had another question:

Was the order split into parts? Was it to be sent to another planet in the Empire, using illegal channels?

The engineer dodged the subject. Speaking to the foreman, I showed him my credentials and asked for the native to be detained. At this point, I was stretching my cover story to its limit, but I desperately needed the information.

I personally took care of the engineer's interrogation. He kept silent for a long while, claiming he was honor-bound not to expose this information. It took some persuading to make the foreman look the other way as I applied a different method of information extraction, until I finally got the information I wanted.

I could say that I wasn't proud of inflicting pain on another living being. Then again, I'd be lying. I found a certain pleasure in hurting that thing, seeing it lose its façade of humanity inside that room. Somehow, it comforted me.

Having pried the information I wanted out of the engineer, I found out his next possible location. It was the planet Rebis. The shipment was to be deposited on its surface, well out of the local Imperial Forces' reach, where it would be picked up by friendly forces.

I notified my colleagues in Rebis and informed them that I would be heading for their position immediately. It was becoming apparent that my quarry had been planning to support native uprisings across the Colonies as a means of covering up his escape. He was sending weapons to the rebels, in order to hide his tracks.

I left port Garnett on the same day.

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“You should know that this man is extremely dangerous.”

“I am aware of that.”

“He is a traitor to Her Majesty, to every ideal we hold dear, but most of all, he is a heretic and a pagan.”

“Yes, Matrona.”

“He has embraced the unholy ways of the non-humans. He has come in contact and learned the ways of the peoples in the Colonies. Learned to speak their tongue and live like they do.”

“But he has also unearthed secrets.”

“Secrets that have cost him his soul, child. He has become a creature that is contradictory to everything we hold dear. He has spat upon everything he has been taught, or worse yet, he has integrated it into their ways. To use the sacred Sciences the way he does, to fuse them with those...outrageous beliefs, it's simply preposterous!”

“They claim that he can traverse the Nothing at will. Others say that no weapon can harm him and that-“

Thwak.

“You will be silent, child! He is nothing to be marveled at! He is a pustule, a sore, a gangrenous limb! He must be cut off and left to die, so that he may not contaminate the remainder of the sacred body of the Empire!”

“Does Her Majesty share the same opinion? Wasn't it her idea, after all, to expose her own firstborn child to this...unclean knowledge?”

“It was. But she was expecting to create a weapon. A thinking weapon that could be pointed at the enemies of the State and crush them at will.”

“Must have come as quite a surprise to them when the weapon deemed her as the Empire's greatest enemy. Right, Matrona?”

22 July, 2259 Anno Reginae

I see the same dream every night. I see myself speaking to the Reverend Mother, after finishing my training course, I see myself kneeling before her Majesty and being briefed on the nature of my mission.

I can recall these events with perfect clarity and I can jump back and forth across the stages of my so far failed quest, but I cannot dream. It is a strange thing, to be immersed so deeply in memory, deprived of the blanket of nonsense that shelters you in your sleep.

During training, the dream engineers had encouraged me to keep a journal. To write down my thoughts and memories. They claimed it would help me adjust to the systemic shock I had gone through during integration. They explained the symptoms in great

detail and told me that I might experience some changes in my subconscious and that I should not panic.

So far, this journal has helped me keep my thoughts in order. By revisiting my previous entries, I have been able to point out my errors. Thanks to it, I have realized that I cannot possibly keep up with my quarry by hunting him in the conventional way.

The planet Rebis looms closer. Soon enough, I'll be landing in Port Moonstone. There are no friendly operatives for my mission there. I will have to move under deep cover, like a plain Citizen and attempt to enter the rebel-controlled zones, so that I may find out about the fate and the recipient of the shipment that came for Fire Star.

I keep thinking about what the shaman told me of the Fas'Har ritual. How, by following in the killer's footsteps, the widow becomes him in mind and spirit. I am slowly becoming so much more like my quarry. I feel like I'm slowly growing more...distant. That, by becoming like him, I am gradually moving farther and farther away from anyone else.

No. I shouldn't personify him. I shouldn't give my quarry any human qualities, they told me that much. I should always refer to him as the quarry or it. I've never seen him, not up close. I've only been shown a few stills, to help identify him. He's been painted as a monster to me, an anathema to everything the Empire stands for.

But sometimes, if I look at the stills really hard, I can imagine his voice. It's a deep, booming voice, that sends chills up my spine. It's the voice of a man born to rule. A man who was raised to decide the fate of the Empire's billions on a daily basis.

I understand now, why Her Majesty sent him off to dwell among the natives. She wanted him as far away from her center of power as possible. She knew that, given a few years, the boy would outshine her by far. She was a terrible visage of power, but she'd be lost under the very brilliance of his presence. Soon enough, she'd be outranked in her own court.

She thought she'd hamstring the boy and keep him well away from any real power. What she didn't foresee, however, was that the boy would make friends with the natives. That he'd cross the Colonies, collecting information, all the time growing in power among the common men. That he'd turn into a force of change and that his sphere of influence would far outweigh hers.

It never crossed her mind then, that her boy would also stumble upon forbidden knowledge. Knowledge from cultures far older than Earth's. That he would begin to delve deeper and deeper into that vast pool of wisdom, seeking means and ways to increase his own, personal power. The boy, who was by that time a man in his own right, was aiming to increase his power to an unimaginable degree.

He'd turn himself into a force of nature, backed by the teeming, suffering myriads, able to push back against the empire's military machine. Unfortunately for him, he chose to keep his power a secret and not openly reveal his might. He chose to fight the Empire in their own turf.

The official version says that he lost that battle. That he was molded into shape as a weapon in Her Majesty's service, before he made for one last, great escape, with the aid of colonial sympathizers. It is my belief there is more to this story than they let on. Some important development that has been left out, for Her Majesty's sake.

24 July, 2259 Anno Reginae

After reaching port Moonstone, I quickly crossed customs and looked for Rebis natives that would be willing to guide me outside Imperial Jurisdiction. Most of them were unwilling to aid me and I would have been forced to seek aid from a colonial officer, were it not for a small, native man who offered his services for an extraordinary price.

When he inquired as to why I wished to go into the wild zones, I replied that I was an Imperial cartographer. He laughed heartily at my reply and explained that he'd require the cash up front, since there was no guarantee that I'd be back at all, if I was really an agent of Her Majesty (he pronounced it Hair Mejestii, almost made me laugh).

We begin our trek at dawn.

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"This is preposterous! I am not an—"

The native's hand crashed on her cheek. She tried rolling with the blow to lessen the impact, but the pain formed white-hot blossoms in her eyes. She felt her head thump on the ground. She tested her lip and discovered it had split.

"You are an Imperial agent. A spy, sent here to map our region, yes? We know this. The guide told us as much. Get up."

She struggled to rise. Her hands were tied behind her back, her ankles bound together. She spat some dirt and blood down and looked at the native. Its vertical mouth opened and closed the two crimson-flecked orbs it had for eyes, stared back at her.

"You serve the Queen Bitch" (The words came out as Quinn Bitz: it seemed that Her Majesty's name was spoken as an insult among this planet's natives). "You Army or Hound?"

"I am a private contractor, working as a cartographer for the Colonial Exploration Society. Were I in the military, I'd surely have had backup!"

"It is of no matter. You were perhaps foolish to think you could enter this deep into our territory without being noticed. You were detected by our scouts two days ago. You attempted to enter the Shattered Zone. Why?"

She took a deep breath and formulated a lie. She licked her lips. Behind her interrogator, she could see two other natives, spilling the contents of her backpack on the ground, shifting through them.

"I've come here to map the Shattered Zone. It's the only place in the Empire where the long-term aftereffects of a Ley-Bomb detonation can be documented. I came here simply to map out the area then leave, as soon as possible."

"You lie. I can smell lies. I have been trained by birth to do this. Human lies smell like spoilt milk and yours just made my stomach churn with disgust." It translated his little joke at its comrades, who chuckled heartily, looking at her. One was leafing through her diary, having broken the lock with ease.

The native grabbed her by the neck with two of its arms, the other two crossed at his waist. He clenched lightly at her throat.

"I know how to kill humans. I have killed them before. You are fragile creatures, useless without armor or radguns. All it takes is a little pressure and I break your spine

so you are paralyzed from the neck down. You will crawl, dragging yourself by your teeth the rest of your life. Tell me the truth. Now.”

“I came here looking for a man they call Rust. I was told he is on this planet.”

His hands lightened their grip, but didn't leave her throat.

“Rust? The man from the Nothing? The man who gave us the radguns?”

“Yes.”

“He was killed in the Shattered Zone, where the Ley-Bomb detonated. The imperials know it well.”

“As I said, I am not Imperial. I work for some sympathizers from the Throneworld.”

“To kill him? He is surely no friend to humans, not after the aid he has given us in Rebis and the other worlds he was moved through.”

“There are people who oppose the Queen's rule. There are people who wish to rally at his side.”

His grip on her throat relaxed. He stepped back, letting her go.

“But they do not want him as a leader, do they? They only want him to take down the Queen Bitch. This much I know. He was not wanted here, not by our leaders. They wanted his help but they did not want him around.”

“How come? I thought that he aided you, that he gave you the firepower necessary to fight off the Colonial army.”

“That he did, but he is a dangerous one, Rust. He covets power and he toys with those he supports. In more ways than one, he is far worse than the Queen Bitch. That is why he was to be exiled, after the war was over.”

“So you are saying he isn't dead?”

“Rust would not die. I was close to his personal guard, my second eldest brother. He would drink poisoned mead and be shot by lightgun, but he was impervious to that. We knew the Ley-Bomb did not kill him, even though it killed so many of us.”

“Then he is an enemy of your people.”

“He is a threat to our leaders, not our people. Our people loved him. He was adored the minute he chose to give up his position on Rebis and live here, in the wilds. It is why he was given secrets.”

“What kind of secrets?”

“Dangerous ones. You seek to find him, to recruit him? Tell the truth.”

“I seek to kill him.”

“It is good, then. We want him dead.”

“Why?”

“He is a threat to the leaders of Rebis. He has given the people too much power and elevated himself to eyes of the commoners, as I said. He survived the effect of your despicable bomb. Should he return, having applied the secrets of our kind, he will surely make the planet his own. I am the heir of the tribe Xolotl. I cannot allow a human to take away my birthright.”

She felt relieved. Apparently natives were just as petty and power-hungry as men. For some reason, this comforted her.

“We know he jumped through the Nothing, the moment the Ley-Bomb exploded. He headed for Ostanes. He has a great number of followers there, underground.”

“Ostanes? Why would he dare to go there? There is nothing there for him!”

*“If he has used the secrets we have given him, he can make so much more than you can imagine there.”*

*The native ordered its comrades to let her go. She was given her things back and shoved away, into the blue verdant hell that was the wilds of Rebis. The future leader of Xolotl whispered a short command to her that would lead her back to the colonial outposts. She would forget the command in a day, unable to recall it.*

*As she reached port Opal, she rented a suite, wore fresh clothes and armed her concealable radgun. She then found her guide’s house, entered it and shot him twice in the chest, in front of his family. Feeling relieved, thanks to the therapeutic effect of retribution, she took a Voidship to Ostanas.*

*26 July, 2559 Anno Reginae*

*Ostanas is a red-hot planet, orbiting the Sun. The days are short and unbearably hot and the nights offer little comfort. It’s a planet with a very small population, mostly used by the Empire as a dump for its political dissenters and anarchists. It took me a lot of pull to clear rights for a prolonged stay.*

*The populace resides in underground bunkers, connected by a series of tunnels. The planet has absolutely no autonomy and is completely dependent on regular Imperial runs for supplies, which effectively stops its inhabitants from rebelling.*

*It’s not as horrible or disconcerting a place as Fire Star or Rebis. For once, I was not surrounded by inhuman-looking natives, but by human beings, albeit ones that shared a deep and bitter hate for everything I stood for. These were the revolutionaries that promised the common men a better life under their rule.*

*The most amusing thing about Ostanas’ structure was how it was divided in sectors, according to the political beliefs of the populace. There was the Popular sector (named after the People’s Party, whose major players were exiled to Ostanas), the Anarchist sector (which was divided into smaller sub-sectors, each run like a small feud), the Counter-Royalty sector (a number of royalists who supported revolutionary and terrorist activity in an attempt to propel themselves across the line of succession) and the Free Thought Sector (which was mostly comprised of poor saps who had no aspiration to power whatsoever and had merely said or done the wrong things at the wrong place).*

*You had to belong to a sector in Ostanas, or else you were immediately marked by its inhabitants as an imperial agent, sent in to interfere with their society. It was remarkable, how those unfortunate souls somehow were convinced that whatever they did here, inside this lightless, hopeless hole they had been shoved in, somehow mattered. I chose to move into the Free Thought sector, pretending I was the mistress of a member of the House of Lords, sent here to cover up a sex scandal.*

*They immediately took me in and asked no further questions. There seemed to be no other women present in this sector, perhaps in all of Ostanas.*

*28 July, 2559 Anno Reginae*

*I marveled at the ease with which I could extract information from these men. They are all desperate beings, too long deprived of the fairer sex. Apparently, there are a few*

women who live in Ostanas, but they're wretched, broken things who despise me. I try my best to stay out of their way.

There's a man they call Etheridge. He is some sort of mover and shaker in this little hellhole, so I immediately did my best to get his attention. He is a man who claims to have sinned against nature and toyed with God's domain, sent here voluntarily, so that his malevolent genius would not harm the Empire.

He was easy to manipulate and easier to bed. He can't hold a secret when asked by a beautiful woman, he told me, and so confided that he had seen my quarry and that he knew him. He claimed to know him better than anyone in the Inner Circle of the Empire's royalty.

He claims that he was part of an experiment conducted with utmost secrecy within the folds of Her Majesty's family. An experiment on eugenics, educational techniques and application of sacred Sciences that aimed to produce the finest, most glorious seeds from the Empire's royal loins.

According to what he divulged, he was responsible for removing the child from the Queen's womb, then subjecting it to a series of chymical infusions, inside an artificial womb. The child was isolated inside a chamber, where he was experimented with, his growth closely monitored.

When the child had developed some small cognitive ability, he was exposed to a series of infusions that would integrate a vast sum of knowledge in its brain, knowledge that would be indented into his very being at the moment of birth.

When the child the apex of its growth inside the womb, it was then removed and trained. It was then subjected to a series of physical and mental tests. The child passed them all with flying colors, of course.

According to specific orders from Her Majesty, the child was not to be touched, never to be tampered with. It was not allowed to come in contact with, or see any other being than herself. The child was to bond with no other human being, other than Her Majesty.

He never got to see the child, of course. He had at that time grown appalled by the sheer inhumanity of the very experiment he was conducting and thus, asked to be sent to Ostanas. I doubt whether the child's upbringing was his only crime, or if it just were the straw that broke the back of his atrophied conscience.

29 July, 2559 Anno Reginae

Etheridge brought a friend of his over. He claims to have been a former member of Her Majesty's intelligence service. He did not give me his name, but I have no reason to think he could possibly blow my cover.

The man told me that he knew of the child, that he had seen it. It was a strange thing, so little like a human boy. There seemed to be something about it, its eyes, or the way it spoke, or even its very presence that made him feel unease. Her Majesty, of course, kept him always at her side.

The child was partly the reason he was in Ostanas, now. Apparently, it had some minor cognitive ability that he could not explain. Somehow, the child was able to reach out to the future and always be one step ahead from anyone, be they playmates or officers of the state.

At the time, the man had been involved in a ploy aimed to wrest control from the Imperial Trading Company's monopoly on a number of goods. The plan failed, as the child realized their conspiracy at a fete and revealed it to his mother. She sent the conspirators to Ostanes, but he had deciphered the way things would unfold already. The way he saw it, it was the child's intention for him to be sent here.

The child was a danger to Her Majesty's rule. Even at a young age, it possessed a quick wit, vast knowledge and a mysterious power. It was becoming apparent that he posed a danger to her rule. Her Majesty would not have that.

He told her about the child's exploits in the Colonies (of which she knew already, but was amazed at his extensive knowledge of the Empire's goings-on even in this place). He told her about how the child (now a man) obviously planned to return to set up a covert coup against his mother. He also told her something else:

He told her how the child had denounced his claim to succession before the Inner Circle of the Empire. He was informed of these events by eyewitnesses, who were subsequently sent to Ostanes to ensure that they remained a secret.

The witnesses claimed, he said, that the child had come there to present Her Majesty, his peers, cousins and uncles with a proposal, a treaty, if you will. He proposed denouncing his claim to the throne and allowing the rest of his cousins and uncles to fight for the succession, in exchange for the position of supreme Anax in the following Colonies, that would since become autonomous: Fire Star, Rebis and Zokhara.

Of course, the witnesses claimed, he was ridiculed. Her Majesty herself ordered the Hounds to detain him. It is said that he merely looked at them wearily, as if he had just failed to explain a simple notion to a child, then just...disappeared. He somehow, someway, made a getaway. He was not to be found anywhere in the vicinity and a short message delivered via covert channels was sent to the Inner Circle, merely saying: "prepare for war".

The man's information was jumbled and uncertain from that point on, but this much is clear. The heir to the Empire had flexed his muscles before the Inner Circle and then went on to direct a covert war against the Empire, using his allies in the Colonies.

He created a war that nearly tore the Empire's grip on the planets and severely drained its coffers. Most importantly, however, was that this was a war conducted by one man. A man who would not die, a man who could move from planet to planet at will. A man armed with strange, alien knowledge from three worlds.

Her Majesty had attempted to kill one man. A monster that she had created, thinking she could banish it with a wave of her hand. Instead, she had her Empire brought to its knees by that monster, by a single, solitary foe. Her own son.

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"And on what grounds am I detained, Chairman?"

"Under suspicion of being an agent of the Crown, and of conspiring with Royalist sympathizers!"

"These men aren't Royalists! They're stuck in this hole with you, for Heaven's sake!"

"Nevertheless, they have confessed to their allegiance and dealings with the Crown, after questioning."



*"You beat them within an inch of their lives! Anyone would agree to anything after that!"*

*"That is irrelevant. What is important is this: we know you for a spy and a political saboteur. We also happen to know about the contents of your little diary and of your purpose."*

*"Then I guess there's no reason for me to keep up this charade, is there?"*

*"We know who you are planning to strike against and of his activity across the Colonies. We are also aware of a substantial bounty being placed on his head, announced to us by former agents of the Inner Circle. What we'd like to know is what you wish to do with him, should you locate him."*

*"My objective is to merely locate him. I have been given specific instructions later, which I am not at liberty to expose."*

*"Understood. Know this, however. Should you choose not to divulge this information, you will be hobbled and then forced into slave labor in the Popular sector for the remainder of your days, well away from any means of contacting any Imperial agents. We will make sure you rot, see."*

*"Very well. I am to find him and then I have been instructed to kill him."*

*"Kill him? How?"*

*"I have had my humors chymically altered so that I may affect him at the moment I reach him, effectively poisoning his mental faculties. Having incapacitated him thus, a team of Hounds will arrive at my location from a nearby Colony as soon as possible and extract him, to deliver him to the Throneworld."*

*"What makes you think he'll let you come close enough to him?"*

*"I bear the likeness of a woman he loved, when he was younger. She died in Fire Star. He is not aware of it. We believe there's reason for him to mistake me for her, long enough for the humors to affect him."*

*"Very well, then. We will provide you with his location."*

*"Why?"*

*"We seek to gain the Crown's acceptance once again, so that we may leave Ostances and return to Throneworld. Aiding an agent of the Crown to destroy its hated enemy will provide the necessary pull to achieve this."*

*"Fair enough. Where is he?"*

*"He is currently residing inside an abandoned voidstation, orbiting the Sun. He is alone there, without any personnel that we know of. His position has so far been hidden by his sympathizers, but we have gained access to it."*

*"Why would he be alone there? Even with the powers attributed to him, he can't possibly defend himself against an attack!"*

*"We have reason to believe it is a display of hubris on his part. We also believe he does this as part of some strange native ritual. Perhaps he believes that his proximity to the Sun will boost his ill-gotten power."*

*"When can you send me off Ostances?"*

*"By next dawn at the latest. We will also notify our colleagues off world, to make sure you hold your part of the agreement. Your diary will be kept here, to be used as collateral."*

*"Understood. Now take these things off me."*

The voidship that she boarded was a modified trading ship, most probably purchased using black market channels. Its crew were hardy men, who looked at her with mixed feelings of desire and suspicion. Even at this age, the presence of a woman on a vessel was considered an omen of bad luck, a superstition that had somehow survived millennia of progress and more remarkably, under the rule of a female despot.

Then again, there were many scholarly anecdotes that debated on the womanhood of her Majesty, which were more than enough to keep this superstition going.

The voidship orbited the Sun, a small dot hidden by its brilliance. From the port windows, she could see the miles-long jets of fire that burst from its surface as it bubbled endlessly. Inside this seething, burning mass, she discerned the shapes of its inhabitants, giant things that resembled whales in shape and size, with enormous flippers that propelled them through the fire. They moved like mountains, gently swept away by the ripples on the Sun's surface.

It was then that she realized the significance of the position of his hideout. He hid behind the sun, inside a station long abandoned. He chose a place to dwell that would befit a god. A place that would allow him to rest and plot and bask in his own glory. A place where he would rise, like a phoenix, to swoop down upon a weakened Empire.

He chose to engineer a war that would loosen the grip of his mother in secret, that would make her seem like a devil in human form, only so he could reveal himself then as the one and True Messiah and claim the Throne for good. There wouldn't be one person among the common folk that would doubt the Sun God's claim.

She shivered at the thought, then considered whether her disguise would hold up there. The chymical balance of her form could react unexpectedly in this heat and might give her away too soon, or worse yet, render her poison useless. She needed to act fast.

She tried to consider every possible outcome. It was entirely possible that, even there, he could possess some sort of means to contact any sympathizers to his cause. He could have been notified of her coming and her purpose. But that would be impossible. Ostanes couldn't have alerted him that soon.

She had the element of surprise. From her mind, she dug up his name, which was hidden by a certain mental command. Upon willing it, her humours would modify so that her personality was that of the woman he loved, an approximation that would distract him from erecting any kind of defense.

But the approximation would not be nearly good enough. It was a gamble. She'd have to be the woman he loved. From the depths of her mind, she formulated an image of him at his young age: a powerful thing, its mind ripe with knowledge and ability far beyond those of his years. She saw a pair of eyes that looked positively ancient, weary with the burden of knowledge and of anticipation.

He had the power to look into the future, the man from Ostanes said. Therefore, he could see everything that lay before him. But he could not have mastered this ability, not at that age. Perhaps he could see have seen the woman she had to be, then, in his dreams. He could have thought of her, imagined her, then found her and seen their future together. He was probably trapped in his own happiness back then. It was the

vision of a simple, peaceful life that drove him away from her.

He imagined himself as a mere mortal, with a litter of children, content in a world that would stifle his unique talents and drag him down to the grave an old, insignificant man. He left her and never saw her live the rest of her days, to die in the midst of a rebellion he engineered for the sake of a greater future he planned for himself.

She felt a wave of sudden bitterness and unexpected understanding rise up from inside her. She felt the humors inside her body churn and change. It dawned on her then: she hated and loved him in the very same breath. She had been spurned by his egotistical need to become something greater than she could ever possibly be. But her love, a deep, pure, mindless thing poisoned her with understanding. He was so much greater than she could ever hope to be. It would be far worse for her to stand in his way, to stop him from fulfilling his destiny.

She opened her eyes and felt her thoughts settle into her body for the first time. She felt her heart beat in her chest, drumming madly and thought: I will destroy him. Because he spurned me. Because he killed me, though unintentionally, for his own benefit. I will end him, because he deserves this death more than he deserves the glorious future that he engineered.

No one else will die for his sake or by his machinations anymore, but me. I came back to kill him, for the sake of the future we could have had together. For the sake of the thousands that will have a future when he is gone.

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“This is as far as we go. You will be shot out in a light vessel onto the station. From there, you will board it and reach him. Understood?”

“Perfectly.”

“Very well. In you go, miss...”

“Lady. Lady Logos.”

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The shuttle was a rickety thing that was shot through the void at blinding speed. She felt the heat from the Sun heat her skin even under all the protective layers, making her sweat.

The vessel crashed on the station and very nearly fell to pieces. She was tossed around inside like a ragdoll, then slowly got up, checking to see if her suit had ruptured. Opening the door of the vessel, she crossed the distance with a single bound, feeling the Sun tugging at her, almost shooting her off her course and into its gravitic pull. The feeling passed, as she landed on the entryway.

It was open, unguarded. The station really was unmanned. She crossed the threshold and realized it was cool inside. She felt serene in there, her hate pushed down under waves of calm that washed over her. At once, she realized it was his very presence that created this change in her thoughts.

As she crossed the inner threshold of the station, she realized there was air inside. She could breathe. Without hesitation, she took out her helmet and let her hair loose. He

stood near a large panel, looking down at the sun. He turned to her and she saw him stare, blushing like a schoolboy.

It was then that she almost gave up on the mission, as her love for him (the love of a woman she emulated) bubbled up inside. He was a tall thing, with a wiry frame, but regal. His hair was a fiery red mane and his eyes were perfect emeralds. He seemed to somehow fill the room, to be the absolute center of her attention.

“You?”

“I came for you. I found you.”

“I never wanted you to find me. I did everything I could to-“

“But here I am. I promised I’d never let us go, didn’t I? No matter how much you wanted to pretend that letting me go was for my own good.”

She came closer to him with each step. Her purpose forgotten, she moved in to embrace him.

“This wasn’t supposed to happen. Not now, not like this.” He let her take him into her arms.

“I came for you. I found you. What wasn’t supposed to happen? We were meant to be together, you told me as much.”

“No. You don’t understand I...I couldn’t be...not like this!” he felt him tremble in her hands. The poison was taking effect. There was nothing she could do about it.

“What’s wrong? What’s happening?”

“You know what’s happening. I know what is happening. They’re using you to get to me. They’ve made you so that you can poison me. I had seen this coming, you see. But I didn’t want to believe it.”

“I wouldn’t hurt you! I’d never hurt you!”

“No, not you. Not now. But the one you used to be, she used every ounce of her strength to find and destroy me. She followed in my footsteps until she became the thing that I would be powerless against!”

He fell on the floor of the vessel, his whole body convulsing. She stroked his hair and held him, sobbing deeply. The guilt rose up inside her, the disgust. She wanted to take it all back. She wanted to have remained dead on Fire Star, that he may live.

“But...you see...” he said, gasping for air, his teeth chattering. He was running a fever. She could feel him grow weaker by the second. “I-I...foresaw...this.”

“You knew? You knew of this? Why couldn’t you stop me?”

“Because...because I needed you back...if only to apologize...if only...to be there to pay back for what I did to you...with my life.”

“You won’t die! You can’t die! Not like this!”

“I...I won’t die. I have seen to that. You...you know what I did? Here? Wh-why I wanted to work...alone?”

She leaned in closer to listen to him. His voice was a whisper now.

“I made myself...a n-new body. A body built with chymical secrets from the Colonies. A body that would amplify my power...a hundred times over. But I couldn’t use this body, unless a certain ritual was performed.”

He coughed and wretched for long moments. The vessel grew hotter. The air thinner.

“I needed someone...to kill me though. To weaken me so that I could...die here. So that my soul would jump to my new body. Couldn’t do it on my own. Wouldn’t let

anyone kill me. I'd retaliate before I knew it."

He gasped for air. She felt the heat creep in the vessel, burning her lungs.

"I didn't see you coming so soon. I thought maybe I would have...a few days...to compose myself, to-to properly...apologize. But I guess...this will suffice. You must go. My grip on this vessel is almost gone. The heat will kill us both."

"No. I'll stay. I can't let you burn to death. I can't stand the thought of seeing you suffer."

"You'll stay? You'll die by my hand again?"

"Yes. For you."

Her hands reached out and grabbed him by the throat before he could react. Her fingers clenched round his windpipe and squeezed, squeezed, harder and harder. She watched him thrash, as her lungs were on fire. She saw him gasp for air as she herself choked him to death. She saw him struggle to free himself, his palms slapping on the sizzling hot metal floor, as the heat burned through her suit.

He died then, seconds before her hair caught fire. Before her skin bubbled, burned and melted. She felt her eyeball pop and her brow slowly slide down her eyes, like melted wax. She saw the glint of bronze under her skin, as it also bubbled and melted away, a pool that formed round his dead body. She thought of the Fas'Har, of culprits and widows dying together in the same pyre.

The vessel burst into flames, descending into the Sun. It was gone in a flash. There was an insignificant ripple on the molten ocean, that was swept away by an idle motion of a beast that passed by, distracted by thoughts hundreds of years old.

There was silence there, for a moment, as something gently bubbled up from the surface. It had the form of a man, but a skin that looked so much like molten iron. It was a thing that looked around with inquisitive eyes, thinking a dead man's thoughts the way the dead man that gave birth to it did. It brushed its fingers across the hide of the beasts that swam around it and looked at the expanses of the Empire that spread before it.

For a moment, it thought of a woman that had died twice for its sake. But the thought was gone in a flash.

He had work to do.

*Maria Petrou Για να σώσουμε τον κόσμο, και τη γάτα*

Ζω σ' έναν χώρο σφραγισμένο που δεν τον επισκέπτεται κανείς, μιά έπαυλη τριγυρισμένη από ροδώνες, χτισμένη πριν δύο αιώνες στη μέση του πουθενά, από έναν εκκεντρικό και πάμπλουτο ερημίτη ονόματι Σίμπσον, που λάτρευε τα τριαντάφυλλα. Έχω υπηρέτες ρομπότ και μία φοβισμένη γάτα που δε μ' αγαπάει - ή δε μπορεί να μου το δείξει. Η μοναδική μου επικοινωνία με τον έξω κόσμο είναι μέσω υπολογιστή. Το χάρισμά μου, η αναπηρία μου, με έχει κάνει απροσπέλαστη, σαν τις βασίλισσες που ζούσαν χίλια πεντακόσια χρόνια πριν, με τα φουσκωτά, γεμάτα κοσμήματα μαλλιά και τους κολλαρισμένους δαντελένιους τους γιακάδες.

Όταν γεννήθηκα έδειχνα φυσιολογική, όμως γρήγορα φάνηκε η διαφορά μου. Ήμουν πολύτιμη για το λαμπρό τους μέλλον. Με πήραν απ' την οικογένειά μου - με όλες τις νομότυπες διαδικασίες, τα Ταλαντούχα παιδιά ήταν κτήμα της Συμπολιτείας - και

προσπάθησαν να με εκπαιδεύσουν. Δεν τα κατάφεραν. Το ταλέντο μου ήταν πολύ μεγάλο, πολύ άγριο για να υποταχτεί σε προκαθορισμένες εντολές, και πολύ φωτεινό για να διαστραφεί και να περάσει στην απέναντι όχθη. Ήταν επικίνδυνο. Έτσι, όταν μεγάλωσα αρκετά για να μπορώ να αυτοεξυπηρετούμαι, και να κουμαντάρω στοιχειωδώς ένα νοικοκυριό, με απομόνωσαν στον λανθασμένο τους παράδεισο που, σίγουρα, λειτούργησε ως καθαρτήριο και γι' άλλους πριν από εμένα, είναι πολύ καλοσυντηρημένος. Φυσικά, δε θα χώνανε στη φυλακή τα πολύτιμα Ταλέντα, για ευνόητους λόγους. Και το μεγαλύτερο πλεονέκτημα, ήταν απομονωμένος – και στη Συμπολιτεία δεν υπάρχουν πολλά πραγματικά απομονωμένα μέρη.

Έχω ό,τι τραβάει η ψυχή μου εκτός απ' την ελευθερία μου. Ένα μέγαρο γεμάτο με αντίκες, τα αυθεντικά έπιπλα της εποχής του, και αντικείμενα ακόμα πιο παλιά και παράξενα, γιατί ο κύριος Σίμπσον ήταν συλλέκτης. Ένα θερμοκήπιο, γεμάτο από εξωτικά φυτά. Ο ροδώνας περικυκλώνει το σπίτι, ένας αρωματικός, αγκαθωτός λαβύρινθος, και τον ροδώνα περικυκλώνει ηλεκτροστατικός φράχτης. Βρίσκομαι εκατοντάδες χιλιόμετρα από κάθε ανθρώπινη κατοικία, γιατί το μυαλό μου είναι πολύ δυνατό, μπορεί να εκπέμψει μακριά. Οδική πρόσβαση δεν υπάρχει πια. Τις προμήθειες τις φέρνουν σκάφη-ρομπότ, δεν τολμούν ν' αφήσουν άνθρωπο να με πλησιάσει, θα τον διαστρέψω.

Πάντως, απ' την αρχή μου έστειλαν ολοβιβλία, από μικρή είχα κλίση στο διάβασμα, και φυσικά φοβόντουσαν μη γυρίσω σιγά-σιγά σε πρωτόγονη κατάσταση, από την έλλειψη ερεθισμάτων και την τρέλα της απομόνωσης. Τα περισσότερα ήταν βαρετά, βιογραφίες μεγάλων ανδρών και γυναικών, καθαρή προπαγάνδα, κι φυσικά η ιστορία της Συμπολιτείας. Όμως, απ' όλα κάτι μάθαινα και συνδύαζα, και κατάλαβα σε τι θέση βρισκόμουν. Τα Ταλαντούχα παιδιά, για αιώνες, ήταν από τα σπουδαιότερα ανταλλάξιμα αγαθά, τα πιο επίζηλα επίγεια πλούτη, την εποχή που τα Παλιά Κράτη δεν είχαν ενωθεί ακόμα. Η προέλευσή τους είναι χαμένη στα χρόνια και τους αστικούς θρύλους. Άλλοι πιστεύουν ότι ήταν μετάλλαξη λόγω ραδιενέργειας, που εμφανίστηκε μετά τη Μεγάλη Καταστροφή, άλλοι ότι ήταν υβρίδια με κάποια τηλεπαθητική εξωγήινη ράτσα από την εποχή των Πρώτων Επαφών, κι άλλοι ότι προήλθαν από μυστικά πειράματα μιας πρώην υπερδύναμης, που ξέφυγαν από τον έλεγχο της. Μα πάντα προέκυπταν σποραδικά, ανεξαρτήτως φύλου και φυλής, διαφορετικής εμβέλειας, και χωρίς αρκετές κοινές παραμέτρους, ώστε να μπορέσουν να κατηγοριοποιηθούν και ν' αναπαραχθούν. Τον πρώτο καιρό, κανείς δεν είχε καταλάβει ακριβώς τη δύναμή τους. Όταν όμως φάνηκε ότι οι Ταλαντούχοι, με το χάρισμά τους, μπορούσαν πολύ εύκολα να καταλάβουν αξιώματα, ή να γίνουν καλλιτέχνες και δημόσια είδωλα και να επηρεάσουν τις μάζες, τα παγκόσμια συντηρητικά κέντρα εξουσίας και οι στρατιωτικοί άρχισαν ν' ανησυχούν. Μπροστά στην κοινή απειλή, τα Παλιά Κράτη έβαλαν για λίγο στην άκρη τις διαφορές τους, και ψηφίστηκαν παντού νόμοι που έκαναν τα παιδιά ιδιοκτησία του Κράτους.

Φυσικά, υπήρξαν πολλές αντιδράσεις, από φιλελεύθερες οργανώσεις, διανοουμένους, και μεγάλου μέρους των πολιτών. Ποιός γονιός θέλει να δώσει το παιδί του; Αύριο, για οποιονδήποτε λόγο, μπορεί να πάρουν και το δικό μου, σκέφτηκαν πολλοί. Όμως οι νομοί για την απόκρυψη των Ταλαντούχων ήταν πάρα πολύ αυστηροί, προβλέποντας μακροχρόνια φυλάκιση ή, ακόμα, και τη θανατική ποινή. Κι όταν ιδρύθηκε η Συμπολιτεία, που ένωσε τα μισά Κράτη της Γης, κι επιβλήθηκε η στρατοκρατία, οι φιλελεύθερες φωνές φιμώθηκαν. Με άσχημο τρόπο. Τα περισσότερα παιδιά κατάφεραν να τα εκπαιδεύσουν και να τα διαστρέψουν από μικρά, κι έγιναν πολύ επικίνδυνοι άνθρωποι – πάντα όμως ελεγχόμενοι –

μα υπήρχαν και περιπτώσεις σαν τη δική μου, όμως δεν βρήκα λεπτομέρειες για τη μοίρα τους. Κάποιοι, που προσπάθησαν ν' αποδράσουν, εκτελέστηκαν ως προδότες, για παραδειγματισμό. Υποθέτω ότι δε θα είχαν πολύ μεγάλη εμβέλεια. Οι προσπάθειες να τα ζευγαρώσουν απέτυχαν, συχνά τα τέκνα δύο Ταλαντούχων δεν είχαν το χάρισμα των γονιών τους. Κι ούτε και τα πιο ακραία πειράματα δεν κατάφεραν ν' απομονώσουν τα γονίδια του Ταλέντου. Έτσι, περιορίστηκαν να τους χρησιμοποιούν με προσοχή, σα μαριονέτες, και να ελπίζουν ότι κάποτε θα λυθεί το μυστήριο. Ένας στρατός εκπαιδευμένων Ταλαντούχων θα ήταν ακατανίκητος. Δυστυχώς για τη Συμπολιτεία, Ταλαντούχους είχε φυσικά και η Άλλη Πλευρά.

Κι ακόμα χειρότερα γι αυτούς, εξερευνώντας συνεχώς το αχανές караβάν-σεράι του φιλότεχνου μακαρίτη, και

θαυμάζοντας εξακολουθητικά τα εξωτικά, μυστηριώδη αντικείμενά του, ανακάλυψα, σε μια μεγάλη κρύπτη στο υπόγειο, πολύ έντεχνα καμουφλαρισμένη πίσω από την κάβα με τ' αραχνιασμένα μπουκάλια οίνων εκλεκτών (που μάλλον είχαν γίνει ξύδι), έναν απίστευτο κι όμως αληθινό θησαυρό. Χάρτινα βιβλία! Τα χάρτινα βιβλία, που θεωρούνταν απλώς μια ξεπερασμένη διασκέδαση εκκεντρικών, ή μούχλιαζαν αργά στις ξεχασμένες πια Βιβλιοθήκες, απαγορεύτηκαν πριν τρεις αιώνες. Κατασχέθηκαν. Κάμποσα κήκαν σε δημόσιες τελετές – αρκετές φορές μαζί με τους κατόχους τους, πάρα πολλά κατέληξαν σε μυστικές αποθήκες του στρατού και στα υπόγεια του Ιερατείου. Όμως, σίγουρα, θα υπήρχαν και άνθρωποι που κατάλαβαν απο νωρίς προς τα πού φυσάει ο άνεμος, κι έκρυψαν βιβλία, είτε για συναισθηματικούς λόγους, ή γιατί κατάλαβαν ότι είχαν αποκτήσει το εισιτήριο για το εύκολο χρήμα. Ο συλλέκτης είναι ένα είδος που δε θα εξαφανιστεί ποτέ. Ο πάμπλουτος 'οικοδεσπότης' μου δε μπόρεσε ν' αντισταθεί στον πιο απαγορευμένο καρπό της τέχνης. Βέβαια, όλες οι ελευθέρια τέχνες μαράζωσαν σιγά-σιγά, ώσπου οι εναπομείναντες καλλιτέχνες, δημιουργούσαν έργα είτε ανώδυνα, προς λαϊκή κατανάλωση, ή που υμνούσαν και προπαγάνδιζαν τη Συμπολιτεία. Τα Μουσεία (ιδρύματα που στέγαζαν θησαυρούς από την πολιτισμική κληρονομιά της ανθρωπότητας, χιλιάδες χρόνια παλιούς) έκλεισαν, και τα πλούτη τους κατέληξαν στα ιδιωτικά θησαυροφυλάκια ανώτερων αξιωματούχων, ή πλουσίων συλλεκτών σαν τον κύριο Σίμπσον.

Πολλά παλιά βιβλία είχαν και φωτογραφίες! Πραγματικές φωτογραφίες, όχι τα κοινά ολογράμματα ή τα μίνι τρισδιάστατα βίντεο που εμφανίζονται όταν άγγιζες τα ανάλογα πλήκτρα. Και μερικές, ήταν αντίγραφα ακόμα παλιότερων φωτογραφιών, που απεικόνιζαν πανάρχαια καλλιτεχνήματα και τόπους χαμένους πια! Ήταν κρύο νερό στην έρημο της αφόρητης πλήξης μου. Ιστορίες σαν μύθοι, από περασμένους αιώνες. Πως ήταν η Γη χίλια χρόνια πριν, πως η ραγδαία εξέλιξη των επιστημών, μέσα σε δυο αιώνες, άλλαξε για πάντα την ανθρωπότητα, με εφευρέσεις, μηχανές και θεωρίες που, μόλις διακόσια χρόνια πριν την εποχή τους, θα θεωρούνταν αίρεση ή μαγεία, και οι δημιουργοί τους θα οδηγούνταν στην πυρά (μια πρακτική που δυστυχώς διατηρείται ως τις μέρες μας). Πως η απληστία και η αλαζονεία των Πολύ Παλιών Κρατών, όταν ανακάλυψαν τη διάσπαση του ατόμου, οδήγησε στη Μεγάλη Καταστροφή και τη μόλυνση και τις φρικτές μεταλλάξεις. Πως η καμένη Γη σιγά-σιγά ανορθώθηκε και ξανάχτισε τον πολιτισμό της, ξαναπρασίνισε και καθαρίστηκε, χωρίς όμως να ξεπλύνει τα μίση της. Για τις Πρώτες Επαφές, την συνένωση τεχνολογιών από διαφορετικούς κόσμους, τη διάδοση της τηλεμεταφοράς και της νανοτεχνολογίας, τους Μεικτούς Διαστημικούς Σταθμούς, τον αποικισμό, και πως η Διαγαλαξιακή Συμμαχία χώρισε σε οικόπεδα το γνωστό σύμπαν και το μοιράστηκαν μεταξύ τους (αν και συνεχώς

τσακώνονται για κάποιο φιλέτο). Κι εκτός απ' την ιστορία, εγκυκλοπαίδειες, λεξικά, μυθιστορήματα, επιστήμες και τέχνες. Χημεία, πληροφορική, ζωγραφική. Το διψασμένο μυαλό μου τα ρούφαγε σα σφουγγάρι. Και το πιο απίθανο, ποίηση! Κατάλαβα γιατί η ποίηση ήταν το απαγορευμένο των απαγορευμένων. Ακόμα και η κακή ποίηση έχει ιδανικά.

Όμως, έχω το πρόβλημα με τη γάτα. Ζήτησα ένα ζωάκι για να 'χω παρέα στη μοναξιά μου, ως υποκατάστατο της ανθρώπινης αγάπης που ποτέ δε θα γνώριζα, και μου έστειλαν αυτή τη μονόφθαλμη, φοβική, αντικοινωνική γάτα, που κοιμάται στα πόδια μου μα δεν έρχεται στην αγκαλιά μου γαμώτο, που δαγκώνει, δεν ανέχεται και πολλά χάδια και χάνεται για ώρες μακριά μου. Κάποιες στιγμές αναρωτιέμαι μήπως το έκαναν επίτηδες, μήπως από τη λύσσα και το μίσος τους μου έστειλαν ένα ζώο που δε μπορεί να καταλάβει την αγάπη. Τιμωρώντας με για το χάρισμα που δε ζήτησα ποτέ, και που ευχαρίστως θα απεμπολούσα.

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Δε με σκότωσαν γιατί ποτέ δεν έπαψαν να ελπίζουν πως θα κατορθώσουν κάποτε να με χρησιμοποιήσουν, είτε με καλοπιάσματα ή με το μαρτύριο της απομόνωσης. Να με απειλήσουν δε μπορούσαν, δεν έχω τίποτα να χάσω, δεν έχω οικογένεια και φίλους, και σε μια καλύβα θα ζούσα, ενώ αυτοί θα έχαναν την έστω και ισχνή πιθανότητα της υποταγής μου – εξ' άλλου ήμουν ακόμα πολύ νέα. Το σπίτι δεν είχε σύστημα παρακολούθησης, θα έπρεπε ν' αλλάξουν όλες τις παροχές ενεργείας του αρχαίου οικήματος, και τις μουσειακές πια γεννήτριες πλάσματος. Υπερβολικά ασύμφορο. Έτσι κι αλλιώς τι θα μπορούσα να κάνω; Να βάλω φωτιά στο σπίτι, όπως οι τρελές ηρωίδες στ' αρχαία μυθιστορήματα; Και ήθελαν και να μου κάνουν τους καλούς. Δύο φορές το μήνα περνούσε ο μικροδορυφόρος που ήλεγχε την περίμετρο και την κατάσταση του κτιρίου, και μια φορά στο τόσο, σποραδικά, επικοινωνούσαν μαζί μου για να μάθουν αν άλλαξα γνώμη. Πάντα απαντούσα 'Όχι, ευχαριστώ, περνάω πολύ όμορφα εδώ'.

Για μένα, το Ταλέντο είναι αναπηρία. Κάτι που δε μου επιτρέπει να έχω φυσιολογική ζωή, κάτι που ευχαρίστως θα αντάλλασα για μια βραδιά σ' ένα παγκάκι με τον γκόμενο να μου κρατάει το χέρι (ναι, υπάρχουν ακόμα παγκάκια, στα ελάχιστα εναπομείναντα και αυστηρά φρουρούμενα Αρχαία Δημόσια Πάρκα, που τώρα είναι ανοιχτά μόνο στους προνομιούχους). Είναι το χάρισμα που με κρατάει φυλακισμένη. Με δύο τρόπους. Ο ένας είναι η πραγματική, υλική φυλακή που είμαι κλεισμένη, κι ο άλλος η άσπρη φωτιά μέσα στο κεφάλι μου, η φωνή που μου λέει ότι έχω ευθύνη, έχω θέληση, έχω την αγάπη και τη χάρη, η γαμημένη φωνή που ρίχνει το βάρος του κόσμου στην πλάτη μου.

Μες απ' τον υπολογιστή μάθαινα τι γινόταν στον κόσμο. Φρικαλέοι πόλεμοι, λυσσασμένες εχθροπραξίες, και φτηνές ερωτοτροπίες ανθρώπων που του χρόνου δε θα τους θυμόταν κανείς. Ω, ναι, το σεξουαλικό ένστικτο πουλάει ακόμα, και κατευθύνει τις μάζες, όπως συνέβαινε από τις απαρχές της ανθρωπότητας. Όμως η σύνδεσή μου ήταν ελεγχόμενη, σιγά να μη μ' αφήναν ν' αλωνίζω το υπερδίκτυο. Κάποιες φορείς αναρωτιόμουν αν οι ειδήσεις που έβλεπα ήταν αληθινές, ή αν η Συμπολιτεία με τάζε με τρομακτικά οράματα, έτσι για να μου τη σπάσει, για να μου τρίψει στα μούτρα την δύναμή μου, που χαραμιζόταν σ' ένα τρελό μέγαρο τριγυρισμένο από τριανταφυλλίες τριγυρισμένες από ηλεκτροστατικό φράχτη.

Όμως αν είχα τη γάτα... αν είχα μια γατούλα τρυφερή και χαδιάρη, αντί γι αυτό το αντικοινωνικό ζωντανό που μου φόρτωσαν... Τι εκλεπτυσμένος σαδισμός, τι τραγική



ειρωνεία, τι χοντρομαλακία τελικά για την πάρτη τους. Νόμιζαν ότι θα μου σπάσουνε τον τσαμπουκά έτσι; Χα, είχα κάνα δυό κόλπα στο μανίκι μου ακόμα, για να τους δείξω...

Ζήτησα να μάθω μια ξένη γλώσσα, τη διάλεκτο ενός εξωγήινου σύμμαχου της Άλλης Πλευράς. Τους φάνηκε θετικό και, ατυχώς γι αυτούς, μου έδωσαν περιορισμένη πρόσβαση σε μερικές υπερδίκτυακές εγκυκλοπαίδειες και λεξικά, κι από κει μάζευα σταγόνα τη σταγόνα κάποιες πολύτιμες, πραγματικές πληροφορίες – τελικά οι δεσμοφύλακές μου δεν ήτανε και τόσο έξυπνοι όσο νόμιζαν. Άρχισα να εξοικειώνομαι με τον θαυμαστό ηλεκτρονικό κόσμο, και τα βιβλία του μακαρίτη, κι ας ήταν παλιά, μου είχαν μάθει τα βασικά. Το δυαδικό σύστημα και οι αλγόριθμοι είναι ακόμα η καρδιά της πληροφορικής. Οι Ταλαντούχοι είναι απ' τη φύση τους έξυπνοι, και το χάρισμά τους βοηθά – άγνωστό πως και γιατί – ν' αφομοιώνουν πανεύκολα τις πληροφορίες. Μετά από λίγα χρόνια, κατόρθωσα να χακάρω το πρόγραμμα που με κρατούσε αποκλεισμένη, και να δω τι γίνεται πραγματικά στον κόσμο. Χειρότερα απ' ότι νόμιζα. Η ανθρωπότητα και οι σύμμαχοί της, δε διδάχθηκαν τίποτα από τα λάθη του παρελθόντος τους. Ο διαγαλαξιακός πόλεμος μαινόταν. Επανάσταση στις αποικίες των Πλειάδων, σφαγές στους αμφισβητούμενους δορυφόρους της Καλλιστώς, η Αφροδίτη μια πυρηνική φωτιά που έκαιγε χρόνια. Οι δακτύλιοι του Κρόνου εξατμισμένοι, τρία ηλιακά συστήματα αιματοκυλισμένα (μεταφορικά, πολλές εξωγήινες φυλές δεν έχουν αίμα). Νόβες, που στην πραγματικότητα ήταν πλανήτες κεραυνωμένοι από θερμοπυρηνικά όπλα, ολόκληροι λαοί σβησμένοι από προσώπου σύμπαντος. Οι Ταλαντούχοι της κάθε πλευράς προσπαθούσαν να σπείρουν τον όλεθρο και να λυγίσουν ο ένας το μυαλό του άλλου – πολλοί πέθαιναν από εγκεφαλικά και ανευρύσματα, λόγω της αφόρητης πίεσης. Είχαμε αρχίσει να γινόμαστε σπάνιο κι απειλούμενο είδος. Δε θα τολμούσαν να με σκοτώσουν, ακόμα κι αν αντιλαμβάνονταν τις παρασπονδίες μου, και δε θα τις αντιλαμβάνονταν, είχα γίνει γάτα. Και οργάνωνα αργά την εκδίκησή μου, τον σεισμό που θα μπορούσε να σαρώσει τον κόσμο αν κατάφερα να περάσω τον ηλεκτροστατικό φράχτη και να βρώ άλλους του είδους μου, να τους μεταλαμπαδεύσω τις φρεσκοαποκτημένες γνώσεις μου. Δε μπορεί, κάποιοι θα είχαν ξεφύγει.

Όμως η γάτα... Ήμουν πολύ τρυφερή μαζί της. Γιατί δεν εξοικειωνόταν η γάτα γαμώτο; Τι εγκλεισμό, τι βασανισμό θα είχε περάσει το ζωντανό για να καταντήσει έτσι; Ήταν σα να ζω μ' ένα ηλίθιο παιδί. Δεν καταλάβαινε από νουθεσίες, δε μάθαινε. Δεν είχε νόημα να τη μαλώνω όταν δάγκωνε ή έκανε ζημιές, θα φοβόταν ακόμα πιο πολύ. Οι βασικές της λειτουργίες ήταν η πείνα κι ο φόβος. Και πολύ βαθειά, ίσως μια απεγνωσμένη ανάγκη για επαφή που δεν κατάφερνε να εκφραστεί. Καημένο γιατί... Τρία χρόνια τη δούλευα κι ακόμα δεν έβλεπα και πολύ φως. Ίσως ένα κεφάλι καρφίτσας, αλλά η πρόοδος ήταν αργή. Δε δάγκωνε πια τόσο πολύ και, δειλά, κούρνιαζε δίπλα μου κάποια βράδια. Όμως, ένας ξαφνικός θόρυβος, μια απότομη κίνηση, την έτρεπαν σε φυγή. Αν το Ταλέντο μου δε μπορούσε ν' αλλάξει τη γάτα, πως θα μπορούσε ν' αλλάξει τον κόσμο;

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Ήμουν σαν τη μαγεμένη πριγκίπισσα στο στοιχειωμένο, τριγυρισμένο με αγκάθια, κάστρο, όπως λένε κάποιοι θρύλοι, που ήταν αρχαίοι ήδη όταν τα Πολύ Παλιά Κράτη ήταν νέα, θρύλοι γραμμένοι στα πιο αρχαία βιβλία (τι μαγική λέξη!) του Πατέρα μου, όπως είχα φτάσει ν' αποκαλώ τον κύριο Σίμπσον, τον μεταστάντα ευεργέτη μου, που με προίκισε με όλες αυτές τις γνώσεις και τις ευαισθησίες, που χάρη στην φωτισμένη του πρόνοια έγινα

αληθινός Άνθρωπος, που με φρόντισε από τον τάφο όπως ποτέ οι γονείς που δε γνώρισα. Ώρες κοίταζα το πορτραίτο του, στο κέντρο της οικογενειακής του πινακοθήκης. Πυκνά γκρίζα μαλλιά, ένα ευγενικό πρόσωπο με καλοσυνάτα μάτια, σουβλερή μύτη και σχεδόν πονηρό χαμόγελο.

Δεν περίμενα τον ωραίο πρίγκιπα, δεν ενδιαφερόμουν για αναπαραγωγή. Δεν είχα καμιά σκασίλα να γεννήσω παιδιά σαν κι εμένα, πλάσματα που, έτσι και κληρονομούσαν το χάρισμα, θα βασανίζονταν όλη τους τη ζωή αν έπεφταν σε λάθος χέρια. Όμως δε θα με πείραζε μια συντροφιά. Κι απ' όλα τα γαμημένα γιατί, μου έστειλαν αυτό το αντικοινωνικό ζωντανό που φοβάται και τη σκιά του, και είναι μια καθημερινή απογοήτευση. Που με ακολουθεί όπου πάω μα, όταν στρέφομαι προς το μέρος της, συχνά τρέπεται σε φυγή. Για να δοκιμάσουν τα όριά μου; Οι κερατάδες!

Κατάφερα να μπω πλαγίως στο υπερδίκτυο, με ψεύτικους κωδικούς και δαιδαλώδεις διευθύνσεις που πήδαγαν από δορυφόρο σε δορυφόρο. Έγινα μέλος σε κάποια μέσα κοινωνικής δικτύωσης, ολομπλόγκ, και υπερσελίδες που διακινούν ιδέες, κυρίως προπαγάνδα βέβαια, και στάλαξα αργό δηλητήριο. Τόσα χρόνια κλεισμένη στη θλιβερή έπαυλη μου, έγινα χάκερ πρώτης γραμμής. Και, επιτέλους, ήρθε η ώρα μου. Ανέβαζα εμπρηστικές αναρτήσεις σ' αυτά που μου φαίνονταν πιο ελπιδοφόρα. Όλο και κάποιοι τσιμπούσαν. Άρχισα να έχω επαφές. Άρχισα να ξεχωρίζω την ήρα από το σιτάρι, τους ψυχοπαθείς απ' τους πομπώδεις, τους δίκαιους από τους δικαιοφανείς, τους ευαίσθητους απ' τους ευαισθητοποιημένους. Αργά. Προσεκτικά. Με περίσκεψη. Ένα σωρό ρουφιάνοι (μια πανάρχαια λέξη που ψάρεψα στη βιβλιοθήκη του Πατέρα) κρύβονται ύπουλα στα υπερμέσα. Όμως το αγαθό που έχω σε περίσσεια είναι ο χρόνος. Σιγά-σιγά ήρθα σε επαφή με παράνομους σαν κι εμένα. Δεν βρήκα άλλους Ταλαντούχους, μα βρήκα κάμποσους αντικαθεστωτικούς, μερικοί απ' αυτούς επιστήμονες. Αλλά οι περισσότεροι ήταν μοναχικοί και καχύποπτοι, και δε φαίνονταν ικανοί μα με βοηθήσουν.

Για να διασκεδάσω την πλήξη και την απογοήτευση μου, και ψάχνοντας για κάποιον άλλο τρόπο επικοινωνίας, στράφηκα στα βιβλία φυσικής και χημείας. Κάποια έργα για την χρήση του ηλεκτρισμού ήταν πάρα πολύ κατατοπιστικά. Και είχα την τεράστια, απίστευτη κωλοφαρδία (άλλη μια ξεκαρδιστική αρχαία λέξη) να βρω μια σχολιασμένη έκδοση του θρυλικού απόκρυφου αλχημιστικού έργου 'Ο Τσελεμεντές του Αναρχικού' (οι αλχημιστές ήταν κάτι σαν αρχαίοι χημικοί, φυσικομαθηματικοί και φιλόσοφοι μαζί). Κάποιοι ρηξικέλευθοι ιστορικοί το ανάγουν τουλάχιστον 900 χρόνια πίσω, και θεωρείται ότι γράφτηκε από έναν σοφό μοναχό του Τάγματος του Οσίου Μολότοφ της παμπάλαιας θρησκευτικής αίρεσης των Αναρχικών, που είχαν τάγματα σε όλα τα Πολύ Παλιά Κράτη. Είχε οδηγίες για την κατασκευή εκρηκτικών, από παρασκευάσματα και ουσίες που χρησιμοποιούνται καθημερινά σε κάθε σπίτι. Τελικά, τίποτα δεν είναι σαν την παλιά καλή στοιχειώδη χημεία!

Άρχισα να τους ζητώ (απ' τη Συμπολιτεία εννοώ) ανώδυνα πράγματα. Λαδομπογιές, απέκτησα μια ξαφνική επιθυμία να μάθω ζωγραφική. Ένα ασύρματο θερμικό λείζερ για το στέγνωμα των μαλλιών, και κάποια καλλυντικά. Έναν φούρνο ποζιτρονίων τελευταίας τεχνολογίας, τον παλιό τον χάλασα επίτηδες – και δεν μπορούσαν να με τσακώσουν, είχα προγραμματίσει τον μπάτλερ-ρομπότ ν' αναφέρει τις δήθεν βλάβες και να ζητά ανταλλακτικά. Έναν ολογραφικό αναπαραγωγέα μουσικής, αν και φυσικά η επιτρεπτή μουσική είναι ή καψούρικα ή εμβατήρια. Μαγνητική κόλλα, λάμπες εξοικονόμησης ενέργειας, που να σκεφτούν οι μαλάκες γραφειοκράτες ότι αυτοί πληρώνουν τον λογαριασμό μου και δεν έχω λόγο να κάνω οικονομία, πολύ δυνατά καθαριστικά υγρά με χλώριο και οξέα. Τρία

καινούργια ρομπότ κηπουρούς, αεριωθούμενο κηπουρικό όχημα τελευταίας γενιάς και μπόλικα λιπάσματα για τις τριανταφυλλίες, υπερσύγχρονα καλώδια οπτικών ινών για τον υπολογιστή – ο μπάτλερ δήλωσε ότι τα παλιά τα 'φαγε η γάτα, αν και προς το παρόν η γάτα τρώει μόνο κάλτσες, αν δεν τις μαζέψω – κι άλλα ψιλικά. Κανιβαλίζοντας αυτά τα μηχανήματα (ευχαριστώ Πατέρα!), συνδέοντας τα τσιπάκια, τα υπερκυκλώματα, τις λυχνίες ισοτόπων ιριδίου, τους πολωτές νανοσωλήνων και τα καλώδια, κατασκεύασα έναν πομποδέκτη, και περιπλανιόμουν στα βουβά ραδιοκύματα που κάποτε τα έλεγαν ερτζιανά.

Λιώνοντας κι αποσπάζοντας τα κραγιόν των χειλιών και τις υδατικές κρέμες προσώπου, τα καθαριστικά και τα λιπάσματα, σαν τον τρελό αλχημιστή, με τα κατσαρολικά της κουζίνας μου, σιγά μην τους ζητούσα και αποστακτήρα (ένα ιερό σκεύος των αλχημιστών), απομόνωσα βαρέα μέταλλα (κορίτσια ξέρετε τι έχουν μέσα τα καλλυντικά σας; Αλουμίνιο, υδράργυρο, θάλιο, νικέλιο, βάριο, κι ένα σωρό άλλα τοξικά στοιχεία, με έξτρα μπόνους το πονηρούλι ραδιενεργούλι θόριο), γλυκερίνη και οξέα (πραγματικά εκρηκτικός συνδυασμός!), χλώριο, βάσεις και ηλεκτρολύτες, όλα τα χρειαζούμενα για τα εκρηκτικά. Οι λαδομπογιές μου έδωσαν κάδμιο, χρώμιο, τιτάνιο, τσίγκο, κυάνιο, αρσενικό. Ίσως να μη μου χρειαζόνταν όλα, αλλά να μην παίξω σαν κορίτσι κι εγώ;

Και ξαφνικά, μια ωραία εσπέρα, όπως έλεγαν οι παλιοί ποιητές, που περιπλανιόμουν, ως συνήθως άκαρπα, στα ραδιοκύματα με το μικρό πομποδέκτη μου, έπιασα για πρώτη φορά ένα ηχητικό σήμα! Ήταν γεμάτο παράσιτα, μακρινό, όμως μπορούσα να διακρίνω μια γυναικεία φωνή να επαναλαμβάνει μια αόριστα γνώριμη λέξη. *Mayday, Mayday, Mayday.* Ανατρίχιασα! Άρχισα να ψάχνω τα βιβλία γύρω μου, και βρήκα το έργο που περιέγραφε παμπάλαιους κώδικες επικοινωνίας. Καλά το θυμόμουν. Ήταν ένας φωνητικός κώδικας, που χρονολογούνταν πριν τη Μεγάλη Καταστροφή. Ήταν η διεθνής λέξη για την κατάσταση εκτάκτου ανάγκης. 'Επείγον! Επείγον! Κινδυνεύω, με λαμβάνεις;' Με τρεμάμενα χεριά, έκανα τις απαραίτητες ρυθμίσεις, και είπα στο μικρόφωνο 'Σε λαμβάνω.'

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Έχω στρωθεί στη δουλειά. Αναβάθμισα τον πομποδέκτη μου, άνοιξα τον Τσελεμεντέ, μάζεψα τα υλικά μου, κι άρχισα να φτιάχνω, σαν καλή νοικοκυρά, σπιτικές βομβίτσες και εκρηκτικά. Πολύ δυνατά. Θα προγραμματίσω τους κηπουρούς-ρομπότ να τα ισομοιράσουν, γύρω από την περιφέρεια του ηλεκτροστατικού φράχτη, την προκαθορισμένη ημερομηνία, θ' αμπαλάρω τα υπάρχοντά μου και θα περιμένω. Γιατί βρήκα άλλους δυό Ταλαντούχους! Ο Τζον και η Μίρκα. Δεν είναι έγκλειστοι σαν κι εμένα. Εκπέμπουν από το κρησφύγετό τους, σε μια απάτητη οροσειρά. Και δεν είναι μόνοι. Υπάρχουν κι άλλοι σαν κι εμάς. Στη Συμπολιτεία υπάρχει ένα μεγάλο υπόγειο δίκτυο αντιφρονούντων, που υποστηρίζεται από εχέφρονες στρατιωτικούς και αξιωματούχους και των δυο Πλευρών. Και ο πιο κοντινός συντονιστικός σταθμός είναι, χα, κάτω απ' τη μύτη τους! Στην υποτιθέμενα μολυσμένη, και ακατοίκητη πλέον, Σελήνη, με τις δεκάδες εγκαταλελειμμένες, αλλά λειτουργικές ακόμα, στρατιωτικές βάσεις και ηλεκτρονικές τράπεζες δεδομένων. Εκεί βρίσκονται κι άλλοι Ταλαντούχοι. Θ'

αρχίσουμε να εκπέμπουμε όλοι μαζί. Θα βρούμε κι άλλους του είδους μας. Θα επηρεάσουμε πολλούς. Και σιγά-σιγά θ' απλωθούμε στον γαλαξία.

Μια Ομάδα Διάσωσης θα περιμένει να σκάσουν οι σπιτικές βομβίτσες μου και τα κεριά του οσίου Μολότωφ, που θα γκρεμίσουν τον φράχτη και θα προκαλέσουν σύγχυση εις τας

φρένες των δεσμοτών μου. Μέχρι να ξεμπλέξουν τα μπούτια τους και ν' απογειωθεί η πρώτη υπερηχητική τορπιλάκατος, θα είμαι πολύ μακριά. Κι όταν φτάσουν, θα εκραγεί η δεύτερη σειρά βομβών και ο μικρός στόλος θ' αφανιστεί.

Η αναπηρία μου είναι μεγάλη. Το Ταλέντο μου μού είναι από τα λίγα. Γι αυτό ήμουν αμαντρωμένη όλη μου τη μικρή ζωή. Για να μη μεταδώσω τις δονήσεις της ανεκτικότητας, της ανθρωπιάς, της αγάπης, της χάρης. Πολύ περισσότερο απ' το λογοκριμένο μέρος του κόσμου, που έβλεπα στη γαλάζια οθόνη, είναι κυλισμένο στο αίμα. Πώς να αφήσουν ελεύθερα εκτρώματα σαν κι εμένα; Που θα καλούσαν τον κόσμο να καταθέσει τα όπλα και να συγχωρέσει; Που θ' αποκάλυπταν και θα στηλίτευαν τους πολεμοκάπηλους, τους επαγγελματίες στρατιώτες, τους υστερικούς ιερείς, τους διαγαλαξιακούς μεγαλοοικοπεδούχους, τους κατασκευαστές ατομικών όπλων... Που θ' αποκήρυτταν τις βόμβες αντιύλης, τα παλμικά λέιζερ, τα όπλα ιόντων, τα υψίσυχνα που εκπέμπουν ήχους πολύ πάνω απ' το εύρος της ανθρώπινης ακοής, σαν τις σφυρίχτρες για σκύλους, και μπορούν να κάψουν τον εγκέφαλο... Που θα κήρυτταν πάλι την ανθρωπιά, την ανεκτικότητα, την αγάπη, την ελπίδα, τη χάρη. Και θα μπορούσαν να την επιβάλουν. Τελικά τείνω να πιστέψω ότι εμείς, οι Ταλαντούχοι, είμαστε όντως υβρίδια με κάποια τηλεπαθητική εξωγήινη ράτσα (ένα πανάρχαιο Ιερό Βιβλίο μιλάει για δυνατούς αρσενικούς που ήρθαν απ' τους ουρανοί και πήραν γυναίκες τις κόρες των ανθρώπων), μια ράτσα που επιτέλους είχε διδαχθεί απ' τα λάθη της, και προσπάθησε με τον σπόρο της να μεταδώσει την κληρονομιά της ανεκτικότητας, της αγάπης, της χάρης, στην πολύπαθη ανθρωπότητα, και μετά έφυγε για να συνεχίσει και αλλού το έργο της... που τα τροποποιημένα τους γονίδια αφύπνιζαν, μετά τη σύλληψη, όταν υπήρχαν κάποιες συγκεκριμένες συνθήκες (Επίπεδα ορμονών της μητέρας; Ομαλή λειτουργία των νευροδιαβιβαστών; Ηλεκτρομαγνητική ισορροπία του εγκεφάλου; Ένας άγνωστος παράγοντας Χ;) κάποια κοιμισμένα κέντρα στο 85% του εγκεφάλου μας που δε χρησιμοποιούμε, δημιουργώντας σποραδικά το Ταλέντο.

Αιώνες τώρα, η 'ανθρωπότητα' – και μεγάλη χάρη της κάνω να τη χαρακτηρίζω έτσι – είναι λουσμένη στη μισαλλοδοξία, τον όλεθρο, τη σφαγή. Κι όχι μόνο για τις πηγές ενεργείας, τα ορυχεία των αποικιών, τον φανατισμό των Ιερατείων και τις ριζωμένες βαθιά προκαταλήψεις, μα και για κάθε προσπάθεια του μυαλού να πετάξει πέρα από τα προκαθορισμένα όρια της εκάστοτε κοινωνίας, και της συνείδησης, και να υψωθεί στους εφτά ουρανοί. Αν θέλετε πείτε με Ρομαντική, όμως αυτό που κατάλαβα στα χρόνια μου της μοναξιάς και της μελέτης, είναι ότι οι οραματιστές, οι επαναστάτες, οι πρωτοπόροι, ήταν πάντα Ρομαντικοί.

Νομίζω ότι έχω την αγάπη και τη χάρη. Νομίζω ότι, προσπαθώντας τόσα χρόνια να χακάρω το υπερδίκτυο, μέχρι να έρθω σε επαφή με άλλα ανθρώπινα πλάσματα, έγκλειστη, απομονωμένη, διδάχθηκα την υπομονή και την ελπίδα. Τον Λόγο, που θα κηρύξουμε εγώ και οι όμοιοί μου στους σφαγιαζόμενους γαλαξίες. Που ίσως μερικές γενιές μετά να κατορθώσουν να ζήσουν στον κόσμο της ελπίδας, της αγάπης και της χάρης, ειρηνικά.

Όμως τι θα κάνω με τη γαμημένη τη γάτα; Σκέφτηκα σοβαρά να την αφήσω πίσω, μα το μοναδικό, ικετευτικό πράσινο ματάκι της, με κοιτάζει με χαζή, θλιμμένη απορία, και νιαουρίζει κλαψιάρικα, σα να ρωτάει 'Μα γιατί δε με καταλαβαίνεις;' και τεντώνει το μπροστινό ποδαράκι της προς το μέρος μου – όμως όταν πάω να το πιάσω το τραβάει πίσω. Και δε μπορώ να την καταλάβω γαμώτο.

Θα την πάρω. Θα ήμουν ανάξια του Ταλέντου αν την άφηνα. Σφράγισα την κρύπτη, με την ελπίδα ότι ίσως κάποτε να καταφέρω να ξαναγυρίσω, έβαλα τη γάτα – όχι χωρίς

δυσκολία – στο κλουβί της, και τη φόρτωση, μαζί με τα σπουδαιότερα βιβλία κι όσα αγαπημένα υπάρχουντά μου μπόρεσα να μεταφέρω, στο αεριωθούμενο κηπουρικό όχημα. Σε δυό λεπτά θα εκραγούν οι καρποί των κόπων μου, και θα κατευθυνθώ στο σημείο της επαφής. Σε λίγες ώρες θα σαλπάρουμε για τη Σελήνη. Για να προσπαθήσουμε να θεραπεύσουμε τον κόσμο, κι αν μπορέσουμε, και τη γάτα.

*Maria Petrou To save the world, and the cat*

*I'm living in a sealed place, that no one visits, a mansion surrounded by rose gardens, built two eons ago, in the middle of nowhere, by an eccentric millionaire named Simpson, who loved roses. I have robot-servants, and a scared cat that doesn't love me – or can't show it. My sole communication with the world is by computer. My gift, my handicap, has made me inapproachable, like the queens who lived fifteen hundreds years ago, with their puffy hair adorned with jewels, and their stiff lace collars.*

*When I was born, I seemed normal, but soon my difference showed; I was precious for their illustrious future. They took me from my family – with all the legal procedures, the gifted children were the possession of the Confederation – and they tried to train me. They couldn't. My gift was too big, too wild to submit to preassigned orders, too bright to be corrupted and pass to the dark side. It was dangerous. So, when I was old enough to fare for myself, and run an elementary household, they isolated me in their fictitious paradise which, I'm sure, was a purgatory for others like me – it's very well maintained. (Of course, they wouldn't throw in prison the precious Gifted, for obvious reasons.) Its biggest asset was its isolation – very few places are truly isolated in the Confederation.*

*I have everything I want, except freedom. A mansion full of antiques; the original furnishings of his era, and objects even older and more curious, because Mr. Simpson was a collector. There is a greenhouse full of exotic plants and fruits. The rose gardens surround the house, a perfumed, spiked labyrinth, which is in turn surrounded by an electrostatic fence. I'm hundreds of miles away from any human residence, because my mind is too strong, it can broadcast very far; robot-crafts bring in my provisions, they do not dare let humans near me; I will corrupt them.*

*At any rate, from the beginning they were sending me holo-books, since childhood I was partial to reading and, of course, they were afraid I would gradually recede to a primitive condition trough lack of stimuli, or go mad from the isolation. Most were boring; biographies of great men and women, clearly propaganda; and, of course, the history of the Confederation. But I learned and gathered information from all, and I understood my position. For eons, the gifted children were of the most precious exchangeable goods, the most coveted earthly riches, back when the Old Nations weren't united. Their origin is lost in the depth of time and the urban legends. Some people believe they were mutations caused by radiation; some others, that they were hybrids with a telepathic alien race, from the time of the First Encounters, and others that they were created from the secret experiments of an old hyper-power, and gone rogue. But they were always sporadic, independent of sex or race, of different range, and without common enough parameters to be categorized and reproduced. In the beginning, nobody understood exactly their potential. But when it became obvious that the Gifted, with their talent, could easily gain offices, become artists and public idols, and influence the*

masses, the global conservative powers that be, and the militia, began to worry. Faced with the common threat, the Old Nations put aside their disagreements for a while, and voted common laws, which made the children national property.

Of course, there was a great upheaval, from liberal organizations, intellectuals, and a large part of the citizens. No parents want to give up their child. Tomorrow, for any reason, they could take mine, a lot of people thought. But the laws concerning the concealment of the Gifted were very strict, imposing long prison terms and, even, capital punishment. And when the Confederation was founded, uniting half the nations of Earth, and stratocracy was enforced, the liberal voices were silenced. Badly. They managed to train and corrupt most of the children, who became very dangerous people – but always controlled; yet, there were cases like mine, but I wasn't able to find any information about their fate. Some tried to escape, and were executed, to set an example, as traitors; I suppose they didn't have a long enough range. The attempts to couple them failed; often, the children of two Gifted didn't have their parents' talent. And even the most extreme experiments couldn't isolate the gift's gene. So, they just used them like puppets, hoping that one day they would figure out the mystery. An army of trained Gifted would be invincible. Unfortunately for the Confederation, the Other Side also had its Gifted.

And, even more unluckily for them, continuously exploring the late Mr. Simpson's vast cornucopia, unceasingly admiring his exotic and marvelous objects I discovered, cunningly hidden behind the cobwebbed wine cellar (full of exquisite wines, now surely turned to vinegar), a large crypt with an incredible, but true, treasure. Books made of paper! These books, considered just an outdated eccentrics' past-time, or quietly molding in the, now forgotten, Libraries, were banned three hundred years ago; they were confiscated; many were burned in public ceremonies – sometimes along with their owners; much more ended up in secret military bunkers or the Priesthood's basements. But, surely, there must have been people who sensed which way the wind was blowing, and had hidden books, either for sentimental reasons, or realizing they had a ticket to easy money. The collector is a species which will never expire. My millionaire 'host' couldn't resist the most forbidden fruit of art. Of course, all liberal arts deteriorated gradually, until the still existing artists created works either superficial, for public consumption, or praising the Confederation. Museums (institutions which stored treasures of humanity's cultural heritage, thousands of years old) closed, and their riches ended up in the vaults of higher officials, or wealthy collectors like Mr. Simpson.

Many books had photographs! Real photographs, not the common holograms or the three-dimensional mini-videos which appeared by touching the right key; some were copies of even older photographs, depicting immemorial artifacts and places long lost! It was cold water in my unbearable boredom's desert. Stories like myths, from eons past. How the Earth was a thousand years ago; how the rapid development of science, in just two eons, changed the world forever, with inventions, machines and theories which, only two hundred years ago, would have been perceived as heresies or witchcraft, and their creators would have been marched to the pyre (a practice which, unfortunately, is preserved to our days). How the greed and arrogance of the Very Old Nations, when they discovered the fission of atom, led to the Great Destruction and the pollution and the horrible mutations. How the burned Earth gradually resurged and rebuilt its civilization,

was cleansed and became green again, but didn't forget the old hatreds. About the First Encounters, the merging of technologies from different worlds, the spread of teleportation and nanotechnology, the Biracial Space Stations, the colonization, and how the Transgalactic Alliance split up in plots, and divided among them, the known universe (but they still quarrel now and then about some tasty morsel). And, apart from history, there were encyclopedias, dictionaries, novels, science and art; chemistry, information technology, painting. My thirsty mind absorbed them like a sponge. And, the most incredible, poetry! I understood why poetry is the Holy Grail of art. Even bad poetry has ideals.

But I have this problem with the cat. I asked for a pet, a company to my loneliness, a substitute of human love, which I would never come to know, and they sent me this one-eyed, phobic, unsociable cat, which sleeps at my feet but doesn't fucking let me hold her, bites, doesn't tolerate a lot of petting, and disappears for hours and hours. Sometimes I wonder if they did it out of spite; if, from their rage and hatred, they sent me an animal which can't understand love. Punishing me for the gift I never asked for, and would give up gladly.

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They didn't kill me, because they never stopped hoping that, some day, they would manage to use me, either with coaxing or through the torture of isolation. They couldn't threaten me, I have nothing to lose; no family, no friends; I could live in a hut; but they would lose the scant possibility of my surrender – I was still very young. The house didn't have a surveillance system; they would have to rewire the huge ancient building, and replace the, museum quality, plasma generators. Totally inexpedient. And what could I do? Burn the house around my ears, like the crazy heroines in the ancient novels? And they wanted to cajole me. Twice a month, a drone checked the perimeter and the building's condition; once in a while, sporadically, they contacted me asking if I had changed my mind. I always answered 'No, thank you. I'm having a great time.'

For me the gift is a handicap. Something forbidding me a normal life, something I would gladly exchange for a night on a bench with a boyfriend holding my hand (yes, there are still benches, in the few existing, and strictly guarded, Ancient Public Parks, now open only to the privileged). It's the gift which keeps me prisoner. In two ways. One is the real, material prison I'm locked in; the other, this white fire inside my head, the voice telling me I have responsibility, I have the will, the love and the grace; the fucking voice which casts the world's burden upon my back.

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Through the computer, I learned what was happening in the world. Horrible wars, furious conflicts, cheap dalliance of people nobody would remember next year. Oh, yes, the sexual instinct still sells, and directs the masses, as it has since the dawn of humanity. But my connection was monitored; of course, they wouldn't let me roam all over the hyper-net. Sometimes I wondered if the Confederation fed me terrible visions just for spite, to rub my nose to my gift, which was wasted in a crazy mansion

surrounded by rose bushes surrounded by an electrostatic fence.

But if I had the cat... If I had an affectionate and loving cat, instead of this unsociable animal they forced upon me... What refined sadism, what tragic irony, what a colossal mistake of theirs. They thought it could break me? Ha! I still had a few aces up my sleeve...

I asked to learn a foreign language, the dialect of an alien ally of the Other Side. They thought it was promising and, unfortunately for them, gave me limited access to a few Hyper-net encyclopedias and dictionaries, and I gathered, little by little, some precious, real information – as it turned out, my wardens weren't as smart as they believed. I started to familiarize myself with the wonderful electronic world; I had learned the basics from the deceased's books; they may be old but, binary system and algorithms are still the core of information technology. The Gifted are, by nature, intelligent, and the gift helps them – we don't know how and why – to absorb information very easily. Some years later, I managed to hack the program keeping me bounded, and see what really happened in the world. It was worse than I had imagined. Humanity, and its allies, never learned a thing from their past errors. Intergalactic war was raging. Revolution at the Pleiades' colonies, massacres at the disputable satellites of Calisto, Venus a nuclear fire burning for years; Saturn's rings vaporized, three planetary systems drowned in blood (metaphorically speaking, many alien races don't have blood); novas which once were planets thunderstruck by nuclear weapons; whole races wiped out of the face of the universe. Every side's Gifted were trying to wreak havoc and bend each other's mind – many had died from strokes or aneurisms, because of the unbearable pressure. We had started to become a rare and endangered species. They wouldn't dare to kill me, even if they caught on to my perfidies. And they wouldn't catch me on, I had become as sly as a cat; I organized my revenge slowly, the earthquake which could sweep the world if I could pass the electrostatic fence, meet others of my kind and pass on to them my newly obtained knowledge. Surely, some of them must have escaped.

But the cat... I was very tender with her. Why the fuck wasn't the cat familiarizing? What imprisonment, what tortures had the animal endured, to end up like this, and one-eyed? It was like living with an idiot child; she didn't understand injunctions, didn't learn; there was no point in scolding her when she bit or made a mess; she would become even more frightened. Her basic functions were hunger and fear. And very deep, perhaps a desperate need for contact, which couldn't be expressed. Poor cat... I was working on her for three years, and didn't see much light at the end of the tunnel; maybe a pinhead, but the progress was very slow. She didn't bite so much and, timidly, nestled near me some nights. But a sudden noise, an abrupt motion, and off she went. If my gift couldn't help the cat, how was it going to save the world?

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I was like the enchanted princess in her haunted, thorn-surrounded castle, according to some legends which were ancient when the Very Old Nations were new; legends written in the oldest books (what a magical word!) of my Father, as I came to call Mr. Simpson, my deceased benefactor, who endowed me with all this knowledge and



sensibilities, and from whose enlightened provision I became a real Human; who tended for me beyond the grave, as the parents I didn't know never did. I spent hours looking at his portrait, in the middle of his family's gallery. He had thick gray hair, a noble face with kind eyes, pointed nose and an almost foxy smile.

I wasn't waiting for the fair prince, I wasn't interested in reproduction; didn't give a fuck to have children like me, creatures who, upon inheriting my gift, would be tortured all their life if they ended up in the wrong hands. But I wouldn't mind some company. And from all the fucking cats, they sent me this unsociable animal that's afraid of its own shadow, and a daily disappointment to me; following me wherever I go, but usually turning tail when I turn towards her. To try my limits? Bastards!

I managed to access deviously the hyper-net, with fake passwords and meandering addresses, jumping from satellite to satellite; I joined some social network media, holoblogs and hyper-pages disseminating ideas, mainly propaganda, and I slowly trickled venom; locked in my sad mansion for so many years, I became a mighty hacker. And now, my time had come. I posted inflammatory arguments on those I thought more hopeful; from time to time somebody bit the bait; I started to have contacts; I started to sort out the tare from the wheat; the psychos from the pompous; the sensitive from the sensitized; slowly; carefully; so many ruffians (an ancient word I unearthed from Father's library) are lurking in the hyper-media. But the commodity I have to spare is time. Gradually, I contacted outlaws like me; I didn't find any Gifted, but I met quite a few antiregimes; some were scientists; most were lonely and suspicious, didn't seem able to help me, and I didn't want to reveal I was a Gifted.

To divert my boredom and disappointment, seeking other means of communication, I turned to physics and chemistry books; some works about the use of electricity were very informative; and I had the great, unbelievable, devil's luck (another hilarious ancient expression) to find an annotated edition of the legendary apocryphal alchemistic opus 'The Anarchist's Cookbook' (alchemists were something like ancient chemists, physicists and philosophers all rolled in one). Some venturous historians date it at least 900 years ago; it's believed it was written by a wise monk of the Venerable Molotov's Order of the ancient religious heresy of Anarchists, which had Orders in all the Very Old Nations. It had instructions on how to make explosives, from concoctions and substances used daily in every household. Well, nothing beats the good old elementary chemistry!

I started to ask (from the Confederation I mean) harmless things; oil paints, suddenly I developed an urge to learn painting; an unwired thermal laser for drying hair and some cosmetics; A positronic oven of the latest generation, I deliberately damaged the old one - and they couldn't catch me, I had reprogrammed the robot-butler to report the supposed malfunctions and ask for spares. A holographic music reproducer - of course the allowed music is either syrupy love songs or marches; magnetic glue; energy-saving light bulbs, the asshole bureaucrats didn't realize they paid my bills, so I didn't have to save energy; strong cleaning fluids with chlorine and acids; three new robot-gardeners, a jet-propelled gardening vehicle and a lot of fertilizer for the rose bushes; state-of-the-art cables of optical fibers for the computer - the butler said the cat ate them, while, up to now, the cat only eats socks if I don't pick them up - and other odds and ends. Cannibalizing this machinery (thank you Father!) connecting chips, hyper-circuits, the iridium isotope lamps, the nanotube polarizers and the cables, I built a transceiver, and

was wandering around the radio waves, which were once called hertzians.

Melting and distilling lipsticks and face creams, cleaning fluids and fertilizers, like a crazy alchemist, with my kitchen's pots and pans, of course I wouldn't ask for a distiller (a sacred Alchemists' vessel) I isolated heavy metals (girls, do you know your cosmetics' ingredients? Aluminum, mercury, titanium, thallium, nickel, barium, and other toxic elements, with the sly radioactive thorium as an added bonus); glycerin and acids (a really explosive combination!) chlorine, bases and electrolytes, all the materials for explosives. The oil paints gave me cadmium, chromium, zinc, cyanogen, arsenic. Maybe I wouldn't need them, but a girl has to have some fun.

And suddenly, one beautiful evening, as the old poets used to say, while wandering aimlessly as usual among the mute radio waves with my small transceiver, I caught for the first time a sound signal! It was full of static, distant, but I could discern a female voice repeating a vaguely familiar word: Mayday, Mayday, Mayday. I shuddered! I rummaged the books around me, and found a work depicting ancient communication codes. I recognized it. A phonetic code, dated before the Great Destruction. It was the international word for emergency, meaning 'Urgent! Urgent! I'm in danger; do you read me?' With trembling hands, I adjusted the dials, and said to the microphone 'I am reading you.'

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I'm bend to the work. I updated my transceiver, opened the 'Anarchist's Cookbook', gathered my ingredients and started to cook up, like a good housewife, homemade bombs and explosives. Very potent. I will program the robot-gardeners to distribute them on the perimeter of the electrostatic fence on the preordained day, I'll pack my belongings and wait. Because I found two Gifted! John and Mirca. They are not prisoners like me. They broadcast from their hideout, on an untrodden mountain range. And they are not alone. There are more like us. In the Confederation, there exists a great underground network of dissidents, supported by prudent military men and officials from both sides. And the nearest coordinative station is, ha, under their nose! At the presumed polluted and now uninhabited Moon, with its dozens of abandoned but still functional military bases and data banks. There, there are more Gifted. We will start to broadcast together. We will find out more of our kind. We will influence a lot of people. And gradually we will expand to the galaxy.

A Rescue Team will be waiting for my homemade bombs and Venerable Molotof's candles to explode, bringing down the fence and scrambling the minds of my jailers. Before they can understand what is happening, and the first hypersonic fighter takes off, I'll be very far. And, upon their arrival, the second set of my bombs will explode, and their small fleet will be obliterated.

My handicap is severe, my gift very strong. On account of this I was penned up all my small life. So that I wouldn't spread the vibrations of tolerance, benevolence love, grace. Much more than the censored part of the world I was allowed to see on the blue monitor, is drowned in blood. How would they let free freaks like me, who would summon the world to lay down the guns and forgive? Who would uncover and castigate the warmongers, the professional soldiers, the hysteric priests, the transgalactic

landowners, the nuclear weapon manufacturers; who would denounce the amdimatter bombs, the pulsatory leasers, the ionic guns, the high-frequency machines which, like dog-whistles, emit sounds beyond the width of the human ear, and can burn the brain... Who would preach again benevolence, tolerance, love, hope, grace, and could compel it. Eventually, I'm inclined to believe that, indeed, the Gifted are hybrids with a telepathic alien race (an ancient holy book talks about mighty males who descended from heavens and took for wives the daughters of humans), a race which had, at last, learned from their errors and tried, with their seed, to transfer the heritage of tolerance, love and grace, to the much afflicted humanity, and then went away to continue its mission; whose modified genes would activate, after conception, if certain specific conditions were met (Hormone levels of the mother? Smooth function of neurotransmitters? Electromagnetic balance of the brain? An unknown X factor?), some dormant limbic systems within the 85% of the brain we don't use, creating sporadically the gift.

For eons, 'humanity' – and it is a great compliment to call it so – is plagued by intolerance, havoc, slaughter. Not just about the energy sources, the fanaticism of Priesthoods, and the deeply rooted prejudices, but about any attempt of the mind to fly over any given society's preassigned limits, or consciousness, and rise to the heavens. Call me Romantic, if you like, but in all those years of loneliness and learning, I realized that all visionaries, revolutionaries, pioneers, were always Romantics.

I think I have the love and the grace. I think that, trying to hack the hyper-net for so many years, until I contacted other human beings, imprisoned, isolated, I learned patience and hope. The Word, which myself and my kind will preach to the slaughtering galaxies. Who, maybe, some generations later, could live peacefully in a world of hope and grace and love.

But what am I going to do with the fucking cat? I seriously considered leaving her behind, but her single, pleading green eye, watches me with dumb, sad query, and she meows miserably, as if asking me 'Why don't you understand me?' extending her front leg to me – but when I try to hold it she draws it back; and I can't fucking understand her.

I will take her. I would be unworthy of the gift if I left her behind. I sealed the crypt, hoping that maybe some day I would manage to come back, I put the cat – not without objection – in her cage, and loaded her, together with my most important books and as many of my dearest belongings as I could carry, to the jet-propelled gardening vehicle. In two minutes the fruits of my labor will explode, and I'll head to the contact point. In a few hours we will sail to the Moon. To try to heal the world and, if we can, the cat, too.

Makis Panorios ΜΕΡΕΣ ΤΟΥ ΜΕΛΛΟΝΤΟΣ

-- «Ωρα έκτη πρωινή», ανακοίνωσε το Σπίτι. «Αφύπνιση!»

Είχε ξημερώσει. Ο ουρανός γκρίζος, ωχρός, θολός, και οι Σφαίρες Φωτός πάντοτε αναμμένες μονίμως επί εικοσιτετραώρου βάσεως μ' ένα φως άρρωστο κίτρινο. Αρχίζει μια νέα ημέρα πανομοιότυπη με την χτεσινή. Την χτεσινή. Που επαναλάμβανε τον εαυτό της. Μια καινούργια οξειδωμένη ημέρα που δεν ήταν πλέον ημέρα.

Ο Αλέξανδρος άνοιξε τα μάτια. Ακίνητος, ανάσκελα στο κρεβάτι, κοιτούσε ψηλά ένα απέραντο λιβάδι κι ένα κορίτσι που έτρεχε γελώντας, ένα ξαφνικό φως, το κορίτσι χάθηκε

μέσα σ' αυτό, το λιβάδι εξαφανίστηκε απότομα και εκεί πάνω ήταν μόνο το ταβάνι. Το εφηβικό του όνειρο που όλο και πιο συχνά τον επισκεπτόταν εν φυλακαίς νυκτός τον τελευταίο καιρό είχε πλέον χαθεί. Ο Αλέξανδρος συνέχισε να παραμένει ξαπλωμένος κι ύστερα συνειδητοποίησε ότι είχε ξυπνήσει. Τα χάπια φυσιολογικού ύπνου, ευχάριστων ονείρων και σωματικής χαλάρωσης είχαν ολοκληρώσει τον κύκλο τους. Την επομένη στιγμή επικοινωνήσε με το σώμα του. Με μια ανακούφιση πήρε βαθιά ανάσα. Το πρόσωπό του, τα χέρια του, τα πόδια του, το στήθος, η κοιλιά, το μοριό του. Μια δεύτερη βαθύτερη ανάσα. Ζει. Και έχει εισέλθει στην καινούργια ημέρα. Αρτιμελής και υγιής. Μόνο που...

--«Καλημέρα σας, Κύριε», τον χαιρετά το Σπίτι.

--«Καλημέρα Οικία», απαντά ο Αλέξανδρος, κι αμέσως εμφανίζεται στο μυαλό του το Ημερήσιο Πρόγραμμα Εργασίας. Ο χρόνος είναι πολύτιμος. Δεν έχει καιρό για χάσιμο. Ως εκ τούτου,

--«Έγερση», λέει, μια τυπική διαταγή. «Πλύσιμο, πρωινό, ενημέρωση. Πάραυτα».

--«Μάλιστα, Κύριε».

Και το Σπίτι εκτελεί την εντολή. Το κρεβάτι ανορθώνεται, ο Αλέξανδρος όρθιος, το κρεβάτι βυθίζεται στο πάτωμα, το άνοιγμα κλείνει, όχι τελείως, μια μικρή ρωγμή παραμένει ανοιχτή, ο Αλέξανδρος ακίνητος στη γυμνότητά του, χλιαρό νερό τον περιλούζει, μεταλλικά χέρια με υφή δέρματος αναφύονται από το πάτωμα, τον σαπουνίζουν, το νερό τον ξεπλένει, απορροφάται από το δάπεδο, θερμός αέρας τον στεγνώνει, ο τοίχος πίσω του ανοίγει, εμφανίζεται μία πολυθρόνα, πλησιάζει τον Αλέξανδρο, ο Αλέξανδρος κάθεται, απ' τον απέναντι τοίχο βγαίνει το τραπέζι με το πρωινό, αναζωογονητικός χυμός, θρεπτικό μίγμα, συνθετικός άρτος ευρωστίας, ο Αλέξανδρος τα καταναλώνει και ξαφνικά ως αφηρημένος σαν κάτι να σκέφτεται ή σαν κάτι να προσπαθεί να θυμηθεί. Δεν σκέφτεται τίποτε, δεν υπάρχει κάτι να θυμηθεί. Βιώνει μια στιγμή απουσίας. Αλλά επανέρχεται αμέσως.

--«Ωραίο πρωινό», δηλώνει άχρωμα, αλλά σαν να θέλει να πει κάτι άλλο.

--«Ωραίο, πράγματι, Κύριε», συμφωνεί το Σπίτι.

--«Τι;» λέει ο Αλέξανδρος. Δεν έχει ακούσει. Και σαν η προηγούμενη στιγμή απουσίας να έχει αφήσει μέσα του ένα κάποιο κατάλοιπο, συνεχίζει στον ίδιο τόνο. «Όμως γιατί σήμερα, παρ' όλη την ωραιότητά του, σαν . . . τρομαγμένο;»

--«Τρομαγμένο;» Το Σπίτι δεν καταλαβαίνει φυσικά.

Αλλά τώρα ο Αλέξανδρος έχει επιστρέψει. Η στιγμή έχει χαθεί. Η στιγμή δεν υπήρξε. Ο Αλέξανδρος είναι πλέον ενταγμένος στη συνηθισμένη ημέρα του.

--«Οπτικόραμα», λέει, και ο τοίχος απέναντι τώρα οθόνη με εκρήξεις χρωμάτων και ηλεκτρονική μουσική. «Πανοραμικό Πόλης, παρακαλώ». Τα επιβλητικά μέγαρα, οι μεταλλικοί δρόμοι, επίγεια και εναέρια οχήματα, οι Σφαίρες Φωτός, κι ένα Θωρηκτό Διαστήματος να ανυψώνεται από το βάθος του ορίζοντα. Αλλά, εντός ολίγου επίκειται ελαφράς εντάσεως βροχή, προειδοποιεί το Οτικόραμα. Παρακαλούνται οι κυκλοφορούντες επιγείως ή εναερίως να λάβουν τις ενδεδειγμένες προφυλάξεις.

--«Αρκεί», λέει ο Αλέξανδρος, σηκώνεται, όρθιος, ακίνητος, ή οθόνη εξαφανίζεται, πολυθρόνα και τραπέζι βυθίζονται στα ανοίγματα των τοίχων, τα ανοίγματα κλείνουν, ο Αλέξανδρος ωσάν σε αναμονή, το Δωμάτιο άδειο, σιωπή, Αλέξανδρος και Δωμάτιο πάντοτε εν αναμονή περιμένοντας ο ένας τον άλλο, έξω η ημέρα έχει ήδη κάνει τα πρώτα της βήματα. Ο Αλέξανδρος σαν να ακούει τον αμείλικτο ήχο τους, μοιάζει να αφυπνίζεται τώρα. Καλεί το Βιονικό Ανδροειδές Βοηθό Οικίας.

--«Άλφα! »

--«Μάλιστα, Κύριε». Το ρομπότ εμφανίζεται. Νέος, εμφανίσιμος, με προγραμματισμένο χαμόγελο. «Υποβάλλω τα σέβη μου. Στις διαταγές σας».

Ο Αλέξανδρος ξαφνικά αφηρημένος. Σαν να κοιτάζει κάπου κάτι. Δεν κοιτάζει πουθενά, τίποτε. Με μία άλλη φωνή μονολογεί.

--«Το Όχημα μετακίνησης είναι έτοιμο;» Πάντα αφηρημένος, δεν ρωτά, απλώς έχει μιλήσει, ίσως για ν' ακούσει τον ήχο του ή για να πει κάτι άλλο που έχει ξεχάσει.

--«Μάλιστα, Κύριε».

Ξανά μια μικρή σιωπή. Που όμως κραυγάζει εκκωφαντικά. Ο Αλέξανδρος την αγνοεί.

--«Βρέχει», λέει άσχετα.

--Μάλιστα, Κύριε».

--«Ωραία. Ρίξε μια τελευταία ματιά στο όχημα. Νομίζω οι τουρμπίνες του έχουν εμφανίσει κάποιο πρόβλημα».

--«Μάλιστα, Κύριε».

--«Πήγαινε».

Το Ανδροειδές Άλφα αναχωρεί. Ο Αλέξανδρος λες και τον αντιλαμβάνεται μόλις τώρα. Τον παρατηρεί καθώς βαδίζει προς την έξοδο του δωματίου. Και

--«Άλφα, μια στιγμή, σε παρακαλώ».

Το Ανδροειδές σταματά και στρέφει προς αυτόν, «Κύριε μου, ορίστε».

--«Νομίζω χωλαίνεις ή κάνω λάθος; Επίσης ακούγεσαι κάπως βραχνός;»

--«Οντως Κύριε. Πιθανή βλάβη στο σύστημα κίνησης των κάτω άκρων μου, Κύριε. Κι ανάλογη στις φωνητικές μου χορδές».

--«Δεν ειδοποίησες το Εθνικό Συνεργείο Ανδροειδών να επιληφθούν του προβλήματος;»

--«Μάλιστα, Κύριε. Αλλά με πληροφόρησαν ότι για κάποιο διάστημα το Συνεργείο θα παραμείνει κλειστό. Συγκεκριμένα θα παραμείνει κλειστό επ' αόριστον».

--«Μάλιστα. Καταλαβαίνω. Αλλά μην ανησυχείς. Θα στείλω τεχνικό της Εταιρείας να σε επιδιορθώσει».

--«Σας ευχαριστώ, Κύριε», και βγαίνει αργά απ' το δωμάτιο.

Ο Αλέξανδρος και πάλι μόνος. Και τώρα, εκεί, μπροστά του, σχεδόν υλική, να τον κοιτάζει με τα τυφλά της μάτια μια ξαφνική απώλεια. Ο Αλέξανδρος της στρέφει τα νώτα, και θέοντας να την αγνοήσει τελείως, ντύνεται την βιονική του ενδυμασία με την προσωπίδα φίλτρου μολυσμένου αέρα και βγαίνει απ' το δωμάτιο. Έξω μια λυπημένη βροχή στο πρόσωπο της ημέρας. Την κοιτάζει προσπαθώντας να αποκρυπτογραφήσει το τραγούδι της, «Πήγαινε, βροχούλα πέρα, κι έλα πάλι κάποια μέρα». Και σβήνει σαν εφηβικό άστρο σ' έναν άλλο ουρανό. Μένει μόνο αυτή η όξινη βροχή που πέφτει αδιάφορη επί δικαίων και αδίκων.

--«Συνέβη κάτι;» αναρωτιέται ο Αλέξανδρος. Τι; Και περιμένει μια απάντηση που δεν θα του δοθεί ποτέ. Μετά, «Νομίζω πως κάτι ξέχασα», λέει κάπως υπερβολικά δυνατά και συνεχίζει να περιμένει, τέλος σαν να παίρνει μια ηρωική απόφαση πηγαίνει στο υπόστεγο κι επιβιβάζεται στο Όχημα Μετακίνησης.

--«Εντολή προορισμού, παρακαλώ, Κύριε», ζητά ευγενικά το όχημα.

--Θα οδηγήσω εγώ», δηλώνει κοφτά ο Αλέξανδρος.

--«Όπως επιθυμεί ο Κύριος. Να μου επιστρέψει όμως ο Κύριος να υπενθυμίσω ότι οι εκτός λειτουργίας κυλιόμενοι δρόμοι παρουσιάζουν προβλήματα, σύμφωνα με επίσημη ανακοίνωση του Υπουργείου Πολεοδομίας και Μεταφορών. Επίσης θα πρέπει να παρακαμφθεί η Αριστερή Πτέρυγα τη Πόλης, διότι σε ένα σημείο της έχει παρουσιαστεί

βλάβη στο σύστημα ανακύκλωσης λυμάτων. Ως εκ τούτου η εν λόγω περιοχή έχει πλημμυρίσει από δύσοσμο ανθυγιεινό πολτώδες υλικό, γεγονός που θα προκαλέσει δυσχέρειες κατά την διεύλευσή μας».

--«Πολτώδες, ε;» Με ειρωνία ο Αλέξανδρος. «Για φαντάσου! Και, φυσικά, η βλάβη δεν έχει διορθωθεί».

--«Όχι, Κύριε. Αλλά, σύντομα, σύμφωνα πάντα με την ανακοίνωση του Υπουργείου. Προς ώρας, όμως, και εφ' όσον θα ακολουθήσουμε μάλλον άγνωστη πορεία, παρακαλώ τον Κύριο να μου επιτρέψει να υποβοηθήσω στην απρόσκοπτη μετακίνησή μας».

--«Ο Κύριος σου το επιτρέπει. Άλλο νέο;»

--«Εξεράγη Σφαίρα Φωτός, στα ανατολικά. Εξαιτίας βραχυκυκλώματος λόγω βροχής. Το συμβάν προκάλεσε ωστόσο αλυσιδωτές αντιδράσεις, με αποτέλεσμα να καταστραφούν περί τις δέκα Σφαίρες Φωτός επιπλέον».

--«Δυστυχώς εμείς, εννοώ εσύ κι εγώ, αδυνατούμε να συμβάλλουμε στην επιδιόρθωσή τους». Σαρκαστικά ο Αλέξανδρος, «Αλλά δεν ανησυχώ. Η Πολιτεία είναι αποτελεσματική. Επομένως αναχωρούμε πάραυτα».

Το Όχημα κινήθηκε με σταθερή ταχύτητα μέσα σε δρόμους γεμάτους σκουπίδια και απορρίματα. Τα πανύψηλα κτήρια κλειστά και σαν να υπονοούσαν το άδειο των κατοικιών τους. Σε ένα πεζοδρόμιο ξαπλωμένος μπρούμιτα μισόγυμνος άνδρας. Μπορεί πληγωμένος, μπορεί αναίσθητος, μπορεί ασθενής, μπορεί νεκρός. Αλλά μπορεί και να υποκρινόταν. Ο Αλέξανδρος προσπέρασε. Στην επόμενη στροφή, στη μέση του δρόμου, ένας νεαρός ρακένδυτος, του έκανε μια απροσδιόριστη χειρονομία. Ζητούσε βοήθεια; Τον απειλούσε; Άγνωστο. Μεταλλαγμένος; Παρίας; Σαρκοφάγος; Όλα ενδεχομένως. Ίσως και κάτι άλλο. Τον παρέκαμψε και αυτόν και μπήκε στη λεωφόρο Ελευθερίας. Ακριβώς μπροστά του προπορεύονταν δυο ψηλόλιγνα πλάσματα. Ακούγοντας το Όχημα ακινητοποιήθηκαν, έστρεψαν απότομα, άκαμπτα, το κοίταξαν, πρόσωπα οστεώδη, μάτια σκιστά, κόρες κατάμαυρες, κρανία φαλακρά. Ο Αλέξανδρος ασυναισθήτως ελάττωσε την ταχύτητα. Τα πλάσματα του φάνηκαν ανεξήγητα ανυπεράσπιστα. Πριν όμως τα πλησιάσει αυτά με ένα αστραπιαίο άλμα εκτινάχτηκαν στα ύψη, προσγειώθηκαν στην κορυφή ενός κτιρίου, στάθηκαν εκεί συσπειρωμένα σαν αλλόκοτα όρνια, κοίταξαν κάτω το όχημα και χάθηκαν με τεράστια άλματα στις πίσω στέγες.

--«Εξωγήνιοι», είπε ο Αλέξανδρος. «Μάλλον. Δεν μας συνήθισαν, και δεν τους συνηθίσαμε». Και με αφελή φιλοσοφική διάθεση, «Φυσικό, αφού όλοι είμαστε ξένοι μεταξύ μας, και αδυνατούμε να υπερβούμε τη διαχωριστική γραμμή που καθιστά αδύνατη την επικοινωνία μας». Χαμογέλασε, «Καλά τώρα».

Συνέχισε να οδηγεί, προσεχτικά παντα. Η λεωφόρος άρχισε τώρα να ανηφορίζει. Σε μια μεγάλη νησίδα της με καχεκτικούς θάμνους, γύρω από μια μικρή φωτιά τρία αγόρια κι ένα κορίτσι, καθώς πλησίαζε, σηκώθηκαν σαν νευρόσπαστα, του έκαναν χυδαίες χειρονομίες επιδεικνύοντας τα γεννητικά του όργανα. Ένα αγόρι άρχισε να ουρεί. Το κορίτσι σήκωσε την κοντή βρώμικη φούστα του, ήταν γυμνή από κάτω, κι άρχισε να τρίβει το αιδού της χαχανίζοντας όλο δόντια, ένα γέλιο ζωώδες.

--«Θαυμαστός νέος κόσμος», σκέφτηκε ο Αλέξανδρος. Και με πικρό σαρκασμό, «Πολτώδης».

Και σαν επιβεβαίωση της διαπίστωσής του πεντέξι μικρά παιδιά απροσδιόριστου φύλου και ηλικίας πετάχτηκαν ξαφνικά μπροστά του. Φρενάρισε απότομα. Τα παιδιά ακίνητα τον κοίταξαν, τα μάτια τους άδεια, ρουθούνισαν, του έδειξαν τα μικρά κοφτερά δόντια τους σαν

θυμωμένα τρωκτικά. Την επομένη στιγμή τρέχοντας χώθηκαν στο άνοιγμα ενός μισοερειπωμένου κτηρίου. Το τελευταίο παιδί στάθηκε, γύρισε, έβγαλε το μοριό του, του το έδειξε κουνώντας τους γοφούς του, κακάρισε και χάθηκε κι αυτό στο εσωτερικό του κτηρίου. Ο Αλέξανδρος πήρε μια βαθιά ανάσα λες και είχε ανεβεί έναν εφιαλτικό κρανίου τόπο.

--«Συνεχίζουμε», είπε σαν να 'θελε να δραπετεύσει από μια φυλακή τεράτων. Το Όχημα ξεκίνησε με την προηγούμενη ταχύτητα. «Πιο αργά, σε παρακαλώ», είπε ο Αλέξανδρος. Το Όχημα επιβράδυνε κινούμενο με μικρά τραντάγματα. «Τι συμβαίνει;»

--«Ανωμαλίες του δρόμου, Κύριε. Σας είχα προειδοποιήσει ότι θα τις συναντούσαμε».

--«Ανέλαβε την οδήγηση», είπε ο Αλέξανδρος αδυνατώντας να τιθασεύσει την προηγούμενη ταραχή του. «Και άνοιξε το Οπτικόραμά σου, σε παρακαλώ».

--«Μάλιστα, Κύριε».

Η μικρή οθόνη δίπλα στον πίνακα οδήγησης φωτίστηκε, μετάδινε ειδήσεις.

« . . . κτακτη ανακοίνωση. Ιδιωτικό εναέριο όχημα συγκρούστηκε με Σφαίρα Φωτός, για άγνωστους μέχρι στιγμής λόγους. Δεν έχουμε ακόμη εικόνα, οι πληροφορίες ωστόσο από τον τόπο του δυστυχήματος αναφέρουν θύματα. Νεκρός ο οδηγός του οχήματος και διερχόμενοι πεζοί που επλήγησαν από τα θραύσματα. Και συνεχίζουμε με άλλες εσωτερικές ειδήσεις. Παρακαλούνται οι κυκλοφορούντες στο ιστορικό κέντρο της πόλης να επιλέξουν άλλες διαδρομές, διότι στην ευρύτερη περιοχή της πλατείας Ειρήνης και Ομόνοιας, στο κέντρο της οποίας και δεσπόζει το παραδοσιακό μουσουλμανικό τέμενος, συγκρούονται αυτή τη στιγμή οι αναγνωρισμένες επίσημα από το κράτος ιδιωτικές ομάδες Ερυθρών και Κυανών. Σύμφωνα με ανακοίνωση που εξέδωσαν από κοινού και οι δύο εμπλεκόμενες ομάδες η αντιπαράθεσή τους θα διαρκέσει μέχρι την δωδεκάτη νυκτερινή ώρα. Οι κεντρικές επιτροπές τους επιζητούν την κατανοήση των πολιτών, διότι . . . »

--«Κλείστο», ύψωσε τη φωνή ο Αλέξανδρος. Η οθόνη νεκρώθηκε. «Δεν είναι καλύτερα έτσι; Να μην βλέπουμε, να μην ακούμε; Πιό έντονα, «ένας αστεροειδής θα μας σώσει! »

--«Τι εννοεί ο Κύριος; »

--«Τίποτα δεν εννοεί ο Κύριος», κάγχασε ο Αλέξανδρος. Συνέχισε να οδηγείς, παιδί μου. Α, για πες μου, σε παρακαλώ. Σταμάτησε η βροχή;»

--«Μάλιστα, Κύριε. Περί την δεκάτη ώρα, προ μεσημβρίας».

--«Σοβαρά; Περί την δεκάτη, ε; Κακώς! Διότι αν συνεχιζόταν θα μπορούσαμε να ελπίσουμε σε έναν ευλογημένο κατακλυσμό. Όλα μετεξελίσσονται επί τα βελτίω, γιατί όχι και η βροχούλα του θεού;»

--«Φοβάμαι, Κύριε, πως δεν σας κατανοώ».

--«Ούτε κι εγώ με κατανοώ», σάρκασε ο Αλέξανδρος.

Και μετά είχε πλέον φτάσει στον Οίκο της Εταιρείας. Το κτήριο υψωνόταν με μία αλαζονεία, προκλητικό και υπεροπτικό, αντανάκλαση των εργαζομένων του. Ο κωδικός πρόσβασης του επέτρεψε να περάσει απ' τη κεντρική πύλη, στάθμευσε στην προσωπική του θέση, βγήκε έξω αργά, έριξε μια ματιά τριγύρω, κανείς, μόνο τα οχήματα, αλλόκοτα γλυπτά σ' ένα ξεχασμένο μουσείο. Στην είσοδο του κτηρίου είπε το ονομά του, έδωσε τα δακτυλικά του αποτυπώματα, η γυάλινη θύρα άνοιξε, μπήκε στον προθάλαμο, και με τον ανελκυστήρα ανήλθε στον όγδοο όροφο, «Στο ικρίωμα», σκέφτηκε, «στην αγχόνη». Κάθισε στην πολυθρόνα του γραφείου του, «Στην ηλεκτρική καρέκλα», συνέχισε να σκεφτεται. Τα έπιπλα τον παρατηρούσαν με μια απειλή, έτοιμα να του επιτεθούν, και θέλοντας να διαφύγει μέσα στην άχρηστη αθωότητά του, εργάστηκε ευσυνείδητα μέχρι αργά το απόγευμα. Συζήτησε με στελέχη εταιριών, με ανώτερα όργανα επιχειρήσεων, υπόγραψε κάποιες συμβάσεις, συνομίλησε με υπαλλήλους κι ετοιμαζόταν να εξέλθει, όταν το κάλεσε ο Γενικός Διευθυντής, με τον οποίο τον συνέδεε και μακροχρόνια φιλία, να μελετήσουν μια ενδιαφέρουσα πρόταση εργασίας. Κι όταν τελείωσε η συνεργασία τους,

--«Πως είναι η Μητέρα, Αλέξανδρε», τον ρώτησε.

--«Ίδια κατάσταση, Κωνσταντίνε. Έχει βέβαια κάποιες περιστασιακές εκλάμψεις, αλλά κι όταν επανέρχεται, πώς να στο πω, είναι σαν να βρίσκεται στο παρελθόν. Σ' έναν άλλο κόσμο».

--«Τι κρίμα! Λυπηρό».

--«Η ασθένειά της είναι ανίατη. Μου το κατέστησαν σαφές στο Κέντρο Υγείας που νοσηλεύεται. Η επιστήμη έχει σηκώσει τα χέρια – και μπορεί η κατάστασή της να διαρκέσει χρόνια, μπορεί όμως και να φύγει από τη μια στιγμή στην άλλη. Φεύγοντας θα πάω να την δω, πηγαίνω κάθε μέρα. Τι άλλο να κάνω».



--«Σε καταλαβαίνω. Και η Ελεάνα;»

--«Βρίσκεται σε καλλιτεχνική αποστολή», λέει ο Αλέξανδρος, με ελεγχόμενη πικρία. «Κάπου στα νησιά Μπαρμπάντος, νομίζω. Θέλει να συλλάβει, λέει, την ποιότητα του φωτός και των χρωμάτων στην καθαρότητά τους. Τι να σου πω».

--«Μάλιστα. Καταλαβαίνω. Λοιπόν, να μη σε κρατώ άλλο. Καλή σου νύχτα και τα λέμε αύριο».

--«Καληνύχτα, Κωνσταντίνε».

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Αργότερα στο Κέντρο Υγείας, στο δωμάτιο της Μητέρας. Βρίσκεται σε κατάσταση αφύπνισης. Του χαμογελάει σαν μαραμένο άνθος. Οι ρυτίδες του προσώπου της βαθιές χαράδρες γεμάτες ξεχασμένους ίσκιους και πεθαμένα όνειρα.

--«Λοιπόν», λέει με έναν ήχο αρχαίου βιολιού. «Ήσουν καλός μαθητής σήμερα;

--«Πολύ καλός, Μητέρα».

--Α, μπράβο. Τότε πρέπει να σου δωρίσω ένα όμορφο παραμύθι. Ποιό θέλεις; Το Χρυσό Ταξίδι του Σεβάχ του Θαλασσινού ή τον Κλέφτη της Βαγδάτης;»

--«Νομίζω . . . τον Κλέφτη της Βαγδάτης. Δεν είναι γι κείνο το μικρό αγόρι που ταξίδεψε στη χώρα των παραμυθιών μ' ένα μαγικό ιπτάμενο χαλί;»

--Αυτό είναι. Κι εμένα μου αρέσει. Λοιπόν, μια φορά κι έναν καιρό . . . » Η φωνή της σβήνει σαν φθινοπωρινό αγέρι, τα μάτια της κλείνουν σα νυσταγμένα αστέρια, το κεφάλι της γέρνει στο μαξιλάρι σαν κουρασμένο τριαντάφυλλο. Ο Αλέξανδρος μέσα σε μία απέραντη έρημο σιωπής. Την κοιτάζει ανυπεράσπιστος.

--«Καληνύχτα, Μητέρα».

Και βγαίνει έξω στη βάρβαρη, οξειδωμένη, εχθρική νύχτα. Μια μακρινή ζωώδη κραυγή συνοπογράφει την ποιότητά της. Ο Αλέξανδρος επιβιβάζεται στο Όχημα.

--«Εναέρια διαδρομή», λέει ουδέτερα, και το Όχημα ανυψώνεται αργά.

--«Εντολή προορισμού, Κύριε».

--«Στο Νησί των Θησαυρών», χαμογελάει δακρυσμένος ο Αλέξανδρος. όσο πιο μακριά γίνεται. Μακριά, μακριά . . . »

Ένα πεφταστέρι κυλάει ξαφνικά στο πρόσωπο της νύχτας και χάνεται στο άπειρο.

### *Makis Panorios Future Days*

--“6:00 a.m.” announces the House. “Wake up call!”

*The day has dawned. The sky is gray, pallid, hazy and the Spheres of Illumination constantly on, twenty four hours, shedding a sickly yellow light. A new day is beginning, yet identical as the last one. A replica of yesterday, keep repeating itself. A new rusty day, no longer a day.*

*Alexandros opens his eyes. Lying, motionless, on his back, he looks high up and sees the laughing girl, running in the vast field; then a sudden light, and she disappears, abruptly, along with the meadow. All that is left is the ceiling. Lately, his adolescent dream, which kept visiting him during those absolutely dark nights, is almost gone. Still in bed Alexandros realizes that he is awake. The pills inducing natural sleep, pleasant dreams and physical relaxation have done their job. Relieved, he breathes deeply. Face,*

hands, legs, chest, belly, sexual organ. All intact. He takes another deeper breath. He's alive. He enters the new day. Able-bodied and healthy. Just that...

-- "Good morning, Sir," the House greets him.

-- "Good day, House," he replies. Immediately, the daily work schedule appears in his mind. Time is precious. He has no time to waste. Therefore,

-- "Time to be up"; he utters a simple order. Cleansing. Breakfast. Briefing.

At once.

-- "Yes, Sir."

The House obeys his command. The bed is lifted. Alexandros stands up. The bed sinks into the floor; the opening has almost shut; only a small crack remains. Naked, he stands still. Lukewarm water drenches him; metallic hands with skin texture rise from the floor; they lather him. Water rinses him out and is sucked by the floor. Warm air dries him up. Behind him the wall opens and an armchair approaches Alexandros. He sits. The table with his breakfast appears through the opposite wall. Refreshing juice, nutritious mix, and vigorous synthetic bread. Alexandros consumes it. Unexpectedly, he feels scatter-brained, as if trying to think or perhaps remember something. He experiences a moment of absence. Then he is back again.

-- "Nice breakfast," he declares with a colorless voice, as if he means something else.

-- "Nice, indeed," the House agrees.

-- "What?" he asks. He has not heard. That previous moment of absence must have left some residue in him. He continues in the same tone: "why, today it seemed scared ... besides being nice."

-- "Scared?" The House does not understand.

Alexandros is back again. The moment has lapsed. It never was. He is now integrated to his regular day.

-- "Visuals," he says. The wall turns into a screen with explosive colors and electronic music. "City panorama, please." Imposing buildings, metallic streets, ground and airborne vehicles, Spheres of Illumination, and a space battleship lifting in the horizon.

-- "Light rain is imminent," states the warning. "All travelers, on the ground and in the air, are kindly advised to take the necessary precautions."

-- "Enough," says Alexandros and stands up. He does not move. The screen disappears; the armchair and the table recede into the wall-openings which close immediately. Alexandros waits. The room is empty and silent. Alexandros and the room pause, waiting for each other. Outside, the day has already taken her first steps. As if he hears their merciless sound, Alexandros seems to awaken. He calls the bionic android butler.

-- "Alfa!"

-- "Yes, Sir." The robot makes its appearance. He is young, good-looking, with a pre-programmed smile. "My respects, Sir. At your command."

Alexandros is absent-minded. He seems to be staring at something. In fact, he is staring at nowhere, at nothing. He speaks with a different voice.

-- "Is the transport vehicle ready?" He does not ask, just speaks inanely, perhaps to hear the sound of his voice or to utter something he has forgotten.

-- "Yes, Sir."

Again silence for a moment. It is deafening. Alexandros ignores it.

-- "It's raining," he says irrelevantly.

-- "Yes, Sir."

-- "Fine. Check the vehicle one more time. I think there's a problem with its turbines."

-- "Yes, Sir."

-- "Go."

Alfa, the android departs. Alexandros seems to notice him only now. He follows the android with his eyes as it approaches the exit.

-- "Alfa, please wait a moment."

The android stops and turns to him. "At your command, my master."

-- "You're limping, are you not? You also sound hoarse."

-- "Indeed, Sir. A possible malfunction in the kinetic system of my lower limbs, Sir. The same with my vocal cords."

-- "Didn't you notify the National Android Maintenance Office to take care of your problem?"

-- "I did, Sir. But they have informed me that the Maintenance Office will be closed for a while. In fact, it will be closed indefinitely.

-- "So, I see. Don't worry. I'll send the company's technician to fix you up."

-- "Thank you, Sir." Alfa leaves the room slowly.

Alexandros is alone once again. There, in front of him, almost material, a sudden loss stares at him, her eyes blind. He turns his back to totally ignore her. He puts on his bionic gear along with the mask that filters polluted air and leaves the room. Out there a doleful rain marks the day. He tries to decode her song: "Little rain don't remain but come again some other day." It blows out like a young star from another universe. Only she, that acid rain, keeps falling indifferently upon the righteous and the unjust.

-- "What has happened?" Alexandros wonders. "What?" The answer he waits for will never come. "I think I've forgotten something," he says very loudly and stands still. It seems like a heroic decision, when he finally moves toward the hangar and gets on the transport vehicle.

-- "Destination, please Sir," says the vehicle politely.

-- "I'll drive," snaps Alexandros.

-- "As you wish, Sir. May I remind you that according to the official announcement of the Ministry of City Planning and Transport, all out of order rolling roads pose complicated hurdles. You should also avoid the left wing of the city, because there is a malfunction in the waste recycling system. The area is flooded with a malodorous, unhealthy, pulpy substance; it will most certainly hinder your passage."

-- "Pulpy, hey?" said Alexandros ironically. "Who would have thought of it! And of course, the problem has not been fixed."

-- "No, Sir. Soon though, according to the Ministry's announcement. For the time being, and since we are taking an unknown route, please Sir, allow me to assist you so that your passage would be unobstructed."

-- "Master allows you. Any other news?"

-- "A Sphere of Illumination has exploded in the eastern section. It short-circuited due to rain. The event created a chain reaction; so ten additional Spheres of Illumination were destroyed.

-- "Unfortunately, we, I mean you and me, cannot contribute to their mending," said

Alexandros sarcastically. "But, I am not worried. The State is effective. So, we depart immediately."

The vehicle begins to move with a steady speed on roads full of garbage and litter. The tall buildings empty of inhabitants look desolate. There is a half-naked man lying face down on the sidewalk. Perhaps injured, perhaps unconscious, perhaps sick, perhaps dead. He may be faking it. Alexandros passes by. In the next turn, a young man in rags and in the middle of the road makes an unidentified gesture. Is he asking for help? Is he threatening him? Who knows! Is he a mutant? a pariah? a carnivore? Probably all the above. Perhaps something else. Alexandros dodges him and enters Freedom highway. Ahead of him he sees two tall and thin creatures. When they hear the vehicle, they stop and turn abruptly towards him, unyielding, and looking straight at him. Their faces are bony with slant eyes, black eyeballs and a bald skull. Alexandros instinctively reduces speed. He finds the creatures inexplicably defenseless. Before he can approach them, they jump high with lightning speed and land on the top of a building. They crouch there like weird vultures, looking at the vehicle below, and then vanish behind the rooftops with great leaps.

-- "Aliens," says Alexandros. "I guess. They are not used to us. We are not used to them. It's only natural, since we're all strangers," he muses naively and in a philosophical mood. "We are unable to cross the dividing line that makes communication impossible." He smiles. "Oh, well."

He continues driving with care. The highway is getting steep. As he approaches a large traffic island with sickly bushes, three fidgety boys and a girl around a small fire stand up and make obscene gestures, exposing their sexual organs. One of the boys begins to urinate. The girl lifts her short and dirty skirt; she is naked underneath; she starts rubbing her vagina while giggling, a beastly laughter, showing her teeth.

-- "A brave new world," thinks Alexandros. "Pulpy," he says with bitter sarcasm.

As to confirm his thought, five or six children of unidentified sex and age dart in front of him. He slams on the breaks. The children, motionless, look at him, their eyes empty; they snort, show him their small sharp teeth like angry rodents. A moment later they vanish into the opening of a half-ruined building. The last child pauses, turns around, takes out his organ, makes a display of it by wiggling his hips, cackles and disappears inside the building with the others. Alexandros takes a deep breath; it seems he has ascended on a nightmarish place of skulls.

-- "Let's move on," he says, as if he wants to flee from a prison full of monsters. The vehicle resumes its previous speed.

-- "Slower, please," says Alexandros. The vehicle slows down jerkily. "What's the matter?"

-- "Road anomalies, Sir." I've warned you about them."

-- "Take over the driving," says Alexandros unable to control his agitation. "And switch on the Visuals, please."

"Yes, Sir."

The small screen next to the instrument board lights up. It is broadcasting the news. "... Breaking news. A private airborne vehicle has crashed onto a Sphere of Illumination. The reasons are still unknown. We have no footage yet but reports from the site of the accident mention casualties. The driver of the vehicle is dead and also some passersby

who were struck by fragments. In other internal news. People going about the City's historical center are kindly requested to choose alternative routes because in the wider area near the Square of Peace and Concord—where the traditional Islamic mosque is located—there are clashes between the Reds and the Blues, the private groups that have been officially recognized by the government. Based on their common statement, both groups declare that their confrontation will last until midnight. Their central committees ask for the citizens' understanding ...”

-- “Turn it off,” says Alexandros loudly. The screen goes blank. “Isn't it better now? Not to see, not to hear? Only an asteroid can save us!”

-- “What do you mean, Sir?”

-- “Master means nothing,” replies Alexandros sarcastically. “Keep driving, boy. Oh, by the way, tell me, has the rain stopped?”

-- “Yes, Sir. Around ten a.m.”

-- “Really? Around ten, hey? Too bad. If it kept raining we could hope for a blessed deluge.” Everything is redeveloping for the better, why not God's rain?”

-- “I'm afraid, I don't understand, Sir”

-- “Neither do I,” mocks Alexandros.

He is finally at the company's headquarters. Reflecting the mood of its owners, the building stands arrogantly, provokingly, haughtily. He enters the access code and goes through the central gate. He parks the vehicle at his personal spot and gets out slowly, looking around. No one is in sight, only some vehicles that look like weird sculptures in a forsaken museum. He gives his name and his fingerprints at the entrance. The glass door lets him in. He crosses the lobby and takes the elevator to the eighth floor. “To the scaffolding, to the gallows,” he thinks. He sits at his desk and muses: “to the electric chair.” The furniture seems threatening, ready to attack him. Wanting to escape into his pointless innocence, he sets to work conscientiously until late in the evening. He talks to company executives, speaks to high officials, signs some contracts, and converses with other employees. When he is ready to leave, the General Manager—a friend of his for many years—calls him to discuss an interesting proposal. Once the task is complete, the Manager makes an inquiry.

-- “How's your mother, Alexandros?”

-- “The same, Konstantine. She has occasional flashes, but how may I put it, she seems stuck in the past. In another world.”

-- “Pity. Very sad!”

-- “She's terminal. They made it very clear at the Health Center. Science can do nothing for her. In her condition, she may last for years or she may depart at any moment. I'm going to see her. I go there every day. What else can I do?”

-- “I see. And Eleana?”

-- “She's on an artistic mission,” replies Alexandros, trying to check his bitterness. “Somewhere in the Barbados islands, I think. She said she wanted to capture the quality of the light and the clarity of the colors. What can I say?”

-- “OK. I understand. Well, let me not keep you any longer. Good night. See you tomorrow.”

-- “Good night, Konstantine.

Later at the Health Center, in her room, Alexandros sees his mother in a state of wakefulness. She smiles at him like a withered flower. The furrows on her face are like deep ravines filled with forgotten shadows and dead dreams.

-- "Well, have you been a good student today?" she asks, sounding like an old violin.

-- "A very good one, mother."

-- "Bravo. I must tell you a wonderful fable. It will be your gift. Which one do you want? The Golden Voyage of Sinbad the Sailor, or the Thief of Bagdad?"

-- "I guess ... The Thief of Bagdad. It's about a little boy traveling to the magic land on a magic flying carpet, right?"

-- "Yes, that's it. I like it too. Let's see, once upon a time..." He voice dies like an autumn breeze, her eyes shut like sleepy stars, her head droops onto the pillow like an exhausted rose. A vast desert silence envelops Alexandros. He looks at her defenseless.

-- "Good night, mother."

He goes out into the barbaric, rusty and hostile darkness. From far away, the sound of a bestial cry attests to the quality of the night.

Alexandros gets in the vehicle.

-- "Aerial route," he says with a neutral voice. The vehicle begins to rise slowly.

-- "Destination Sir?"

-- "Treasure Island," says Alexandros smiling, but there are tears in his eyes. "As far away as possible. Far, far away..."

A falling star crosses the nightly horizon and vanishes into infinity.

*Vladimir Arenev* Критические дни

Это была любовь с первого взгляда. И ничего не предвещало.

А всё из-за новой версии опти-фильтра «Идеальный партнёр». Криворукие программисты не доотладили – и вот, изволь, Марина вдруг обнаружила среди безликой толпы, в самый час пик, приятного молодого человека. Линзы Марины не сделали его частью виртуального фона – наоборот, высветили, ярко и привлекательно. На узкой средневековой улочке остановился вполне современный парень. И кажется, тоже видел Марину (потом признался: видел, но посреди бескрайней прерии...)

Они обменялись электронными визитками и уже вечером сидели в уютном ресторанчике на берегу Сены. Ветер пах миндалём, смеялись туристы... (Артём не поспешил на прямую трансляцию с полным синхронном звуков и запахов). Когда от «Идеального партнёра» пришло сообщение об ошибке, оба его проигнорировали. И зря.

В общем-то, к её критическим дням Артём быстро привык – и вёл себя очень деликатно. «Ну что ты, – говорил, – здесь нечего стыдиться. Ты же не виновата». Возил в дорогую клинику, но там развели руками: кодоны вписаны в генетическую цепочку намертво, раскиданы так, что вычленишь и удалить невозможно. Посоветовали судиться с юристами корпорации: прадед Марины, подписывая договор о добровольном сотрудничестве, не давал добро на то, чтобы его потомков тоже превращали в живые реклам-трансляторы.

Судиться она не хотела. Хотела, чтобы всё поскорее закончилось. Во время приступов она словно превращалась в деревянную куклу; ходила и выкрикивала: «Покупайте шампуни «Снежный лев»! «Снежный лев» – душистый шёлк ваших волос!»

А потом через три года у Артёма обнаружили агитку – чудом сохранившуюся ещё с прошлого века, тоже вписанную в геном так, что не вычленишь, не сразу и найдёшь. Включившуюся непонятным образом. Теперь Артём ходил по улицам и всех призывал голосовать за очередной клон бывшего президента. Того, которого уже лет сорок как сверг нынешний.

В конце концов Артёма отправили на насильственную перекодировку, Марину – понизили в правах. «Хорошо хоть, не успели детей завести», – думала она. Боялась представить, что могло бы передаться им по наследству.

Так и живёт. В общем-то, неплохо. Как и многие из нас.

Но каждую ночь ей снится далёкий беззаботный смех, и воздух пахнет миндалём, и горят, качаются фонарики на том берегу...

*Vladimir Arenev Fitting Partner*

*This was love at first sight. With no warning.*

*And all because of a new version of the 'Ideal partner' optical filter. Those helter-skelter programmers left one too many bugs in the software and there's a result for you! Marina noticed this pleasant young man unexpectedly, among the faceless crowds typical of the rush hour. Marina's lenses didn't make him part of the virtual background, but instead showed him in the best possible light. In the middle of a narrow Medieval street stood a perfectly modern looking young man. And it seems he's noticed Marina too (though he later confessed that she saw her in the middle of boundless prairies).*

*\*\*\**

*They exchanged electronic cards and by the evening were eating in a cozy restaurant on the banks of the river Siene. The air smelled of almonds, and they could hear tourists' chatter and laughter... (Atryom splashed out on a live broadcast complete with sounds and smells). When 'Ideal Partner' warned them of a mistake, they both ignored it. They shouldn't have.*

*\*\*\**

*I fact, Artyom didn't mind her fitsi at all – he quickly got used to them and treated her with delicacy. 'Don't worry, it's not your fault – he said – Nothing to be embarrassed of!' He took her to expensive clinics and they only shrugged shoulders: codons were written into the very fabric of the genetic chain, and spread so widely, that finding and removing them was virtually impossible. They suggested she sued the corporation's lawyers: Marina's great grandfather signed a goodwill agreement of cooperation, but didn't agree to the clause that his descendants would be made into live adverts too.*

*\*\*\**

*She didn't want to go to court. She wanted it to be over. During her fits she seemed like a wooden doll which shouted on the top of its voice: "Use Snow Lion shampoo for silky and fragrant hair!"*

*\*\*\**

*And then three years later Artyom found a bug in his own DNA, which somehow survived since the last century. It was so crafty that there was no way to locate or pinpoint it. It switched on one day unexpectedly. So now Artyom walked the streets calling for people to vote for yet another clone of the former president. The one who was toppled by the current one over forty years ago.*

*\*\*\**

*At the end Artyom was forced to undergo obligatory re-coding. Marina was lowered in her rights. 'Thank goodness we didn't have children' – she thought. She was afraid*



*even to imagine what they would have inherited.*

\*\*\*

*And so her life goes on. And it's not that bad, really. Like for many of us.*

\*\*\*

*But every night she dreams of the distant laughter, and the air smells of almonds again, and the lights twinkle on the other side of the river...*

1.

Andreas K. Andreou Ισχύς διά της Γνώσεως του Μέλλοντος

Ο Δρ. Ανδρεάδης έκανε τις τελευταίες ρυθμίσεις στην κονσόλα που βρισκόταν έξω από τον θάλαμο υποδοχής. Στην οθόνη του ηλεκτρονικού υπολογιστή εμφανίστηκε η ένδειξη «Χρονολογία: 29 Μαΐου 1453, ώρα: 11.30 π.μ., γεωγραφικές συντεταγμένες 41°00'31"Βόρεια - 28°58'48"Ανατολικά».

Το μηχάνημα άρχισε να γυρίζει τον χρόνο πίσω. Η ένδειξη στον υπολογιστή άλλαζε σαν τρελή:

«Ιστανμπούλ, Τουρκία, 2053»

«Ιστανμπούλ, Τουρκία, 1970»

«Κωνσταντινούπολη, Τουρκία, 1920»

«Κωνσταντινούπολη, Οθωμανική Αυτοκρατορία, 1820»

«Κωνσταντινούπολη, Οθωμανική Αυτοκρατορία, 1620»

«Κωνσταντινούπολη, Βυζαντινή Αυτοκρατορία, 1453».

«Ωρα 11.30 π.μ.». «ΤΕΛΟΣ!»

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Στον υπολογιστή εμφανίστηκε ο εσωτερικός χώρος του ναού της Αγίας Σοφίας.

Οι μαχητές του Μωάμεθ του Β είχαν ήδη σπάσει τις τελευταίες γραμμές άμυνας των Βυζαντινών και μπήκαν στην Πόλη σφάζοντας και λεηλατώντας. Μέσα στην εκκλησία, ο πατριάρχης Ισιδωρος ετοιμαζόταν να δώσει την τελευταία θεία κοινωνία στον καταπονημένο Κωνσταντίνο Παλαιολόγο. Οι προσωπικοί του φρουροί, με το σπαθί στο χέρι, φυλάγανε τις εισόδους του ναού. Οι φωνές των Οθωμανών ακούγονταν ολοένα και πιο καθαρά. Σε λίγα λεπτά θα εισέβαλλαν στην εκκλησία. Ο Αυτοκράτορας και οι σύντροφοί του ήταν αποφασισμένοι να πουλήσουν πολύ ακριβά το τομάρι τους, αλλά δεν υπήρχε περίπτωση να παραδοθούν.

Ο Δρ. Ανδρεάδης εστίασε την οθόνη στον άντρα με τα πορφυρά ρούχα που ήταν γονατιστός και έτοιμος να κοινωνήσει, έχοντας ακουμπημένο στο πάτωμα το αυτοκρατορικό του ξίφος. Τον επέλεξε με τον κέρσορα και πάτησε την εντολή «τηλεμεταφορά». Ο Αυτοκράτορας «πάγωσε» για μερικά δευτερόλεπτα και μετά εξαφανίστηκε από την οθόνη. Το δυσκοπώτερο έπεσε από τα χέρια του Ισιδωρου και η θεία κοινωνία χύθηκε στο πάτωμα, την ώρα που ο Πατριάρχης αναφωνούσε: «Θαύμα! Θαύμα!». Οι φρουροί παράτησαν τα πόστα τους και έτρεξαν προς το ιερό... Λίγες στιγμές αργότερα στην οθόνη του υπολογιστή εμφανίστηκαν Οθωμανοί να μπαίνουν αλαλάζοντας στην Αγία-Σοφία. Σφάγιασαν τον Πατριάρχη και τους φρουρούς, αλλά δεν κατάφεραν να εντοπίσουν πουθενά τον Αυτοκράτορα.

Ο μύθος για τον μαρμαρωμένο βασιλιά ξεκινά... Μόνο που, αντίθετα με τον λαϊκό θρύλο που θέλει άγγελο Κυρίου να εξαφανίζει τον Αυτοκράτορα, στην πραγματικότητα ο Κωνσταντίνος Παλαιολόγος διασώθηκε από την άμεση επέμβαση μιας χρονομηχανής, η οποία τον μετέφερε στο μέλλον.

Στον ειδικά διαμορφωμένο θάλαμο που βρισκόταν σε εργαστήριο, στο αρχηγείο των Ελληνικών Μυστικών Υπηρεσιών, εμφανίστηκε ξαφνικά ο σαρανταεννιάχρονος Αυτοκράτορας, Κωνσταντίνος Παλαιολόγος.

Κοίταζε γύρω του έχοντάς τα χαμένα...

Ολόκληρη η επιστημονική ομάδα παρακολουθούσε πίσω από το τζάμι μονής όψεως τον νεοφερμένο άντρα. Ο Δρ. Ανδρεάδης έκανε νόημα στην ψυχολόγο να μπει στο δωμάτιο.

Η Δέσποινα άνοιξε προσεχτικά την πόρτα. Ο Κωνσταντίνος που δεν είχε καταλάβει ότι υπήρχε είσοδος σε εκείνη τη μεριά του τοίχου έστρεψε απότομα το κεφάλι του προς το σημείο από το οποίο άκουσε θόρυβο. Με μια απότομη κίνηση έβγαλε από την τσέπη ένα σουγιά προτάσσοντάς τον με το δεξί του χέρι.

«Γεια. Είμαι η Δέσποινα» είπε η νεαρή ψυχολόγος όσο πιο ήρεμα μπορούσε.

Το γαλήνιο βλέμμα και οι ήρεμες κινήσεις του κοριτσιού με τα παράξενα ρούχα και την περιέργη προφορά, δεν έδωσαν πολλά περιθώρια στον Αυτοκράτορα.

«Που βρίσκομαι; Τι συμβαίνει εδώ;» ρώτησε σχεδόν παρακαλετά, μη μπορώντας να συνειδητοποιήσει πώς από τη φωτιά της μάχης βρέθηκε σε κείνο το άγνωστο μέρος.

«Ηρέμησε... Είσαι με φίλους», του είπε η Δέσποινα κοιτάζοντάς τον με δέος.

Ο Παλαιολόγος κατέβασε το χέρι και άφησε το αιχμηρό όπλο να πέσει στο έδαφος. Πάνω στη χρυσή λαβή του μαχαιριού ήταν σκαλισμένος ένας αετός με δύο κεφάλια.

Η Δέσποινα τον προέτρεψε να καθίσει και του πρόσφερε νερό. Αφού τον ηρέμησε, έκανε νόημα και στους υπόλοιπους να φανερωθούν και να συστηθούν στον Αυτοκράτορα.

Η ψυχολόγος τού αποκάλυψε ότι βρισκόταν στο μέλλον και συγκεκριμένα στην Ελλάδα του 2053. Ο Νικόλας, ο ιστορικός, του διηγήθηκε συνοπτικά την εξέλιξη της ελληνικής ιστορίας από εκείνη την αποφράδα μέρα του 1453. Για να κάνει πιο παραστατική, μάλιστα, τη διήγησή του, του έδειχνε εικόνες και κείμενα στον υπολογιστή. Ο Παλαιολόγος κοίταζε με ενδιαφέρον αλλά και θαυμασμό την οθόνη. Ο Δρ. Ανδρεάδης του εξήγησε ότι τον είχαν τηλεμεταφέρει χρησιμοποιώντας μια τελευταία τεχνολογία που είχαν αναπτύξει και στην οποία είχαν επενδύσει πάρα πολλά. Η Ελλάδα, όπως του εξήγησε, είχε χρεοκοπήσει οικονομικά πριν αρκετά χρόνια και δεν μπορούσε πλέον να διαθέσει χρήματα για αμυντικούς εξοπλισμούς. Έτσι, έριξε όλο της το βάρος στην τεχνολογία και την έρευνα μαζεύοντας τα πιο λαμπρά μυαλά απ' όλες τις επιστήμες σ' εκείνο το εργαστήριο. Η αμυντική αδράνεια της χώρας είχε σαν αποτέλεσμα να χαθούν από τους Τούρκους, πρώτα ολόκληρη η Κύπρος και αργότερα η Θράκη και όλα τα νησιά του Αιγαίου. Τώρα όμως όλοι ήταν ενθουσιασμένοι, αφού το πρώτο μέρος του παράξενου και φιλόδοξου σχεδίου τους είχε πετύχει! Ο Κωνσταντίνος Παλαιολόγος είχε διασωθεί και βρισκόταν μαζί τους!

Το δεύτερο μέρος του σχεδίου προνοούσε εντατικά μαθήματα στον Αυτοκράτορα από εξειδικευμένους επιστήμονες που είχαν μελετήσει τα θέματα της εποχής του. Το τρίτο και τελευταίο μέρος προνοούσε την επιστροφή του Παλαιολόγου στο παρελθόν, και συγκεκριμένα δέκα χρόνια πριν από την άλωση της Πόλης. Θα τον έστελναν στο 1443, στην ημέρα που θα αναλάμβανε Δεσπότης του Μυστρά στην Πελοπόννησο.

Οι υποδείξεις από τους ειδικούς που μελέτησαν για πολλά χρόνια τα αίτια της πτώσης της Βασιλεύουσας ήταν σαφείς:

Κατά την παραμονή του στην Πελοπόννησο, αλλά ειδικά μετά που θα αναλάμβανε Αυτοκράτορας και θα πήγαινε στην Κωνσταντινούπολη, θα έπρεπε να στηρίξει τον λαό. Να μην υποκύψει στους ευγενείς και να κάνει το λάθος να τους δώσει υπερπρονόμια εις βάρος των φτωχών. Να μοιράσει τη γη της αυτοκρατορίας σε όλο τον κόσμο. Μόνο έτσι οι απλοί

πολίτες θα την ένιωθαν δική τους και θα την υπερασπίζονταν όταν ερχόταν η κρίσιμη ώρα. Του εξήγησαν γιατί δεν πρέπει να περιμένει βοήθεια από τους δυτικούς, να μην στηρίζεται σε μισθοφόρους και να φροντίσει να κρατήσει ψηλά το φρόνιμα του λαού. Του πρότειναν να εκδώσει νόμο που να απαγορεύει σε κάποιον να γίνει μοναχός αν δεν υπηρετήσει πρώτα τη στρατιωτική του θητεία, ώστε να παταχθεί η φυγοστρατία που είχε πάρει δραματικές διαστάσεις την εποχή εκείνη. Του εισηγήθηκαν να υιοθετήσει όλες τις καινοτομίες και μεταρρυθμίσεις που θα του πρότεινε ο λόγιος Γεώργιος Πλήθων Γεμιστός, αφού ήταν όλες προς την ορθή κατεύθυνση, για τον εκσυγχρονισμό της κοινωνίας, της διακυβέρνησης, της οικονομίας και της άμυνας.

Του επέστησαν την προσοχή ότι ο πόλεμος και η επιβίωση της αυτοκρατορίας του θα κρινόταν το 1446 στη μάχη που θα διεξαγόταν με τους Οθωμανούς στον Ισθμό της Κορίνθου, στο Εξαμίλιον.

Τέλος, του έδωσαν την τεχνογνωσία για να φτιάξει και αυτός κανόνια, μεγαλύτερα από αυτά των Οθωμανών.

Η εκπαίδευση κράτησε ένα μήνα. Ο Κωνσταντίνος Παλαιολόγος έδειχνε μεγάλη προθυμία να μάθει και κρατούσε σημειώσεις για όλα. Πέραν από τα στρατιωτικά και τα πολιτικά θέματα, ρωτούσε συνεχώς σαν μικρό παιδάκι που τώρα εξερευνούσε τον κόσμο για το κάθε τι που έβλεπε μπροστά του. Είχε απορίες για την λάμπα που φώτιζε το δωμάτιο, για τον τρόπο που η βρύση κατέβαζε νερό, για τον ηλεκτρονικό υπολογιστή, τα τηλέφωνα και ότι άλλο του έκανε εντύπωση. Τα μέλη της ομάδας προσπαθούσαν να του εξηγήσουν το κάθε τι όσο πιο απλά μπορούσαν αποφεύγοντας τις δυσνόητες λεπτομέρειες. Θέματα όπως την ανακάλυψη της Αμερικής, τη σύγχρονη παγκόσμια πολιτική κατάσταση και τα ταξίδια του ανθρώπου στο διάστημα αποφάσισαν να μην τα θίξουν, αφού έκριναν ότι αυτά θα τον αποπροσανατόλιζαν από τον μεγάλο στόχο.

Ένα μήνα αργότερα, όλα ήταν έτοιμα για την επιστροφή. Η ομάδα βρισκόταν έξω από τον θάλαμο τηλεμεταφοράς και ο Αυτοκράτορας, μόνος, μέσα σε αυτόν.

Ο Δρ. Ανδρεάδης έκανε τις τελευταίες ρυθμίσεις στον ηλεκτρονικό υπολογιστή. «Χρονολογία: 01 Οκτωβρίου 1443, ώρα: 11.30 π.μ., γεωγραφικές συντεταγμένες 37°03'59"Βόρεια - 22°22'35"Ανατολικά».

Το μηχάνημα άρχισε να γυρίζει τον χρόνο πίσω. Η οθόνη έδειχνε:

«Μυστράς, Πελοπόννησος, Ελλάδα, 2053»

«Μυστράς, Πελοπόννησος, Ελλάδα, 1970»

«Μυστράς, Πελοπόννησος, Ελλάδα, 1920»

«Μυστράς, Πελοπόννησος, Οθωμανική Αυτοκρατορία, 1820»

«Μυστράς, Πελοπόννησος, Οθωμανική Αυτοκρατορία, 1620»

«Δεσποτάτο του Μυστρά, Πελοπόννησος, Βυζαντινή Αυτοκρατορία, 1453»

«Ωρα 11.30 π.μ.» «ΤΕΛΟΣ!»

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Η οθόνη της κονσόλας έδειξε το παλάτι των Παλαιολόγων.

Με ένα κλικ ο Αυτοκράτορας εξαφανίστηκε απ' το δωμάτιο και εμφανίστηκε στην οθόνη του υπολογιστή, μέσα στο κτίριο του παλατιού όπου γινότουσαν οι ετοιμασίες για ενθρόνιση του νέου Δεσπότη.

Ο Δρ. Ανδρεάδης, έσωσε τις αλλαγές και βγήκε από το πρόγραμμα. Την ίδια στιγμή σε

ολόκληρο το κτήριο των Μυστικών Υπηρεσιών τα φώτα άρχισαν να τρεμοπαίζουν. Το πάτωμα άρχισε να σείεται και όλοι έπεσαν κάτω.

Όταν συνήλθαν, μετά από μερικά λεπτά, κοίταξαν γύρω τους. Το δωμάτιο ήταν το ίδιο όπως πριν αλλά ο θάλαμος τηλεμεταφοράς είχε εξαφανιστεί! Έτρεξαν στα παράθυρα του κτιρίου και κοίταξαν έξω. Τα κτίρια, η φύση, όλα γύρω τους ήταν διαφορετικά... Ο ιστορικός έτρεξε στον υπολογιστή. Μπήκε στο διαδίκτυο και πληκτρολόγησε τον όρο «Μάχη Εξαμιλίου». Η οθόνη έγραψε:

«Με επικεφαλής τον Δεσπότη του Μυστρά Κωνσταντίνο Παλαιολόγο οι Έλληνες απέκρουσαν την επίθεση των Οθωμανών στον Ισθμό της Κορίνθου αιφνιδιάζοντάς τους, αφού χρησιμοποίησαν για πρώτη φορά κανόνια, μεγαλύτερα μάλιστα από τα δικά τους. Αυτή ήταν η τελευταία σοβαρή προσπάθεια των Οθωμανών να επιτεθούν στην Πελοπόννησο, η οποία μετά από αυτή τη μάχη οχυρώθηκε με τείχη και κανόνια και έγινε απόρθητη».

Συνέχισε πατώντας το όνομα «Κωνσταντίνος Παλαιολόγος». Η οθόνη έγραψε:

«Κωνσταντίνος ΙΑ΄ Δραγάσης Παλαιολόγος (1404-1475). Αυτοκράτορας του Βυζαντίου (1449-1475). Διοίκησε με μεγάλη ικανότητα και δικαιοσύνη. Επί των ημερών του η Αυτοκρατορία άκμασε ξανά και αναπτύχθηκε πολύ τεχνολογικά. Σε αυτόν οφείλει πολλά η Ελληνική Δημοκρατία, η οποία διαδέχτηκε την Βυζαντινή Αυτοκρατορία».

Ο Νικόλας συνέχισε πατώντας τον όρο «Ελληνική Δημοκρατία».

Στην οθόνη άνοιξε ένας χάρτης που απεικόνιζε την σύγχρονη Ελλάδα. Περιλάμβανε και πάλι τα νησιά του Αιγαίου και τη Θράκη, αλλά και την Κύπρο, την Μικρά Ασία και την Κωνσταντινούπολη.

Συγκλονισμένα και συγκινημένα τα μέλη της ομάδας προσπαθούσαν να αφομοιώσουν τη νέα πραγματικότητα.

Μια φωτογραφία, στην άκρη του χάρτη, προσέλκυσε την προσοχή τους. Η σημαία της Ελλάδας, κίτρινη με ένα μαύρο δικέφαλο αετό στη μέση και από κάτω τη φράση:

«Ισχύς διά της Γνώσεως του Μέλλοντος»

Πάτησαν με περιέργεια πάνω στη φράση.

Στην επεξήγηση αναφέρονταν εικασίες για την προέλευση της. Μερικοί υποστήριζαν ότι με τη φράση αυτή ο Αυτοκράτορας, ο οποίος την καθιέρωσε, προέτρεπε τον λαό να μαθαίνει το μέλλον για να αποκτήσει ισχύ. Κάποιοι άλλοι έλεγαν ότι ο Κωνσταντίνος Παλαιολόγος, λόγω των πολλών γνώσεων που είχε, μπορούσε να προβλέψει το μέλλον.

Μόνο η ομάδα του Δρ. Ανδρεάδη κατάλαβε τι ακριβώς εννοούσε ο Αυτοκράτορας...

*Andreas K. Andreou Power through Knowledge of the Future*

*Dr. Andreadis carried out all final adjustments to the console located outside the reception hall. On the computer screen popped an indication reading: "Date: May 29th, 1453, Time: 11:30 am, Geographical Coordinates: 41°00'31" North - 28°58'48" East."*

*The machine began to turn back time. The indications on the screen were changing frantically:*

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*"Istanbul, Turkey, 2053"*

*"Istanbul, Turkey, 1970"*

*“Constantinople, Turkey, 1920”*

*“Constantinople, Ottoman Empire, 1820”*

*“Constantinople, Ottoman Empire, 1620”*

*“Constantinople, Byzantine Empire, 1453”*

*“Time: 11:30 am.” “OVER!”*

*\*\*\**

*The interior of the Temple of Aghia Sophia appeared on the monitor.*

*Mohamed II's warriors had already crushed the Byzantines' final resistance and entered Constantinople slaying and looting. Inside the temple, Patriarch Isidoros was preparing to offer the Holy Communion to a worn-out Constantinos Paleologos. His personal guards, holding their swords, stood at each temple entrance. The Ottomans' voices were becoming clearer. In a few minutes, they would be invading the church. The Emperor and his companions were determined to dearly sell their lives, but they would never surrender.*

*Dr. Andreadis focused his monitor on the man dressed in scarlet who was kneeling Χρειdown, ready to receive the Holy Communion, his imperial sword lying on the floor next to him. He pointed the cursor right on him and selected the “Teleportation” command. The Emperor “froze” for a few seconds and then disappeared from the screen. The chalice dropped from Isidoros' hands, and the Holy Communion was spilled on the floor, while the Patriarch exclaimed: “Miracle! Miracle!” The guards abandoned their posts and ran towards the sanctuary... Some moments later, the computer screen showed the Ottomans raiding Aghia Sophia amidst clamour. They slew the Patriarch and the guards, but the Emperor was nowhere to be found...*

*The legend of the Marble King begins... only, contrary to the popular legend in which an Angel performs the Emperor's disappearing act, reality narrates that Constantinos Paleologos was rescued, thanks to a machine's prompt intervention, a time machine that had transferred him into the future.*

*At the Greek Intelligence Service Headquarters, inside a specifically designed booth located in the laboratory, the 49-year-old Emperor, Constantinos Paleologos suddenly made his appearance.*

*He looked around, stupefied...*

*The whole scientists' team watched the newcomer through an one-way glass. Dr. Andreadis motioned for the psychologist to enter the room.*

*Despina gingerly opened the door. Unaware that there was an entrance on that side of the wall, Constantinos abruptly turned around towards the direction of the sound. In a swift movement, he removed a penknife from his pocket, wielding it with his right hand.*

*“Hi. I'm Despina,” said the young psychologist as calmly as she could.*

*The tranquil stare and calm movements of the girl with the strange attire and with the quirky accent, left little room for a reaction on the Emperor's part.*

*“Where am I? What's going on here?” he demanded, begged almost, unable to fathom how, during the heat of a battle, he had found himself in this unfamiliar environment.*

*"Calm down...You are amongst friends," Despina told him, looking at him in awe.*

*Paleologos put his hand down and let the sharp weapon drop to the floor. On the golden handle of his knife there was an engraving of a two-headed eagle.*

*Despina urged him to sit down and offered him a glass of water. After she had calmed him down, she motioned for the others to reveal themselves and be introduced to the Emperor.*

*The psychologist revealed to the Emperor that he had been transported into the future and, more specifically, that he was now in Greece, 2053. Nicholas, the historian, briefly recounted the historical events in Greece ever since that ominous day in 1453. In order to spice up his narration, he showed him images and writings on the computer screen. Paleologos watched with interest, fascination even. Dr. Andreadis explained that they had transported him utilising a brand new technology that they had developed and invested in immensely. Greece, according to the scientist, had declared bankruptcy many years ago and could no longer afford funding for defence armament. Therefore, the country focused solely on technology innovation and research, recruiting the brightest brains across the board for that one laboratory. The country's defensive inertia brought about the complete occupation by the Turks, of the whole of Cyprus for starters, afterwards of Thrace and finally of all of the Aegean islands. But now, everyone was excited, as the first part of their strange, ambitious plan, had proved successful! Constantinos Paleologos had been rescued and was right there with them!*

*The second part of the plan, provided that the Emperor was to attend some intensive lessons taught by specialised scientists who were well versed regarding the issues of his own era. According to the third and last part of the plan, Paleologos was to return to the past, specifically ten years before the Fall of Constantinople. He was to be transposed back to 1443, on the very day he was to be ordained Despot of the Mystra in the Peloponnese.*

*The recommendations made by the specialists who had thoroughly studied the causes of the Fall of the Byzantine Empire were clear:*

*During his stay in the Peloponnese, and especially after he became Emperor and went to Constantinople, he would have to support his people. He should not give in to nobility or commit the error of granting privileges to the rich to the detriment of the poor. He should distribute the empire's land to the common people. Only in this way would laymen feel that the land belonged to them and therefore defend it when the decisive moment arrived. They explained to the Emperor why he shouldn't expect any assistance from the West nor should he rely on the mercenaries; on the contrary, he should make sure that his people's morale would remain high. They suggested that he issued an edict forbidding from becoming monks unless they completed military service, in order to eradicate army defection, an act which had taken on dramatic proportions at that time. They also proposed that he should adopt all innovations and reforms recommended by scholar George Plethon Gemistos, as they all pointed to the right direction, which was the modernisation of society, governance, economy and defence.*

*The board of scientists drew the Emperor's attention to the fact that the war and the fate of the Empire would be tested during 1446, at the battle against the Ottomans at the Isthmus of Corinth, in Examilion.*

*Finally, they gave him the technical knowledge needed for him to build cannons that*

would be bigger than those of the Ottomans.

Training lasted for a month. Constantinos Paleologos demonstrated great eagerness to learn, and kept notes on everything. Apart from the military and political issues, he kept posing questions about everything around him, like a little child in the process of discovering the world. He had queries about the lamp illuminating the room, about the manner that the water ran through the faucet, about the computer, the telephones and whatever made an impression on him. The team members tried to give him as simple explanations as possible, avoiding unnecessary and inpalpable details. They decided not to touch on such issues as the discovery of America, the modern international political circumstances and man's travel to space, as they thought this information would distract him from the main goal.

A month later, everything was ready for the return. The team was outside the teleportation booth and the Emperor, alone, stood inside.

Dr. Andreadis made the final adjustments on the computer.

"Date: October 1st, 1443, Time: 11.30 am, Geographical Coordinates 37°03'59" North -22°22'35" East."

The machine started turning back time. The screen showed:

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"Mystras, the Peloponnese, Greece, 2053"

"Mystras, the Peloponnese, Greece, 1970"

"Mystras, the Peloponnese, Greece, 1920"

"Mystras, the Peloponnese, Ottoman Empire, 1820"

"Mystras, the Peloponnese, Ottoman Empire, 1620"

"Despotate of Mystras, the Peloponnese, Byzantine Empire, 1453"

"Time 11.30 am" "OVER!"

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The console screen showed the Paleologos palace.

With a single click, the Emperor vanished from the room and appeared on the computer screen, inside the palace, where preparations for the ordination of the new Despot were underway.

Dr. Andreadis saved the changes and exited the program. Simultaneously, the lights across the Intelligence Service building began to flicker. The floor started shaking and everyone fell on their knees.

When they came to, after a few minutes, they looked around. The room looked the same as before, but the teleportation booth was gone! They ran towards the windows and looked outside. The buildings, nature, everything around them was different... The historian ran to the computer. He logged on the net and keyed in the term: "Examilion Battle." The screen popped up:

"With the Despot of Mystras, Constantinos Paleologos, at the head, the Greeks fended off the Ottomans at the Isthmus of Corinth, blindsiding them, as they used cannons for the first time, cannons that were bigger than their own. That was the last serious



Ottoman attempt against the Peloponnese, which after the battle entrenched itself behind walls and cannons, thus becoming impregnable.”

He continued by clicking on the name “Constantinos Paleologos.” The screen read:

“Constantinos Paleologos (1404-1475). Emperor of the Byzantine Empire (1449-1475). He ruled with great ability and justice. During his time, the Empire flourished again and achieved excellent technological growth. Greece as a country, which succeeded the Byzantine Empire, will always be in his debt.”

Nicholas keyed in “Greece.”

On screen popped up a map depicting modern Greece. This time, it included the Aegean islands and Thrace, as well as Cyprus, Asia Minor and Constantinople.

Shocked and moved, the members of the team tried to absorb the new reality.

One photo, at the right edge of the map, caught their eye. It was the flag of Greece, yellow with a black two-headed eagle in the middle, and beneath it a phrase:

“Power Through the Knowledge of the Future”

They clicked on it, out of curiosity.

The explanation referred to speculations as to its origins. Some people claimed that with this phrase the Emperor Paleologos, who was the one that had established it, urged his people to obtain knowledge about the future so as to gain power. Some others said that Constantinos Paleologos, thanks to his erudition, could, in fact, foresee the future.

Only Dr. Andreadis’ team understood exactly what the Emperor meant...

## Ghassan Homsy نور

قصة قصيرة من أدب الخيال العلمي، من تأليف غسان حمصي / دمشق  
نقلها إلى اللغة الألمانية المترجم أحمد خماس / برلين

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بعد أن أنهينا تركيب المرافق السكنية والتجهيزات التي أصبحت موطناً لأكثر من عشرة آلاف نسمة على سطح القمر، تقدمت بطلب للحصول وكنت في نهاية المطاف قد **Wyoming** على تعويض انتهاء فترة التعاقد لأسدّد به آخر أقساط القرض المترتب على شراء مزرعتي في ويومينغ وعدت زوجتي بأن أبقى برفقتها على كوكب الأرض بعد انتهاء هذه "المغامرة المنفلتة من عقالها" كما كانت تصفها مراراً وتكراراً. كان ولدانا قد دخلا الجامعة فعليا، لكنها كانت مصرّة على أن وجود أبيهما قريبا منهما سيكون عوناً لهما. أما أنا فكانت أرى الأمر مخالفاً لذلك تماما، لكنني أثرت أن لا تحدث مشاكل زوجية بيننا بأية حال من الأحوال.

ما الذي تقصده بـأن الأمر ليس بهذه البساطة؟ لم أتفاهم يوماً مع دائرة المحاسبة

"...لقد بلغنا السيد هيندرشوت إن الشيخ علي يلح على مقابلتك شخصياً قبل أن نقوم بأية خطوات تالية"

"لكنني عازمت أمري على ترك الشركة. ولم يبق سوى أن نبحت في قيمة التعويض"

صدّقني لو كان الأمر بيدي لكان المبلغ قد أصبح على حسابك البنكي منذ فترة. لكن لا يسعني أن أقول لك سوى أنّ رب العمل يطلب منك"

"أن تلقاه اليوم قبل الغد"

قلت لنفسي: "لم يعد الأمر مرهوناً بيوم إضافي أو يوم أقل". وبخاسة أنني ممتن بالكثير للشيخ الذي عرض عليّ هذه المهمة الرائعة قبل بضعة سنوات. اعتلت وجهي ابتسامة عندما تذكرت لقاءنا الأول وحجم العناء الذي تكبده ليقنعني بأن خطته بتحويل القمر إلى منطقة سياحية ليست مجرد

خيال رجل مصاب بجنون العظمة.

"حسناً، لتتصل به فوراً ونحدد موعداً للقاء"

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ابتسمت لي ليندا بلطفٍ وربما بحزنٍ عندما دخلتُ غرفة الاستقبال الفسيحة، هذه الغرفة التي تدين بسعتها لحجم نهديها العرمرمين. "أ صحيحٌ ما بلغني عن عزمك على ترك العمل لدينا يا جون؟" احترت في أمري. "الواقع أنني وعدت زوجتي بذلك." كانت ليندا قد حدتني بنظرة عميقة ثم "...فتحت لي بيدها باب الدخول إلى قدس الأقداس." إذاً أمل أن لا تعاني علاقتك الزوجية بعدما تنقض هذا الوعد

كنت ما أزال أفكر بجملتها الأخيرة عندما صافحني الشيخ علي بلطفه المعهود. "اجلس يا جون، اجلس... أعتقد أن لدينا أشياء كثيرة لنبحث بها." اتضح لي رويداً رويداً أن الأمر لا يتعلق الآن بأية حالٍ من الأحوال بتعويضني، فرب عملي العربي كان ينظر إليّ بيقظة عالية. بالطبع لم يطرح الموضوع مباشرة، فذلك يُنافي اللباقة بحسب أعرافهم. ولهذا تماماً اعتبرت الأمر مؤشراً إنذاراً من الدرجة العالية عندما ألقى بظهره على الكنب بعد أقل من خمس دقائق وزفر ثم لاذ في الصمت. كنت بمرور السنين قد تعلمت التعامل مع الأمر. زفرت بدوري وألقيت بنفسني على كنبتي الفاخرة (3 آلاف دولار) ولذت في الصمت أيضاً.

"؟" "نعم، إلى حدّ ما. بحسب اطلاعي تم تشغيل **Desertec** سألني الشيخ علي فجأة: "هل تتبع التطورات الأخيرة في مشروع دزرتك المحطات السبع الأولى في المغرب والجزائر في العام الماضي. لا بد وأنها تصدّر حالياً نحو ثلاث أو أربع غيغا واط من الكهرباء إلى أوروبا، وهذه بالطبع نقطة في بحر إذا ما قارناها بالحاجة الفعلية هناك؛ وبخاسة اليوم بعد أن أصبحت مجمل حركة المرور والنقل تعتمد على المركبات الآلية الكهربائية."

كان الشيخ علي ينقر بأصابعه على الطاولة، أمرٌ لم أعهده عليه أبداً: "وهناك على الأقل ضعف هذا العدد من المحطات قيد الإنشاء. إذا كنت ترغب، بوسعي أن أرسل لك التقرير الأخير، وأنا في نهاية الأمر شريك في ذلك المشروع بمبلغ نصف مليار دولار. لكن ليس هذا هو السبب الأساس للقائنا"

الإدارة الوطنية للملاحة الفضائية والفضاء) وترأست) **NASA** كنت قد وصلت بنفسني إلى هذه النتيجة. بعدما تركت عملي في الناسا مشروع القمر تعلمت سريعاً كيفية التعامل مع رجال الأعمال والمليارديرين العرب وكيفية نيل احترامهم. وهذا يتضمن الانتباه الدقيق للدلالات

أقوالهم الضمنية أو المبطنة. إذا لم تكن الخمسمائة مليون دولار التي اشترك فيها الشيخ علي قبل سنوات في مشروع كهرواء الصحراء السبب الأساس للقائنا، فهذا حتما يعني أننا نتحدث عن مشروع قيمته عشرة أضعاف ذلك المبلغ على الأقل، رغم أننا لم ننبث بينت شفة عن هذا المشروع حتى هذه اللحظة. لكن الجمل التالية التي قالها رب عملي أثبتت شكوكي ومخاوفي.

أتعلم يا جون. عندما أعلنت مجموعة الشركات الألمانية عن المشروع في عام 2009 كنت أنا وزملائي هنا في الخليج ممتعضين جدا إذ لم يقل لنا أحد قبل ذلك ولا حرف واحد بهذا الخصوص. لو شاركنا بعد ذلك في المشروع لكان ذلك بمثابة فقدان ماء الوجه، لذا جاءت مشاركتي عبر عملاء سريين فقط. لكن قبل بضعة أسابيع زارني شخص - لا أستطيع الآن أن أفصح عن هويته، لذا أرجو منك أن تتفهم الأمر. "وأما بكياسة مقلدا إياه

ماذا ستقول إذا اقترحت عليك مشروعاً تكون محطاتنا على القمر حضانة أطفال بالمقارنة به؟ لا! أرجو أن لا تجيب الآن؟ أعلم أنك تريد الانسحاب من العمل وأنا أفهم الأمر تماماً. بيد أنني أجزم أنك ستراجع عن وعدك الذي قطعته على زوجتك في اللحظة التي تطلع فيها على التفاصيل... لذا أطلب منك أن تتخذ قراراً مسبقاً. هل تريدني أن أفصح عن المزيد أم لا. فالقضية برمتها تخضع للسرية المطلقة، ما يعني أنه يحظر عليك أن تنبث بينت شفة عن مضمون المشروع في حياتك الخاصة

"أحقاً تنتظر مني أن أوافق قبل أن أعرف ما هي طبيعة العمل؟"  
أجل يا جون، فأنا أعتبر خبيراً بك لدرجة أستطيع معها التكهن بالذي سيحصل: حالما أعرض عليك المشروع لن تنس مزرعتك في ويومينغ فقط بل ستسسى أيضاً الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية برمتها على الأرجح. لا أريد أن أقف عقبه في وجه سعادتك، لذا أرجو أن تتحدث إلى زوجتك وتسالها إن كانت مستعدة لانتظارك لمدة خمس سنوات أخرى، إذ أنك ستتمكث نحو هذه المدة على القمر وفي الفضاء دون العودة إلى لأرض... بين الفينة والأخرى

استقيمت في جلستي بطريقة عفوية، إذ لم أسمع من الشيخ علي شروطاً مماثلة من قبل. أثار مشروع "سباق الجمال على القمر" ضجة إعلامية في حينه. وجرى الاحتفاء بكل خندق حفر وكل شراع شمسي جديد بوصفه فقرة العصر النوعية. لذا شعرت بشيء من الأرق عندما أخذت أفكر بما يخطط له الشيخ علي هذه المرة وبطبيعة المشروع الذي يستدعي كل هذه السرية

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"معك المركز الأرضي، هل تسمعي؟"  
"معك البراق 2، أسمعك بوضوح تام"  
مرحباً يا جون، هل كل شيء على ما يرام لديكم؟ لدينا بعض بيانات القياس البعادي (تيليميتري) لكنها غير مرضية بما يكفي. أرجو أن "تراعي التشفير عندما ترسل المواد إلينا. سأرسل المتطلبات إلى شاشتك مباشرة حسناً - سأتابع الأمر. أرجح أن يكون الانفجار الشمسي الهائل الذي حصل في الأسبوع الماضي سبب هذا الاختلال، لكن من شأن "وحدات التوجيه المستقلة أن تقوم الوضع قريباً. سأتصل بموشي ليراجع مجمل المسألة بدوره، ومن ثم يتصل بك

"شكراً جزيلاً يا جون. بدّل. انتهى"  
نعمل منذ ثلاث سنين ليلاً نهاراً وبلا هواده كما يقال على كوكب الأرض. هنا في الفضاء الخارجي لدينا نهاراً أبدياً - أو ليل سرمدي، بحسب حالة المعنى النفسية. إنه مشروع عملاق اشتركت في العمل به عدة دول وبعض أكبر الشركات العالمية. وكما هي حال المشاريع الأخرى كان لهذا المشروع وجهان: وجه رسمي علني وآخر سري. أمام الرأي العام كنا بصدد تجهيز مجموعة كبيرة من الأقمار الصناعية للطاقة الشمسية بغية إرسال الكهرباء المكتسبة بدون خسائر كبيرة أثناء نقلها المباشر من الفضاء الخارجي إلى هوائيات الاستقبال التي تلتقط الموجات الصغرى (مايكرو ويف) المعدّة خصيصاً لذلك. بهذا كنا بطبيعة الحال نعمل على المشروع المنافس لمشروع دزرتك الذي غدت كل دول البحر الأبيض المتوسط تقريباً شريكة فيه. لذا حدثت ضجة كبيرة حول مشروعنا في البداية، لكن من ناحية أخرى كانت المحطات الصحراوية للطاقة التي تنتج الكهرباء تغذي شبكات الدول المشاركة والدول الأوروبية ليس إلا، ولم تكن هناك قدرة حتى على تغطية كل احتياجات هذه الدول

يعزم الشيخ علي وشركته القابضة على تزويد كل دول الأرض بكهرباء الأقمار الاصطناعية للطاقة الشمسية إن كان بمستطاع الدولة أن تدفع ثمن حقل هوائيات مساحته كيلومتر مربع واحد - وبطبيعة الحال تسديد قيمة فاتورة الكهرباء الشهرية! بعد حديث مع زوجتي استمر حتى ساعات الفجر الأولى بلغت رب عملي بموافقتي على إدارة المشروع. وناهيك عن بعض الزيارات القصيرة إلى القمر مكثت مجمل الوقت في محطاتنا التي كنا قد بُنيناها منذ البداية في نقاط لاغرانج. كنت أتمرّن بالتأكد بنشاط في قمره الطرد المركزي لكي أتغلب على انكماش العضلات وهشاشة العظام، بيد أنني بدأت أحن إلى الأرض وإلى المساحات الشاسعة المفتوحة وإلى خريف السواقي أو زقزقة العاصيف الطبيعية التي لا تأتي من جهاز التسجيل. لكن راتبتي الشهري الخيالي الذي كان يتراكم شهراً تلو الآخر على حسابي البنكي لم يترك ذرة شك لدي من أنني سأنعم بوقت هانئ بعد اكتمال المشروع

كان تشييد محطات استقبال الطاقة على الكرة الأرضية يحقق التقدم أيضاً. نصبت معظم المحطات على جبال مجللة أو في مناطق زراعية

سابقة قريبة من مراكز الاستهلاك. سيزود المشروع الأرض بالكهرباء النظيفة المكتسبة من الطاقة الشمسية في غضون عامين على أقصى تقدير. لكن شيئاً آخر سيحدث في هذه الأثناء، شيئاً لم يحسب له أحد أي حساب. وأنا بدوري سعت لأن لا أفكر به قدر الإمكان لكي لا أتقلب من الأرق طوال الليل في مرقد منعدم الجاذبية. كما حاولت أن أخفف من تبيكت ضميري بحجة أن الجزء السري من المشروع من شأنه في نهاية المطاف أن يقضي على الحروب إلى أبد الأبد. كنت أضلل نفسي بالتأكيد لأننا لو لم نقم نحن بالمشروع لقم به غيرنا عاجلاً أم آجلاً. هكذا تسير الأمور دائماً...

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"هل تعتقد أننا سننجح في ذلك؟"

سننجح بالتأكيد! فكل الخيوط بيدنا في نهاية الأمر. والدول التي لديها صواريخ بعيدة المدى والتي قد تشكل خطراً علينا تلعب معنا في "الفريق. إذا سيعرف الآخرون قريباً أنه لا فرص أمامهم سوى القبول بشروطنا... وأن عليهم أن يدفعوا المستحقات

علي أن أعترف بأن الجانب التقني من مشروع الشيخ علي قد بهرني. حسناً، لم يكن الأمر نزيهاً إزاء الدول الصغيرة على كوكبنا، بيد أن مشروعنا سيعود عليها بالنفع عبر تقليله الجذري لمخاطر حدوث كوارث طبيعية في المستقبل. أما أنه على دول مشروع دزرتك أن تدفع مستحقاتها لنا فلم يكن سوى القشدة التي تغطي الكعكة. وصدقوني الكعكة كانت كبيرة بل كبيرة جداً

أثناء أحد اللقاءات أخبرني الشيخ علي عن بعض خلفيات المشروع. بالطبع لم تكن الفكرة فكرته. كان هناك من توجه إلى قطر عبر عملاء متعددين وكان رئيس دولتهم صديقاً شخصياً لموكلي. وأثناء صيد الصقور تحدثنا عن الموضوع. تلت ذلك سلسلة من الاجتماعات السرية شارك فيها خبراء من معهد وايزمان الإسرائيلي للبحوث ممن طوروا الفكرة أساساً

وبما أن مشروع القمر كان قد اكتمل بشكل أو بآخر، وكنت أنا والشيخ علي قد لاحظنا أن المشترك بيننا هو كرهنا الشديد للروتين، جاء أخذ القرار يسيراً. كذلك بالنسبة لي ولزوجتي، فما سأناقضه في هذه السنوات الخمس سوف يكفيننا حتى ثامن جيل بعدنا، ناهيك عن أنني كنت شريكاً بنسبة في الأرباح، ومن الناحية الحسابية لم يكن ممكناً أن نصرف العائدات المتوقعة مهما طال الزمن

انكبنا على العمل. والآن بقيت سنتان، أو 104 أسبوعاً، أو 730 يوماً، ما أروع ذلك! ستمر الأيام بسرعة فلكية بكل ما للكلمة من معنى. أصبحت الأقمار الصناعية للطاقة الشمسية جاهزة ويمكننا استخدامها متى نشاء، لكن هناك أيضاً الجانب السري من المشروع وقد كان يشكل لنا تحديات كبيرة

"ألا تخشى من عمل انتقمي على الكرة الأرضية؟"

ضحك رب عملي بصوت عالٍ قائلاً: "أتعلم يا جون، أتوقع حدوث بلبلة هنا أو هناك، لكن صدقني في اللحظة التي تقطع الكهرباء عن مسببي". الشغب سيأتون إلينا راعين يستجدون الرحمة والعفو

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حددنا موعد المؤتمر الصحفي عند الظهيرة تماماً، كما اخترنا الموقع بدقة متناهية. تقع كيتو عاصمة الإكوادور في حوض على سلسلة جبال الأنديز على ارتفاع 2850 م عن سطح البحر، وهي ثاني أعلى عاصمة في العالم بعد العاصمة البوليفية سوكرى. لكن الأهم أنها تقع على مسافة 20 كلم فقط من خط الاستواء. فهنا سيظهر التأثير الأقوى والأسرع لمشروعنا

توافد ممثلو وكالات الإعلام وبوابات الإنترنت منذ الصباح الباكر إلى أكبر مدرج رياضي في المدينة. ولم تذهب أعصاب خبراء الأرصاد الجوية. المكلفين سدا، حيث لم تعكّر ولا حتى غيمة صغيرة صفو السماء الزرقاء

عند الساعة 11 قبل الظهر بدأ المدعوون بإلقاء كلماتهم، وكنا قد دعونا بعضاً من أشهر علماء كوكبنا. تحدث الواحد تلو الآخر عن بداية عصر جديد، وكان علي في كل مرة أن أضبط نفسي كي لا أرتعش بقوة. ثم لاحظت بداية بلبلة بعد نصف ساعة. وبخاسة بين المصورين ومصوري التليفزيون الذين أخذوا بالعبث بأجهزتهم دون أن يجدوا سبباً للتراجع السريع لقوة الضوء. لكن لم يطل الأمر حتى لاحظ حتى أكثر الصحفيين سداجة بأن السيطرة على شيء ما قد فُقدت. أما الشيخ علي الذي كان يجلس بجانب فلكرني بكوعه غامزاً. وبعد دقائق كنت أنا من يعتلي المنصة. ويتنحى لعدة مرات أمام الميكروفون لكي ألفت إلي انتباه الصحفيين والمراسلين المتوترين الذين كانوا ينظرون إلى السماء

السيدات والسادة المحترمون، إذا أصغيتم في الدقائق العشر التالية لما سيُقال ستحصلون على أجوبة عن كل أسئلتكم. لذا أرجوكم "الهدوء"

لا نستطيع تصويركم بشكل جيد إذ لم نجلب معنا معدات الإضاءة، ومن ذا الذي يفكر عند الساعة 12 ظهرًا بأن الظلام سيحل فجأة؟! أم هو خسوف شمسي إضافي أعد خصيصاً لهذه المناسبة؟

. حصد مراسل محطة الجزيرة الشاب ضحكات بعض زملائه على ما قاله، لكن الانقباض ظل جاسماً على معظم الحضور

لا أعتقد أن الأمر مرهونٌ بالتقاط صور جيدة. عوضاً عن ذلك سأعطيكم بوصفي مدير مشروع هيلبوس ما يكفي من المعلومات لكي تملأوا" برامجكم لمدة أسبوع كامل. على الأقل! أنسب لكم بكثير أن توجهوا عدسات كاميراتكم إلى أعلى لأنه كما تلاحظون تراجعت قوة أشعة الشمس بشكل كبير. أنتم تعرفون تماماً أن مجموعتنا من الشركات الدولية قد أنشأت في السنوات الخمس الأخيرة سلسلة من الأقمار الصناعية للطاقة الشمسية في الفضاء الخارجي. وقد شاركت في هذا المشروع حكومات وشركات دولية. الهدف من ذلك هو تزويد جميع الناس على كوكبنا بالكهرباء النظيفة دون أدنى تأثير سلبي على بيئتنا الأرضية. والآن أريد أن أطلعكم على عنصر إضافي في مشروعنا. يعتمد هذا العنصر على الأسس العلمية الصادرة عن معهد وايزمان في إسرائيل، وجامعة موسكو، ومعاهد بحثية مختلفة في الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية.

أخذتُ استراحةً مصطنعةً استغليتها لأشرب جرعة ماءٍ ولأمسح العرق عن جبينني وكأني أفعل الأمر تلقائياً. لا، لم أكن أخشى شيئاً، فالشيخ علي كان قد كلّف ما يكفي من الحرس الشخصيين بإعادتنا عند الضرورة نحن وجميع ضيوف الشرف بالسيارات الفاخرة إلى المطار، حيث اصطفت الطائرات الخاصة منتظرةً بجوار بعضها. وبالرغم من ذلك، هالني قليلاً رد الفعل الذي ستحدثه كلماتي التالية لدى الصحفيين الحاضرين.

أعدنا لكم بالطبع مواد إعلامية شاملة سوف تحصلون عليها أمام البوابات لدى خروجكم. لذا اسمحوا لي أن أعطيكم ملخصاً مفيداً عن الموضوع: أطلقت الدول الأوروبية ودول شمال إفريقيا مشروع ديزرتك في عام 2009 وكان أكبر مشروع للطاقة الشمسية المتجددة في حينه كما أصبح معلوماً للجميع. بعد ذلك بفترةٍ وجيزةٍ تشكلت شركة جديدة من دولٍ وأفرادٍ لم يكونوا منخرطين في مشروع ديزرتك. كنا مقتنعين بإمكانية توفير الكهرباء بواسطة الأقمار الصناعية للطاقة الشمسية بأسعارٍ قادرةٍ على المنافسة - وهذا ما فعلناه. بعد عدة أسابيع سيكون جميع زبائننا "موصولين" بالمحطات الفضائية وسيتزودون بالطاقة عبر الموجة الصغرى. لكن هذا أحد جوانب المشروع ليس إلا.

ارتفعت وتيرة الفوضى بين الحضور فنقرت عدة مرات بأظفاري على الميكروفون علاوة على ذلك، نصبنا في إطار مشروع هيلبوس مظلة عملاقة تفتح في هذه الدقائق وسوف تحجب أشعة الشمس عن الأرض في المستقبل. نريد أن نضمن بذلك تخلصنا النهائي من مشاكل المناخ المتنامية باضطراد. كما سيكون باستطاعتنا أن نتحكم بكميات الضوء بحيث تحصل الدول التي توقع عقوداً معنا على ما يكفيها من ضوء النهار التي تحتاجه لأراضيها الزراعية. نتطلع طبعاً لأن تكون جميع الدول حكيمة وتفكر بمواطنيها، فنحن نضمن على أية حال ومن خلال تقنياتنا الحديثة نهاية التلوث البيئي الناتج عن الطاقة الأحفورية والذرية، كما نضمن مناخاً متوازناً... في كافة أنحاء المعمورة، وبطبيعة الحال نضمن التزويد بما يكفي من الطاقة والضوء لكل من يريد أن يتزود بها من مشروعنا. شكراً على إصغائكم

كنت أقول دائماً إنه لا يجب الاستهانة بشيوخ النفط. حسناً، كان من شأنهم أن يمتطوا جمالهم ويقفلوا عائدين إلى الصحراء غير مكترئين إن نفذ النفط فعلاً ذات يوم. لكن من ملك هذه القدرة الاحتكارية في مجال الطاقة ذات مرة لن يسمح بإزاحته إلى الهامش مجدداً. هذا الأمر غاب عن الجميع تقريباً.

والحق، إن أكثر ما أثار استهجانني هو التنسيق العربي الإسرائيلي الجيد في إطار الشركة الجديدة، وكأن النكبة لم تحصل أبداً. حلت اليوم! بالعالم نكبة أكبر من سابقتها بكثير، لكن هذه المرة نضع نحن يدنا على مفتاح التبديل... ولن ننزعها عنه أبداً

بالطبع ضمنتُ لمزرعتي في ويومينغ شروطاً خاصة بحيث أستطيع يوماً أن أتمشى تحت أشعة الشمس مجاناً وذلك بغض النظر عن مدى الظلمة المدلهمة في أي مكان حولي وعن المبالغ التي يتعين على الآخرين دفعها للحصول على قليلٍ من الضوء. إذ "يَهْدِي اللهُ نوره مَنْ يَشَاءُ" كما... جاء في القرآن الكريم في سورة النور

קומפוסט Galit Dahan Carlbach

גלית דהן קרליבך

לא רציתי להגיע למצב הזה, על הגב, פשוטת איברים

לא שבחוץ היה כל כך נפלא, אבל להיות מוצג מוזיאוני מעולם החי לא היה בתוכנית שלי

"הי, אתם שם. בואו לראות מקרוב את "תהליכי הקומפוסטיזציה האירובית

בעולם רירי אני חיה. מגן עדן תשכחו

עולם החי רוחש מסביבי: תולעים אדומות, תולעים שחורות, אורי כדורי, חשופיות

עצם. זה כל מה שאני מבקשת. מאתיים יחידות מגה גלופלקס

אני מתרכזת ברצון חזק ומוצק: לגרש להשמיד ולאבד את כל הרמשים

אביס אותם על קוצה של עצם. עצם. מאתיים מיליגרם של סידן. מורכבת ומאוחה. בעולם

הקומפוסט אין גבס שיאחה רגליים שבורות. כאן לא מתחזקים ולא מתקשים ולא מתרכזים

מילת המפתח כאן היא להתגמש

געועי לעצם, למוחלט

ארון- זה רק אצל נוצרים. או אצל חיילים מפורקים. תשכחו מכבוד המת. אדם שעצמותיו

תתפוררנה ועוד שנים יעברו עד שמשלחות של ארכיאולוגים יגלו אותו בהתרגשות, יהיה נתון עד אז

לחסדי הרמשים

במרץ מפזמות להן התולעים האדומות. אח. נזללים התאים. אחח. מתפרקות להן מולקולות.

אחח. קשרים ביולוגים מושמדים. אחח

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לא. לא רציתי להיות במצב הזה. מתפוררת לאיטי, גופי טרף לתעשיית רמשים זיפניים. לא

חשקתי להתמזג עם האדמה

החיים כאקולוגיה. החיים כזואולוגיה

"והרי יש מועמדים טובים ממני ביישוב האקולוגי-קהילתי "שורשון

המועמד הראשון הוא בעלי. אבישי בן אור. בא מהמקצוע. מנכ"ל "משמרות הקומפוסט". קורות

חיו משובחים: לימודים קונבנציונאליים בוויצמן, ומהצד, עם עוד נשים, השלמה בבתי מדרש

אקולוגיים

ומה על יפתח גרץ השכן? בזמן שאני נאכלת על ידי הזייפניות, הוא מגדל לו בנחת את האויב.

תולעים אדומות שמונים שקל כולל משלוח לכל חלקי הארץ

או אולי מירה גור הקומפוסטרית מספר אחת- היא לא הייתה שוכבת כמוני באפס מעשה. היא

הייתה עושה משהו, מדשנת את עצמה, ומתמסרת לרמשים

או, אולי, אהבה לוריא. מנחת סדנת "אימא אדמה", מפורסמת נורא מהטלוויזיה. היא, אהבה,

הייתה צריכה להיזלל. פריכה ושבירה כמו השם שלה. לפני כן נקראה חופית, אבל היא לא התחברה

לשם. התחדד לה מדי בקצוות. כשהחליפה את השם, היא ערכה מסיבה גדולה גדולה במעיין, שם

טבלה בעירום ופיזרה אהבה בכמות שהספיקה למשוך את כל הטסטוסטרונים באזור. אהבה אוהבת

את המופשט. כמהה לעיניים מיוסרות. מייחלת לתעות במבוכי הנפש, חפצה לגעת באני

אימא אדמה גדולה ומחבקת", שמעתי אותה פעם מהסטודיו, כשרצתי בשביל. בהתחלה שכנעה"

אותי להצטרף ליוגה שלה. "את צריכה להפסיק לרוץ" אמרה לי. "ריצה מזעזעת את הנשמה"- נתנה

פירוש משלה לעצלנות הנוראה שלה. אבל גברת לוריא לא יודעת שאפילו הנשימה קשורה לעצם. שאיפה ארוכה ארוכה, והאוויר נכלא בין עצמות הריאות. הריאות שייכות לבעלי החוליות. נשיפה ארוכה ארוכה, ופחמן דו חמצני מוצא דרכו החוצה. שוב נשימה. להחזיק את האוויר בסרעפת, לדחוף את בית החזה, ולפלוט.

אם נשאר לי חלק מהנשמה אתן אותו בשביל שאיפת הדפנות. את חיי אתן

פעם אחת הסכמתי לבוא. כולן היו שם, בפנים רציניות, יושבות בתנוחת בודהה, התיישבתי ואז בדיוק גירדה לי הרגל. גירוד שכולו תענוג: שפשוף חזק של העור, קילוף המעטה ודם מחפה על עצם. גירוד הרגל עלה לי בהגדרה העצמית: הסתבר שכל הצקרות שלי חסומות ואטומות. קמתי וצחקתי, והסיגריה כבר הייתה מוכנה לי ביד.

(חזרתי לרוץ. (להיזכר: עצמות קשיחות מזעזעות את האספלט, עצם נקייה עטופה בבשר אדום.

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בתור יהודייה, יש לי כמה זכויות בסיסיות. אבל ב'שורשון' טרם שמעו על החסד האחרון על החסד של אמת שלכם כבר שמענו: לתת למירה גור הקומפוסטרית מספר אחת לרחוץ את גופתי. לזה אתם קוראים חסד? בכוח, היא שפשפה לי את הראות. שלא תחשוב שלא הרגשתי אבל, אבוי. לנטע ברבן, כבר לא היו ריאות. נטע ברבן אהבה אהבת נפש את הסיגריות נטע מעריצה סיגריות! יבורכו היצרנים. יבורך העטרן. יבורכו משקעי הזפת בנשמתי. ברוכה תהיי סיגריה. וברוכים תהיו כולכם- הפחמן חד חמצני, הניקוטין והפורמלין

לאחוז סיגריה, כמו שצריך: בין אצבע לאגודל.

לא כבוד מת, לא חסד אחרון. בלי ערימת קומפוסט, ובלי דאגה מגז המיתאן הארור

רק אפר דק שמתפזר ברוח. אל אם לייט הייתי רוצה להיות. לרחף בחלל ובהרבה חלקיקים נוחים ונעימים.

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ובבית חוגג עכשיו בעלי. מטהר את רכבו ( פח מגולוון, 2000 סמ"ק, פחמן חד חמצני, תחמוצות גופרית, עופרת) מהסיגריות של נטע. הנשים מעוקמות האף שלו ישכבו בו בנוחיות. אין כמו להידפק באוויר נקי מרעלים.

אבישי מעיף את המיקרוגל לזבל. מייצב את פחי המיחזור. מוריד טפיחה לגנן שלנו, איש מטופש שאוהב לדבר אל הצמחים. פעם העפתי לו סטירה. הוא עמד ופיזר לי קרטונים בגינה. בפני מלאך ירוקות אמר: "זה כדי למנוע אידוי של מים". אני שאגתי עליו: "מים. הרבה מים אני רוצה. לא אכפת לי מ"מבצורת. רטיבות בכל מקום"

בבית התעלמו מההוראות שלי: לא כיבסו במכונה. לא חממו במיקרוגל

ילדתי רוני, בשקט בשקט שורפת לה פיתה על הגז. אפילו החתולים יורקים את השניצלים שאני מטגנת. בלי ירקות - לא אוכלים

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כולם בכו בהלוויה שלי, ולא מטעמי עצב. מטעמי בלוטות דמעות מגורות. אני יודעת. מטעמי "להוליך את הכאב החוצה". אני יודעת

אבל אנחת הרווחה שלכם הגיעה עד לזוללי בשרי

? כי מי יטרפד משלוחי שלשולים ליפתח גרץ? מי ירעיל את הספסל הירוק בהפרחת עשן

? מי ימית את הקומפוסט בעיניו? מי יקרין במיקרוגל

אף אחד. נטע ברבן הלכה. לא יוקרן העולם. לא יורעל הספסל. לא יטרפדו שלשולים. אהה

נטע שילמה את חובה לבריות. גוף אכול ניתן במתנה לשלשולים  
את גופי לא ישרפו. לא ישלחו למים. לא יאדו. גופי רעיל, משחרר מתכות והורג דגים  
הגופה תינתן לתולעים הזייפניות. אחח. אחח.

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חסרי החוליות כאן משקיענים. מריירים ג'לי. הם מפצים על חסרונם בעצם, זוללים ומתרבים. לא  
לזלזל: השלשול של היום הוא המושבה של המחר  
קומפוסט, קומפוסט, קומפוסט. כל החי נרקב.

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היום כבר התפורר לי האף. כאן נשברתי. הסונאר שלי הלך. מת. תהלוכה של תולעים זמררו,  
ולקול החפירה התווסף קול מציצה. בקשית שתו לי את האף. כל נחיר שימש אולם ליצורים  
הכשרונים הללו.

הקהל, נטע לשעבר, שכב על הגב ולא פרגן.

הייתי צריכה לעמוד עכשיו בחדר האוכל האורגני שלכם, ולאכול בלי להריח. בשארית הדמיון  
שלי אני מתענגת על החיזיון: שורשים נלעסים ומיץ ללא ריח נמצץ מתוכם. בשר פרי ללא כימיקלים  
מתלעלע בפיו, כשהאף סתום.

תענוג!

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עולם החי: עולם של היררכיה. עכשיו הגיע תורי להיאכל. עצמותיי שוכבות במאוזן, נשמתי  
מנדנדת רגליים: הנה לכם. לא התכליתי. עדיין

בשיעורים הקהילתיים של שורשון הרצו: איך שותלים ללא דשן כימי, איך מגדלים גינת ירק  
המושבתת על חברות, וכמה זמן לוקח לפחית להתכלות.

ורק אני לא אגלה לכם לעולם לאחר כמה זמן פורקתי

לא, את נטע ברבן לא טרחתם לכבד בחיים: לא הקשבתם לה. עשיתם עם בעלה יד אחת נגדה.  
רימיתם אותה: החבאתם לה מיקרוגל. גזלתם את שקיות האשפה שלה, שקיות פלסטיק כחולות,  
סגורות היטב. פלשתם לתוכן. הפרדתם

חטפתם את ילדיה והרבצתם בהם קומפוסט. לא נתתם לה לסגור מרפסת מרעפים. כשעישנתי  
בחוץ - הזמנתם כתבים

עליתם על גיל ההתבגרות של רוני. פתחתם לה את לבכם. לב, גיליתם, הוא לא רק שריר

נדתם ברחמים: אימא לא אקולוגית. טפטפתם: אמא רעה

גנבתם לי כביסה סינטטית. שלא תחשבו שלא ראיתי. ואחרי שהלכתי מבתיכם ריססתם אותם  
בשמן לבנדר, שהריח שלי לא יידבק

ועל פטרייה יושב לו הטבע ומעשן בחיך: אשרי הטבע שככה לו

לא. לא אגלה לכם את קצב הפירוק

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המוח, קראתי פעם, הוא האחרון להיזללות

:הטבע אכזר: הוא מאפשר לעקוב אחר התהליכים עד סופם. הסעודה האחרונה

להרגיש איך מתפקעים העצבים, איך נמסות שכבות העור, איך נסוג הדרמיס. ורק מקלות לבנים



מוטלים בסוף הסעודה. כמה הייתי נותנת, כדי להחזיר עצם בתולעת

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?לא רציתי להגיע למצב הזה, אבל מי שואל אותי, מי

ההלוויה הייתה מזויעה

עיני היו עצומות, כיאה למתים שמירה גור מתעסקת איתם.

בעוד רגע, חשתי, נגיע למקום הקבורה שלי, שם אשכב לי במנוחת עולמים. הברוש שבשער

צמרתו אז ירכין. ילדים יגיעו לכאן במקרה לחפש אחר כדור שנזרק. שעמום. אני אומרת לכם

בחדר האוכל, תתכנס וועדה, ותפסוק בחומרה על הקומפוסט. במועדון תתרכך הנימה, ותנעים

בסדנת קומפוסט

קומפוסט, קומפוסט, קומפוסט. כל החי נרקב

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ודווקא מצד אבישי לא ציפיתי שיתחיל ב-"הייתה תלמידה טובה". למה להעלות נשכחות, שגם

?המורים מעדיפים לשכוח

הביאו מורה שתעיד שהייתי חיונית. שפי שפע אמרות כנף וחיודודי לשון

לו לפחות היה לי מגפון לצעוק את הנאום האחרון. במילה האחרונה הייתי חזקה תמיד. הלו שם,

שומעים אותי? יש לי בשבילכם בכיס נאום מוכן

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ביום חגיגי זה, אנו חוגגים את נפלאות האקולוגיה. האקולוגיה אמרה את דברה, והאקולוגיה"

ניצחה:

סיגריות באמת מסרטנות. מי הביוב מזוהמים. האשפה הלא מופרדת עושה שמות באוויר,

והאספלט, גרגיריו, סותמים את הנשמה, בהנחה שאכן יש לציניקנים נשמה

והנה שוכבת לה נטע. גופה כבר נרקב בבית החולים. שומעים את הרעש? זה הסרטן שמכרסם

את גופה. פיה נודף מצחנת סיגריות- גם למרחק

נטע התעללה בסביבה, והסביבה החזירה לה, בריבית דריבית

נפרדים אנו ממך נטע. עוד רקבובית טובה מתווספת לאדמה ומשביחה אותה. ומי יודע, ברבות

"הימים, אולי קבלן אדמה יוכל לעשות בה שימוש.היי לעפר טוב, נטע

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זה הנאום שהכנסתי לכיס של הג'ינס. ג'ינס? תשכחו מזה. בחלוק מכוער עטפו אותי, אפילו דגל

היה עדיף

אבל איזה נאומים דופקים לי פה. אם לא בחיי אז במותי. אבישי דקלם: "הייתה אישה טובה".

מעברו השני של הקבר חמש נשים מצועפות מבט עפעפו לו

אהבה:"סוף סוף, התחברה לה נטע עם אימא אדמה". והוסיפה בשביל הפרסום: "הסדנא אצלנו

(מקדימה ומלמדת איך להתמודד עם מוות".(אני אגיד לכם איך: תבואו עם אוכל לתולעים בכיס

"מירה גור החניקה פיהוק: "בסופו של דבר, נטע, היית הרוח החיה, המצחיקה והמשמחת

רוני הגיעה מהצבא וברגישות של משקית ת"ש בכתה. היא באמת אהבה אותי, הטיפשה

וקוצ'י הקטן נצמד אליה במבט מבוהל. קומפוסט או לא, בדבר אחד ניצחתי: אהבת אם אינה

אקולוגית

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כמה חבל שאי אפשר לבחור מוות. מוות בים, כחול ורוגע. שייט תמידי בין יצורים פקוחי עין. אדווה סנפירית. צלילות. כשהכול מכוסה במים, אני מבוהלת פחות. וממילא, האף לא שמיש

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אני מונחת. לראות אני לא יכולה. בחוץ- קולות עמומים. אולי עלייה לקבר, אולי יום השנה, הכול יכול להיות. האף כבר מזמן נגמר, ורק הרצון נשאר לי: להחזיק בשתי עצמות סיגריה ולעשן, באין ריאות. אין -ריאות יתרחבו וינשבו את העשן לתוכן. אין ריאות יתכווצו והעשן ייפלט מהן מדודות

הנה, יגיד אבישי, בעלי הצדיק. הנה העונש שלה. על כל חטאיה: עישון, ווכחנות, אי הפרדת זבל! החטא שלך, נטע", היה אומר, "הוא שאת לא יודעת להתמזג. תשכבי לך באדמה ותתמזגי. גופך יתחלק שוב ושוב. חלקיקים טובים לאדמה

אז אני שוכבת

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מתישהו, אולי בעוד שעה, יתרוקן לי המוח מהראש. מקומפוסט לא באתי, אבל אל קומפוסט אשוב

*Pavel Amnuel Чайка*

На набережной Утоквай она часто встречала старика, одетого в длинное пальто, холодное зимой и слишком теплое летом. Сутулый, с нечесаной седой гривой, он брел вдоль берега, ни на кого не обращая внимания, и что-то бормотал себе под нос. Поравнявшись с ним, она всегда говорила: «Добрый день, герр профессор», хотя и не знала, был ли старик рассеянным ученым или неопрятным бомжем.

Сегодня старик не встретился. Может, потому что она пришла не одна?

– Посидим здесь? – сказала она своему спутнику и, не дожидаясь ответа, присела на ажурную скамью, подобрав оборки платья.

Ее спутник сел рядом – не так, как она, не на краешек, а основательно, – откинулся на гнутую спинку, прищурился – солнце, стоявшее довольно высоко, светило в глаза – и сказал:

– Двадцать шестого я отплываю в Англию из Остенде.

– Вы, – поправила она. – Вы отплываете. С Эльзой.

Он молча разглядывал далекие крыши домов на противоположной стороне озера.

– Ты не захотел повидаться с Тете, – осуждающе сказала она.

Он, наконец, ответил:

– Не думаю, что это было бы... – он помедлил, подыскивая слово, – полезно для нас обоих.

– Полезно, – повторила она с легким презрением. – Ты весь в этом слове. Тебе не приходило в голову, что Тете хочет увидаться с отцом?

– Не будем спорить, – терпеливо проговорил он и положил ладонь ей на колени. Она не ожидала от него этого жеста, означавшего, возможно, попытку примирения,

может быть – просьбу о прощении или, на худой конец, знак понимания, которого не было между ними долгие годы – точнее, четырнадцать лет и два месяца. Она считала быстро и подсчитала мгновенно: столько времени прошло после того, как ей пришел по почте конверт федеральной службы, в котором лежало заполненное и ею же двумя днями раньше подписанное свидетельство о разводе.

Она не убрала руку, только посмотрела удивленно в его глаза. Он не отвел взгляда, смотрел изучающе, напряженно. Ей знаком был такой его взгляд: он размышлял о чем-то, не имевшем отношения к окружающей реальности, думал о том мире, который он всю жизнь хотел понять.

– Ты снова на перепутье? – спросила она. – Тебя беспокоят открытия Хаббла? Я иногда просматриваю научные журналы. Это не ностальгия, мне просто интересно.

– Нет, – он покачал головой. – Хаббл меня не беспокоит. Я написал об этом статью в «Нахрихтен», она должна была выйти в июне, но ее выбросили из номера. Ты слышала, я отказался от звания и гражданства?

– Кто же не слышал? – она все-таки сделала движение, и ему пришлось убрать ладонь. – Об этом писали газеты, а фрау Молнаг, ты ее не знаешь, я сдаю ей комнаты на втором этаже...

– Неважно, – прервал он рассказ, который мог затянуться. – Скажи лучше вот что. Если ты иногда читаешь научные журналы, то знаешь... думаю, ты не могла этого пропустить... ты всегда этим интересовалась...

– Да, – кивнула она, поняв, что он хотел сказать, прежде, чем ему удалось сформулировать вопрос, чтобы он прозвучал не напоминанием о прошедшем и невозвратимом, а всего лишь желанием обсудить новую проблему в теоретической физике.

– Знаешь, – сказала она, – мне это уже не кажется странным.

– Станным, – повторил он, сделав вид, что не понимает, или действительно не понимая. – Что?

– Все, что было тогда.

– Тогда... У нас было много разных «тогда»...

– Ты хочешь поговорить об этом? – спросила она спокойно, но он ощутил в ее голосе глубоко скрытое напряжение, понял, что говорить об «этом» не нужно, и вернулся к теме, занимавшей его последние месяцы.

– Мир меняется, – сказал он. – Мир становится все более неопределенным и грубым. Такое ощущение, будто квантовая неопределенность играет роль и в мире человеческих страстей. Никогда не знаешь заранее, чем закончится даже простой, казалось бы, разговор о погоде, – пожаловался он, и она вспомнила прежние баталии, когда в их берлинскую квартиру приходили друзья, тоже физики, а иногда не только, и разговоры, громкие, как военная музыка, велись далеко за полночь, и никто не знал, к чему приведут эти яростные споры, и, тем не менее, он был прав в своих ощущениях: она всегда знала, что произойдет потом, когда все мысли окажутся высказаны, все слова произнесены, гости и хозяин (сама она никогда не присоединялась к мужчинам, хотя ей было что сказать) в изнеможении сидели, бросая друг на друга красноречивые взгляды.

– Тебя это выводит из равновесия, – улыбнулась она одними губами.

– Да! – воскликнул он. – С тех пор, как я... как мы перестали чувствовать друг друга, я потерял ощущение правильности того, что делаю. То есть...

– Я понимаю, – прервала она его. – Это заметно по твоим работам, и мне странно, что никто из твоих биографов не обратил внимания на даты.

– Никому не пришло в голову, – усмехнулся он, – сделать самое простое.

– Самое простое, – сказала она, – было в том, чтобы...

– Не надо!

– Ты хотел простоты, а получил обыденность.

– Я не жалею, – твердо произнес он, и она на секунду отвернулась, чтобы он не заметил слезинку, которой, скорее всего, и не было, но она почувствовала, как капелька выкатилась из глаза и упала на подставленную ладонь.

– Мне тоже не о чем жалеть, – сказала она. – Но ты не за тем приехал, чтобы вспоминать то, чего никогда вспоминать не хотел, верно? Не ходи вокруг да около. Говори, наконец.

Крыши домов на противоположной стороне Цюрихского озера сверкали на солнце и выглядели отсюда, с набережной, нотными знаками, зримой музыкой, которую можно было прочесть.

– Кванты, – сказал он. – Умные люди, замечательные ученые. Бор. Гейзенберг. Шредингер. Умнейшие. Но уведят физику с пути ее.

– Кванты, – удивленно повторила она. – О чем ты? Премию ты получил именно за...

– Да! – воскликнул он. – Энергия распространяется квантами. Физические поля квантуются. Это математика. Но они, – он произнес слово «они» с неожиданной смесью уважения, презрения, и даже некий страх, глубоко в нем сидевший и не имевший шансов быть высказанным открыто, услышала она в его словах, – они уверены, что весь мир подчиняется законам вероятности, и никогда не предугадаешь, как закончится тот или иной элементарный процесс. Посмотри – вот летит чайка: да, я не знаю, нырнет она или взмоет в небо. Я смотрю на тебя и не знаю: улыбнешься ли ты сейчас или скажешь колкость, после которой мне только и останется, что встать и уйти. Я не могу предвидеть такие простые, казалось бы, вещи, потому что на самом деле они подчиняются огромному числу законов. Но если бы мне были известны все твои душевные побуждения, все твои страхи и эмоции, все рефлексy и инстинкты – это сложно, но сложность преодолима, – я смог бы предсказать, что ты сделаешь в следующую секунду так же точно, как могу сказать, где и когда взойдет солнце.

– Глупости. Я и сама не знаю, что сделаю в следующее мгновение – расплачусь или мило тебе улыбнусь. А ты при всем своем уме недалеко ушел от Лапласа.

– Ты понимаешь, что я хотел сказать!

– Да, – согласилась она. – Ты так и не смог смириться с тем, что миром управляют законы случайности, а не определенности.

– Видишь ли, – произнес он, следя взглядом за чайкой, которая сначала опустилась на воду, но в следующее мгновение взмыла высоко в небо и исчезла в его иссиня-глубокой вышине, – если бы миром управляла случайность, мы бы сейчас не сидели здесь и не разговаривали о вещах, в которых, кроме нас двоих, никто ничего не понимает.

Она внимательно посмотрела ему в глаза.

– Ты впервые говоришь эти слова, – медленно сказала она. – Раньше ты был более жестким... и жестоким.

Он покачал головой.

– Жестокость... Мы все равно не смогли бы жить вместе.

– Не смогли бы, – согласилась она. – Но Эльза... Ты мог бы придумать что-нибудь менее жестокое.

– Ты не допускаешь, что я мог влюбиться? Как раньше – в тебя? И что...

– Оставим это, – быстро сказала она и сделала движение, будто хотела прикрыть его рот своей ладонью – знакомый жест, так она делала всегда, когда его слова казались ей неправильными, обидными, глупыми... только она могла сказать ему, что он глупец, только ей это дозволялось... до какого-то времени, и тогда она стала говорить: «Какой ты умный», но таким тоном, что он понимал: в ней ничего не изменилось, она та же, и он для нее всего лишь глупый, не приспособленный к жизни мужчина, которого она вынуждена была отпустить, потому что он не понимал, и сейчас не понимает того, что сделал...

– Оставим, – повторила она. – Ты уже третий раз начинаешь разговор и уводишь его в сторону. Боишься? Ты всегда был немного трусом, верно?

– Нет, – он не желал признавать очевидное. Очевидное для него было менее понятно, чем странное, непривычное.

– Ты хочешь говорить о квантовой физике, – с удовлетворением сказала она, ощущая минутную над ним победу и желая предаться давно забытому ощущению.

Он промолчал, поняв ее чувства и позволив им на этот раз проявиться в полной мере. Он знал по старой памяти, что только так можно пустить ее сознание в свободное плавание по волнам интуиции, из которого она приплывала со странными идеями; он, бывало, интерпретировал ее слова по-своему и оказывался прав, и все получалось, как утверждал он, но она считала (не без основания?), что без ее несносной интуиции его математический поезд не сдвинулся бы с места и до сих пор буксовал бы на какой-нибудь из промежуточных станций.

Но о квантовой физике они не говорили никогда. Наверно, потому что в то время, когда Шредингер опубликовал свою первую работу, они давно жили порознь, встречались редко, и он не поверял уже ей свои сомнения, да и сомнений у него становилось меньше и меньше, хотя ошибался он (она читала его работы и следила за его дискуссиями) чаще и чаще.

– Вселенная возникла из первоатома, – сказала она.

– Наверно, – он решил, что теперь она уводит разговор в сторону. – Какое отношение...

– Помолчи, – сурово сказала она. – Ты, как всегда, нетерпелив. В первоатоме ничего не было, кроме света. «Да будет свет!» – сказал Бог. И стал свет.

– При чем здесь... – начал он раздраженно, но она не позволила ему договорить фразу, которая, по ее мнению, была еретической. Как и он, она не верила в Бога, но, в отличие от него, понимала, что ее вера или неверие ничего не означают – потому что Он есть.

– Был свет, – повторила она. – Фотоны. Те самые...

Она всего лишь напомнила ему весну почти тридцатилетней давности, когда они сидели рядом, склонившись над большой тетрадью, исписанной формулами. Два почерка – его и ее, а цепочка формул одна. Начало квантовой теории излучения.

Он мрачно кивнул. Он тоже помнил, как и то, что потом она сказала: «Не хочу. Будут сложности с публикацией, я женщина». И он согласился.

Она сидела, закрыв глаза, будто от солнца, а на самом деле отгородившись от всего – набережной, озера, города, неба и, прежде всего, от него, своим присутствием мешавшего ей погрузиться в привычное для нее, но непонятное ему состояние.

– Не было ничего, только фотоны, а потом другие частицы, ведь взялись же они откуда-то, – говорила она, не думая и, возможно, даже не осознавая, какие слова произносит. Слова рождались не из мыслей, а из осознания истины, в которой она не была уверена, но которую просто знала. – Кванты и частицы. Ничего, кроме связанных друг с другом квантов и частиц. Ты понимаешь, что я хочу сказать?

Он смотрел на крыши домов и покачивал ногой. Он не мог сказать «не понимаю». Сказать «понимаю» он не мог тоже. Он просто ждал продолжения.

– Первоатом, а потом Вселенная, – терпеливо произнесла она, – представляли собой одну квантовую систему. Изолированную систему, потому что ничего, кроме Вселенной, не существовало. И не существует. Понимаешь?

Пожалуй, он начал понимать причудливый ход ее мысли. Пожалуй, сейчас он понимал даже больше, чем она – так на мгновение показалось ему, но он счел благоразумным промолчать.

– Сколько лет расширялась Вселенная потом? – спросила она, то ли ожидая от него ответа, то ли не ожидая ничего, кроме пристального внимания к каждому ее слову.

– Это зависит от величины постоянной Хаббла, которая точно не измерена, и ты это наверняка знаешь, – сказал он. – И если ты воображаешь, что все это время фотоны первоатома оставались связаны...

– Частицы тоже, – кивнула она. – Не только те, из первоатома, но и другие, возникшие потом из первых, и следующие, возникшие из вторых...

– Как же, как же, – иронически проговорил он, уловив в ее рассуждении неминуемое противоречие, которого не должно быть в правильной научной идее. – Расстояние между частицами – миллионы парсек. Миллиарды. Единая квантовая система? И значит, частица – скажем, атом водорода – в туманности Андромеды и такая же частица, скажем, в твоем платье – кстати, красивое, тебе идет – связаны так же, как в первоатоме? И если ты сейчас случайным движением руки выдернешь атом водорода из той цепочки, в которой он находится в твоем платье, то другой атом, там, в туманности Андромеды, «почувствует» мгновенно это изменение и сам вынужден будет изменить свое состояние? Глупости ты говоришь, – сказал он сердито. – Дальнодействие – это мы с тобой еще...

– В том и проблема, – спокойно сказала она, – что ты не в состоянии понять это единство: дальнодействие в квантовом мире и близкодействие – в обычных масштабах.

– Дальнодействие и близкодействие несовместимы, – отрезал он. – Скорость света – предел.

– Потому тебе и не удастся сделать то, что ты хочешь, – с мстительным удовлетворением сказала она.

– Чего хочу я? – вопрос вырвался непроизвольно, он никогда не говорил с ней о планах, он даже с Бором еще не обсуждал свои идеи, хотел, чтобы новая физика сначала выкристаллизовалась в его мыслях, а потом... Что она имела в виду? Она не могла знать. Или...

– Единая физика, я права? Но ты не сможешь сделать ничего, потому что уверен: дальнодействие квантов несовместимо с близкодействием относительности. На самом

деле нет двух миров: квантового и обычного. Мир един.

– Нет двух миров, – повторил он. – Конечно. Мир един, потому что квантовая физика, как ее изображают Вернер с Нильсом, – химера. Математический трюк.

– Мир един, – упрямо сказала она. – И если...

– Что если? – спросил он минуту спустя, потому что она замолчала на полуслове и сидела, плотно сжав губы и по-ученически сложив руки на коленях – усталая, немолодая, все в жизни потерявшая женщина.

– Если на твоём столе ты найдешь утром красивый камешек, которого не было вечером, ты повертишь его в ладонях и выбросишь в корзину... или положишь на подоконник... в зависимости от настроения. Главное – ты забудешь об этом через минуту, потому что мысли твои заняты другим, и бытовым странностям в них нет места.

Он покачал головой.

– Не напоминай, – сказал он, помрачнев. – Тете таскал домой все, что попадалось под руку. Теперь, наверно, тоже.

– Ты так и остался при своем мнении, – с горечью произнесла она. – Ты не хочешь понять, что Тете... Неважно, – прервала она себя. – Для тебя это бытовые глупости, ты никак не связываешь их с квантовой физикой.

– Опять ты об этом, – с досадой сказал он. – Я хотел говорить с тобой о важных вещах.

– Я о них и говорю! – она повысила голос, воображая, что так дотянется до его сознания, до его гениального, раскованного, все понимающего сознания. – Погляди на эту чайку, – ему показалось, что она опять переменяла тему разговора, и он недовольно поморщился.

– Погляди на чайку, – повторила она. – О чем ты думаешь, когда смотришь, как она ловко подхватывает рыбу? О том, как великолепно создала эволюция этот живой организм, верно?

Он молчал, и она не была уверена – слушал ли. Он умел погружаться в свои мысли, становиться недоступным для собеседника, выглядя при этом немного рассеянным и вроде бы прислушивающимся.

– Ты слышишь меня?

– Да, – сказал он, глядя в небо. – Слышу и слышал. Лет пятнадцать назад мы с тобой повздорили, когда ты нашла у Тете камень, похожий по форме на Тадж-Махал, и сказала, что это такой же плод эволюции, как муха, ползавшая в это время по столу. Эта твоя идея не нова и...

– ...И глупа, я знаю. Тогда это была чистая интуиция, ничего больше, но сейчас...

– Сейчас это даже не интуиция, а непонимание, – отрезал он. – Тете таскал в дом всякую всячину, которую мы находили в самых неподходящих местах. Он и сейчас так поступает? Я правильно тебя понимаю?

– И сейчас, – повторила она. – Только ни тогда, ни сейчас он не таскал, как ты говоришь, всякую всячину.

– Да-да. Тете сам создавал эти предметы. Как фокусник в цирке. Правда, там...

– О, Господи, – сказала она. – До чего порой умны эти физики! Они так умны, что перестают понимать самые простые вещи. Ты можешь помолчать?

Он демонстративно сложил руки на груди и приготовился слушать внимательно, очень внимательно, как умел только он. Она обожала такие мгновения их прошлой

жизни. Когда ей приходила в голову мысль, она застывала на месте, а он, уловив перемену, поворачивался к ней, складывал на груди руки и впитывал не слова, она не всегда могла выразить свою мысль словами, он умел понимать идеи просто по выражению ее лица, по взгляду, и потом, когда он произносил вслух то, что она только подумала и не могла объяснить, оказывалось, что это цельная, необычная, новая потрясающая идея, до которой мог додуматься только его гениальный ум. Да, глядя на ее покрасневшееся лицо, но лицо – не мысль, а мысль рождалась в его голове, в его сознании.

– Мироздание состоит из частиц и квантов...

Она сейчас не думала, не расставляла слова по местам. Она смотрела на его руки и вспоминала: маленький Тете очень хотел, чтобы Санта Клаус подарил ему на Рождество настоящий паровоз, и, когда игрушка действительно оказалась лежавшей под елкой в гостиной, мальчик не удивился. Удивилась она, потому что не клала этой игрушки. Подумала, что это сделал он, но и он не мог, он даже не знал о детской мечте сына. Она сказала ему... а он, рассеянно посмотрев, проронил: «Я попросил бы лошадку».

– Мироздание состоит из частиц и квантов, – говорила она, не слыша себя. – Все кванты и частицы во вселенной – единая физическая система. Раньше я не понимала, как это возможно, и не донимала тебя своими бреднями, а после работ Леметра поняла... Все началось в первоатоме...

– Да-да, – рассеянно сказал он, давая понять, что она уже говорила это, не надо повторяться, он все понимает с первого раза.

– В замкнутой изолированной системе все частицы связаны друг с другом. В первоатоме все частицы и кванты были связаны. Они остались связаны, когда Вселенная расширилась, потому что мироздание – замкнутая изолированная система. Это так просто! Электрон, бегущий под твоей кожей, связан с фотоном, летящим сейчас от туманности в Андромеде.

– Частицы вступают в реакции, фотоны излучаются и поглощаются, – назидательным тоном произнес он, воображая, что этим очевидным утверждением разбивает ее аргумент напрочь.

– Конечно! Но связь сохраняется – теперь между другими частицами! Энергия ведь не исчезает никуда, превращаясь из кинетической в химическую или тепловую, верно? Может, существует закон сохранения связи, такой же всеобщий, как закон сохранения энергии в замкнутых системах?

– Скорость света... – начал он.

– Скорость света ни при чем! – воскликнула она. – Информация не передается, электрон под твоей кожей ничего не может сообщить фотону, летящему из туманности Андромеды. Меняется состояние частиц, это совсем другое...

– Ты говорила о чайке, – напомнил он и вздохнул. – У тебя скачут мысли, ты стала рассеяна...

– Нет! Чайка – результат эволюции. Камень на столе Тете, паровоз под елкой – помнишь? – тоже результаты эволюции. Эволюции в квантовом мире. Эволюции квантов и частиц, разнесенных так далеко в пространстве-времени, что никто пока не подумал... а ты и думать не хочешь, ты вообще решил, что квантовая физика – математическая фикция...



– Конечно, – пробормотал он так, чтобы она не услышала.

Она не услышала. Почувствовала.

– Паровоз под елкой, – сказала она, – результат эволюции, да. Электрон с Земли, атом железа из звезды Барнарда, еще один атом из туманности «Конская голова», фотон из той красивой туманности, что значится в каталоге Мессье под номером пятьдесят семь... Связанные друг с другом в те еще времена, когда первоатом взорвался, эти частицы миллионы лет... миллиарды... искали новые связи друг с другом, эти связи возникали и переходили к другим частицам и квантам... в том мире, о котором твои коллеги ничего не знают, а ты и знать не хочешь. И как однажды из неорганической материи возникла жизнь в океане, так и из этих частиц и квантов время от времени возникает нечто упорядоченное... причудливый камень, кусок металла, похожий на человеческий глаз...

– Паровоз, – насмешливо дополнил он, подмигнув ей, как бывало, когда много лет назад какая-нибудь ее мысль представлялась ему не то чтобы глупой, но, с точки зрения физики, смешной.

– Конечно, – кивнула она. – И паровоз. Потому что в квантовом мире любой процесс заканчивается...

Она замолчала, ожидая, что он продолжит фразу. Он всегда продолжал ее мысль, когда понимал принцип рассуждения.

Он молчал, смотрел на нее с любопытством, смешанным с осуждением.

– Наблюдением, – вздохнула она. – Наблюдением он заканчивается.

– Ах! – патетически воскликнул он, взмахнув руками. – Конечно. Узнаю голос Эрвина. Если никто не смотрит на обезьянку, то она занимается сразу всем, что физически возможно: спит, ест банан, прыгает на ветке, чешется, дерется... Только когда мы на нее бросаем взгляд, она прекращает все дела, кроме одного, и мы видим обезьянку, жующую банан. Вот потому квантовая физика не отражает реальности! Реальность одна, а решений уравнения состояния множество!

– Твоя мысль, – осуждающе сказала она, – мчится быстрее того паровоза, который...

– Естественно! Эволюция на квантовом уровне? Электрон в моей коже и фотон в галактике Андромеды? Никогда не слышал более нелепого...

– Паровоз под елкой Тете...

– Ты сама его туда положила! Признайся. Сейчас можешь это сделать – столько лет прошло.

– Камень, похожий на птицу, на его подушке... Пятно на скатерти, возникшее, когда ты не отводил от нее взгляда... Мои очки, вторая пара, помнишь, они-то откуда взялись, если у меня всегда была только одна? Камешки причудливой формы, которые Тете откуда-то доставал, часто – просто протянув руку, из воздуха... сейчас у него получается тоже, но реже... может, потому что он уже взрослый, а способность стимулировать эволюционные процессы в квантовом мире больше свойственна детям?

– Никогда не слышал большей... – пробормотал он и не закончил фразу, не хотел ее обижать, не хотел произносить слово, которое она всегда ненавидела.

– Чепухи, – закончила за него она. – Конечно. Но ты не станешь утверждать, что ничего этого не было: паровоза под елкой, камешков в руке Тете, второй пары очков...

– Паровоз купила ты, – упрямо произнес он. – Камни... Ну, знаешь, способность

нашего Тете таскать домой всякую всячину известна тебе не хуже, чем мне. Он и сейчас, повзрослев, не избавился от этой привычки? Послушай, – сказал он, помолчав, – я понимаю, ты всегда хотела... то есть, у тебя всегда были свои соображения, которыми я, по твоему мнению, пренебрегал... но это не так, ты знаешь...

– Знаю, – с горечью сказала она. – Потому ты предпочел мне Эльзу. Она не...

– Оставим это, – прервал он. – Квантовая эволюция, говоришь ты? Предположим. Наблюдение, завершающее этот странный процесс? Допустим. Как видишь, я сегодня готов принять любые твои... э-э... идеи. И результат такой эволюции: камни Тете, паровоз под елкой? Если бы никто под елку не заглянул, паровоза там не было бы?

– Если бы Тете не хотел эту игрушку... Если бы в его мозгу кванты и частицы не завершили этот эволюционный процесс...

– Извини, – сказал он, бросив взгляд на часы, поднявшись и отряхнув с колен невидимые ему самому пылинки. – Мне пора на вокзал.

– Знаешь, – добавил он, помогая ей подняться и впервые за много лет обняв ее располневшую талию, – наш разговор многое мне дал сегодня. Не то, на что ты, видимо, рассчитывала, но я подумаю. Проводить тебя?

Он надеялся на отрицательный ответ и получил его. Она покачала головой и забрала его руку со своей талии.

– Если ты так уверена в существовании квантовой эволюции и в том, что заканчивает этот процесс наблюдение, – сказал он с легкой насмешкой, – то почему тебе не сотворить такой же камень, что таскал домой Тете? Прямо здесь. Чтобы я увидел: ты не принесла камень с собой в кармашке этого широкого платья. Ну, попробуй! В физике, ты знаешь, все решает эксперимент. Наблюдение, да. Мало кто верил в общую относительность, пока сэр Эддингтон...

– Передай Эльзе привет, – сказала она и отвернулась, чтобы он не заметил слезинки в уголках ее глаз.

– Прощай, Иохонесль, – сказала она, подав ему руку и отняв сразу, как только он коснулся ее пальцев.

– Прощай, Доксерль.

Давно забытые прозвища, которыми они называли друг друга... когда же... почти тридцать лет назад.

Они разошлись в разные стороны и ни разу не обернулись. Оба прекрасно понимали, что больше никогда не увидятся.

Милева вздохнула и пошла вдоль берега. Навстречу ей шел бомж... или профессор? Поравнявшись с ней, он приподнял шляпу, тряхнул седой гривой, улыбнулся и сказал:

– Добрый день, фрау Эйнштейн. Всего вам хорошего.

Под мостом она постояла, глядя на воду, на чаек, на прогулочный катер, где тихо играла музыка. Протянула руку ладонью вверх, задумалась, и на ладони возникла чайка. Маленькая каменная белая в крапинку, расправившая крылья и готовая взлететь. Тяжелая. Милева опустила руку, и фигурка упала на гравий дорожки. Краешек крыла откололся.

– Иохонесль... – прошептал порыв ветра.

On the waterfront of Utoquai she often met an old man, dressed in a long coat which was not warm enough for winter and was too warm for summer. Stooping, with unkempt gray mane, he walked along the shore, muttering under his breath; no one was paying him any attention. Whenever she caught up with him, she said, "Good morning, Herr Professor," even though she did not know whether the old man was a distraught scientist or an unkempt homeless bum.

Today, the old man was not to be seen. Maybe because she did not come alone?

"Shall we sit here?" she asked her companion. Without waiting for an answer, she sat down on the mesh bench, lifting up the frills of her dress.

Her companion sat down – not in her manner of sitting on the edge, but solidly on the curved back of the bench. Squinting – the sun stood quite high in the sky and shone in his eyes – he said, "On the twenty-sixth I sail to England from Ostend."

"Both of you," she corrected. "You both sail. You and Elsa."

He silently stared at the distant rooftops on the opposite side of the lake.

"You do not want to see Tete," she said accusingly.

He finally replied, "I do not think it would be...," he paused, searching for a word, "...useful for either of us."

"Useful," she said with a shade of contempt. "That word is everything to you. Did it ever occur to you that Tete would want to see his father?"

"We won't argue," he said patiently, and put his hand on her knee. She did not expect this gesture from him – it could be a request for reconciliation, or at least a sign of the understanding that they had not shared for many years – more precisely, fourteen years and two months. She calculated quickly: that much time had passed since she had received in the post the envelope of the government service in which lay the completed certificate of divorce signed two days earlier....

She did not remove her hand, but only looked into his eyes in surprise. He did not look away, but merely stared inquisitively and tensely. This look of his was known to her: he was thinking about something which did not have to do with the reality of his surroundings, but rather was thinking about the world that all his life he had wanted to understand.

"You are again at a crossroads?" she asked. "Hubble's discovery is bothering you? I sometimes look through scientific journals. It's not nostalgia; I was just wondering."

"No," he shook his head. "Hubble does not bother me. I wrote an article about it for the Nachrichten. It was supposed to be published in June, but has been withdrawn. Did you hear that I gave up my position and renounced my citizenship?"

"Who hasn't heard of it?" She finally made a movement, and he had to remove his hand. "The newspapers wrote about it, and Frau Molnag, you don't know her, I rent a room on the second floor to her.."

"That's not important," he interrupted her story that could wait until later. "It would be better if you told me something else. If you sometimes read scientific journals, then you know... I think you could not miss this... you've always been interested in this.."

"Yes," she nodded, realizing what he wanted to say even before he was able to formulate the question. She knew that he wished to formulate it in such a way that was not a reminder of the irrevocable past, but that would only express his desire to discuss a

new problem in theoretical physics.

"You know," she said "this already doesn't seem strange to me."

"Strange," he repeated, either pretending not to understand, or really not understanding.

"What?"

"Everything that was then."

"Then.... We've had a lot of different 'thens'..."

"Do you want to talk about it?" she asked quietly, but he felt the deep latent tension in her voice. He realized that to talk about "it" was not necessary, and so returned to the subject that had occupied him during these last months. "The world is changing," he said. "The world is becoming more uncertain and rude. It feels as if quantum uncertainty plays a role in the world of human passions. You never know what the outcome even of a seemingly simple conversation about the weather will be," he complained.

She remembered the old battles when their Berlin apartment friends came, including physicists – sometimes only physicists – and conversed as loudly as military music long past midnight. No one knew where these fierce arguments would lead. Nevertheless, his impression was correct: she always had known what would happen afterwards, after all thoughts had been expressed, all the words had been spoken, the guests and the host (she herself had never joined the men, despite having had something to say) had sat exhausted, throwing each other eloquent glances.

"You've been thrown off balance," she said, smiling only with her lips.

"Yes!" he cried, "ever since I...we... stopped to intuit each other's thoughts and feelings, I've lost all sense of the correctness of what I'm doing. That is..."

"I understand," she interrupted. "This can be seen in your work, and I find it strange that none of your biographers have noticed it there.

"It didn't occur to anyone," he smiled, "to do what would have been the simplest thing."

"The simplest thing," she said "would have been to..."

"Don't!"

You wanted simplicity and got routine."

"I do not regret anything," he said firmly. She looked away for a second so that he would not notice a tear which, most likely, wasn't one, even though she felt as if a drop had rolled down from her eyes and fallen on her outstretched hand.

"I also do not regret anything," she said. "But you did not come here to reminisce about something that you never wanted to remember. Don't beat around the bush. So come out and say what you came to say."

Roofs of houses on the opposite side of Lake Zurich glittered in the sun, as if they reflected musical signs, visible music which could be read.

"Quanta," he said. "Smart people, great scientists. Bohr. Heisenberg. Schrödinger. The most brilliant. But they have left the path of physics."

"Quanta," she repeated in surprise. "What are you talking about? You got your prize precisely for..."

"Yes!" he cried. "Energy is distributed in quanta. Physical fields are quantized. This is mathematics. But they..." He used the word "they" with an unexpected mixture of respect and contempt, and even a bit of fear which was seated deeply inside him with no chance of being openly expressed. She heard all this in his words. "...they are sure that the whole

world is subject to the laws of probability with no possibility to predict how a given elementary process will finish. Look – there's a seagull flying. Yes, yes, I do not know whether it will dive into the water or soar off into the sky. I look at you and I don't know whether you will smile or throw taunts at me after which I would just get up and leave. I can not foresee such seemingly simple things, because in fact they are subject to a huge number of laws. But if I knew all your emotional impulses, all your fears and emotions, all your reflexes and instincts – it would be difficult, but not insurmountably so – I could predict what you would do in the next second as accurately as I can tell where and when the sun comes up."

"Nonsense. I myself do not know what I will do in the next moment – break down and cry, or smile nicely at you. And for all your intelligence, you have already strayed far from Laplace."

"You know what I mean!"

"Yes," she said. "You cannot accept the fact that the world is governed by the laws of chance, not by certainties."

"You see," he said, glancing at the seagull which first dived into the water but at the next moment soared high into the sky, disappearing into its deep blue, "if the world were ruled by accidents, we would not be sitting here and talking about things which no one except the two of us understands."

She looked him in the eye.

"You say these words for the first time," she said slowly. "You used to be tougher... and cruel."

He shook his head.

"Cruelty... In any case we could not have lived together."

"We couldn't have," she agreed. "But Elsa.... You could have come up with something a little less cruel."

"Do you not admit that I could fall in love? As before – to you? And that..."

"Forget that," she said quickly, and made a movement as if to cover his mouth with her hand – a familiar gesture, as she always had done when she thought his words wrong, offensive, stupid... only she could tell him that he is a fool, only she is allowed to.... She kept the hand there for a certain length of time, and then began to speak: "How clever you are," but in such a tone that he understood that nothing had changed, that things were just the same, and that he was, for her, just stupid, not adapted to human society. She was forced to let go because he did not understand before, nor did he understand now, what he had done.

"Forget that," she repeated. "That's the third time you started a conversation and then went off on a tangent. Are you afraid? You've always been a bit of a coward, right?"

"No." He did not want to admit the obvious. Obvious to him was less clear than the strange and unusual.

"You want to talk about quantum physics," she said smugly, feeling a tiny victory over him and wanting to indulge in this long-forgotten sensation.

He was silent, understanding her feelings and letting them fully manifest themselves this time. He knew the old memories; he knew that the only way was to let her mind float freely on the waves of intuition, on which she was sailing with the help of strange ideas. He used to interpret her words in his own way, and he had been right; everything

had worked as he claimed. But she considered (not without reason ?) that without her intolerable intuition, his mathematical train of thought would never have budged, and would still be stuck in some intermediate station.

But about quantum physics they had never spoken. Probably because, at the time when Schrödinger had published his first work, they had long lived apart, and rarely met. He had not confided her doubts to her, and indeed his doubts had become ever fewer, even though he had been more and more wrong. (She read his work and watched his discussions.)

"The universe emerged from the primeval atom," she said.

"Probably." He decided that now she wanted to take the conversation off on a tangent. "What does this have to do with..."

"Don't speak another word," she said sternly. "You are, as always, impatient. In the primeval atom there was nothing but light. 'Let there be light,' God said. And there was light."

"What does that..." he said irritably, but she did not let him finish a phrase that, in her opinion, was heretical. Like him, she did not believe in God, but, unlike him, knew that her belief or disbelief did not mean anything – because God exists.

"There was light," she said. "Photons. Precisely those..."

She reminded him of spring almost thirty years ago when they were sitting side by side, leaning over a large notebook, scribbling formulas. Two handwritings – his and hers – but a single chain of formulas. That was the beginning of the quantum theory of radiation.

He nodded grimly. He remembered just as well that she had said: "I do not want this. There will be difficulties with publication. I'm a woman." And he had agreed. She sat with her eyes closed, as if from the sun, and in fact cut off from everything – waterfront, lake, city, sky, and, above all, from him. His presence prevented her from plunging into a state which was familiar to her but not understood by him.

"There was nothing, only photons, and then other particles, because they came from somewhere," she said without thinking, and perhaps without even realizing what she was saying. Words were born not of ideas but of realizing the truth, a truth of which she was not sure, but which she simply knew. "Quanta and particles. Nothing but photons and particles in their relations to one another. Do you understand what I mean?"

He looked over the rooftops, and shook his leg. He could not say "I do not understand." Nor could he say "I understand." He just waited.

"The primeval atom, and then the universe," she said patiently, "represented a quantum system. An isolated system, because nothing but the universe existed. Or exists. There. Do you understand?"

Perhaps he began to understand the curious direction of her thoughts. Perhaps he now knew even more than she did. For a moment it seemed like this to him, but he thought it prudent to remain silent.

"How many years did the universe expand after that?" she asked. It was not clear whether she expected an answer from him or not, or whether she merely expected his undivided attention to each one of her words.

"It depends on the value of the Hubble constant, which is not measured accurately, as you probably know," he said. "If you imagine that during all this time the photons of the

primeval atom have remained entangled..."

"Also particles," she nodded. "Not only those of the primeval atom, but others then emerged from the first, and following that yet others emerged from the second..."

"Sure, sure," he said ironically, catching her in the inevitable contradictory argument which was inadmissible in a correct scientific concept. "We are talking about distances of millions, even billions of parsecs between the particles. A single quantum system? That would mean that a particle – for example, a hydrogen atom – in the Andromeda Nebula and the same particle, say, in your dress – which is, by the way, quite pretty; it becomes you – are connected exactly as they were in the primeval atom? And if, by a random gesture, you pull a hydrogen atom from one chain in your dress, then another atom, there, in the Andromeda galaxy, 'feels' this change instantly and will be forced to change its state? You're talking nonsense," he said angrily. "Long-range – we still..."

"That 's the problem," she said quietly, "that you are not able to understand this unity: the long-range in the quantum world with the short-range on the conventional scale."

"Long-range and short-range are incompatible," he snapped. "The speed of light is the limit."

"Because you are not able to do what you want," she said with vindictive satisfaction. "What do I want?" The question involuntarily escaped his lips; he had never spoken to her about his plans. Not even with Bohr had he discussed his ideas. He wanted the new physics to first crystallize in his mind, and then.... What did she mean? She could not know. Or perhaps....

"Unified Physics, am I right? But you cannot do anything because you are certain: long-range quantum relativity is incompatible with short-range. Reality is not two worlds, quantum and conventional. The world is one."

"Not two worlds," he repeated. "Of course. The world is one, because quantum physics, as it is represented by Niels and Werner, is a chimera. A mathematical trick."

"The world is one," she said stubbornly. "And if..."

"If what?" he asked a minute later, because she had stopped in mid-sentence and sat tight-lipped and with her hands in her lap like a schoolgirl – this tired, middle-aged woman who had lost everything in life.

"If you find a beautiful stone on your desk one morning, a stone that had not been there in the evening, you'd turn it around in your hands but then throw in the rubbish... or put it on the windowsill ... depending on your mood. The main thing – you'll forget about it within a minute afterwards, because your thoughts are occupied elsewhere, and little household oddities have no place there."

He shook his head.

"Do not remind me," he said in a darker tone. "Tete lugged home everything he found. He probably still does."

"You still remained unconvinced," she said bitterly. "You do not want to understand that Tete.... No matter," she interrupted herself. "For you it was everyday nonsense, you cannot associate them with quantum physics."

"Again you turn to that theme," he said with annoyance. "I wanted to talk to you about important matters."

"I 'm talking about them!" She raised her voice, imagining that this would help it penetrate to his mind, to his genius, uninhibited, all-understanding consciousness. "Look

at that seagull." It seemed to him that she had changed the subject again, and he winced.

"Look at that seagull," she repeated. "What do you think when you watch as she deftly catches a fish? About how evolution has created a magnificent living organism, right?"

He was silent, so she was not sure whether he was listening. He was able to dive into his own thoughts, become inaccessible to a conversation partner, looking at him or her with a slightly confused expression but nonetheless as if he were listening.

"Are you listening to me?"

"Yes," he said, looking at the sky. "I heard you; I am listening to you. Fifteen years ago we had this argument when you found a stone that Tete had, a stone that was shaped like the Taj Mahal, You said that it was also the fruit of evolution, comparing it to a fly which was crawling on the table at that time. Your idea is not new, and..."

"...and stupid, I know. At that time it was pure intuition, nothing more. But now..."

"Now it's not even intuition, it's a misunderstanding," he snapped. "Tete dragged all sorts of things into the house, and we found them in the most unlikely places. Is he is still doing this? Do I understand you correctly?"

"Still now," she said. "Only that neither then nor now does he lug, as you call it, all sorts of things."

"Yes, Tete himself created these things. As a magician in a circus would do. However, there..."

"Oh, God," she said. Up to what point does the cleverness of physicists stretch! They are so intelligent that they cease to understand the simplest things. Can you stop speaking for a moment?"

He defiantly crossed his arms and prepared to listen carefully, very carefully, as only he could. She had loved such moments in their past life. When she had come up with an idea, she had frozen on the spot; he had then noticed the change, turned to her, his arms folded and absorbed – not words – it is not always able to express his thoughts in words – but the idea. He had been able to understand the idea just by the look on her face. Then, when he had spoken aloud what she had just thought and could not explain, it had turned out to be a cogent, unusual, and exquisitely new idea, about which only he could think, with his brilliant mind. Yes, by looking at her flushed face, but a face is not a thought; the idea itself had been born in his mind, in his consciousness.

"The universe is composed of particles and photons..."

Now she wasn't thinking, wasn't putting the words in their proper order. She looked at his hands and remembered: little Tete had very much wanted Santa Claus to give him a real locomotive as a Christmas present, and when the toy really was lying under the tree in the living room, the boy had not been surprised. She had been surprised, because she had not bought this toy. She had thought that her husband had done it, but that couldn't be, because he had not even known about his son's childish dream. She had asked him about it; in reply he had just mumbled absentmindedly, "I would have asked for a horse."

"The universe is composed of particles and photons," she said, not hearing herself. "All photons and particles in the universe together form a unified physical system. Before I did not understand how it was possible, and did not pester you with my nonsense, but



after Lemaître's work it became clear to me. It all started in the primeval atom..."

"Yes, yes," he said absently, reminding her that she had already said that.

"In a closed isolated system, all particles are bonded to each other. In the primeval atom all particles and photons were connected. They were bound also as the universe expanded, because the universe is a closed isolated system. It's so simple! An electron running around under your skin is entangled with the photon flying from the Andromeda galaxy."

"Particles react, photons are emitted and absorbed," he said in a didactic tone, imagining that this obvious statement completely shattered her argument.

"Of course! But the connection is saved, now between other particles! Energy does not disappear anywhere, transforming to and from chemical, kinetic or thermal energy, right? Maybe there is a law of conservation of communication as universal as the law of conservation of energy in closed systems?"

"The speed of light..." he began.

"The speed of light has nothing to do with it!" she exclaimed. "Information is not transferred; the electron under your skin has nothing to reveal about photons emitted from the Andromeda galaxy. But the changing state of the particles is quite another..."

"You were talking about a seagull," he reminded her with a sigh. "Your thoughts are jumping around, you are getting absent-minded..."

"No, I'm not! The seagull is the result of evolution. The stone on the Tete's table, the engine under the Christmas tree – remember? Also the results of evolution. Evolution in the quantum world. Evolution of quantum particles spaced so far in space-time that no one has yet thought... and you do not want to think, you have just decided categorically that quantum physics is a mathematical fiction."

"Of course," he muttered in such a way so that she would not hear.

She didn't hear it. But she felt it.

"The steam locomotive under the tree," she said, "was the result of evolution. An electron from the Earth, an iron atom in Barnard's Star, another atom of the Horsehead Nebula, a photon of that beautiful nebula that is listed in the catalog under the Messier number fifty seven... these were related to one other even in those times when the primeval atom exploded. For millions and billions of years these particles have been looking for new relationships with one other. These relations arose and were inherited by other particles and photons – in a world about which your colleagues know nothing, and about which you do not want to know. Just as once inorganic matter of life originated in the ocean, so too these particles and photons from time to time produce something ordered: a fancy stone, a piece of metal looking like a human eye..."

"A steam locomotive," he added sarcastically, winking to her as he did many years ago when some thought seemed to him – not stupid, but, from the point of view of physics, funny.

"Of course," she nodded. "Also a locomotive. Because in the quantum world any process ends..."

She paused, waiting for him to continue the sentence. He always continued her thoughts once he understood the principle. This time he was silent, staring at her with curiosity.

"Observation," she sighed. "It ends in observation."

"Ah!" he exclaimed pathetically, waving his hands. "Of course. I recognize the voice of Erwin. If nobody looks at the monkey, then the monkey undertakes all that is physically possible: sleeping, eating a banana, jumping on a branch, itching, fighting... Only when we glimpse at the monkey, all cases but one disappear, and we see a monkey eating a banana.... That is why quantum physics does not reflect reality! Reality is one, and the equation of state is the set of solutions!"

"Your thoughts," she said accusingly, "are racing faster than that ship that..."

"Naturally! Evolution at the quantum level? The electron in my skin and the photon in the Andromeda galaxy? I have never heard anything more ridiculous..."

"The steam locomotive under Tete's Christmas tree..."

"You put it there! Admit it. Now you can admit it – so many years have passed."

"The stone looking like a bird, on his pillow... the stain on the tablecloth that emerged even though you did not take your eyes from the tablecloth... my glasses, the second pair, remember? Where did they come from, then, if I always had only one? Bizarre pebbles that Tete fetched from somewhere, often just out of the air.... Now he does it less, maybe because he is an adult, and the ability to stimulate evolutionary processes in the quantum world is more characteristic of children."

"I've never heard such..." he muttered. He did not finish the sentence, as he did not want to hurt her; he would not utter that certain word which she had always hated.

"Drivel. Of course. But you're not going to argue that none of this happened: a locomotive under the tree, stones in Tete's hand, a second pair of glasses..."

"You bought the steam locomotive," he said stubbornly. "Stones.... Well, you know as well as I do the ability of our Tete to carry home all manner of things." After a pause, he continued, "Look, I mean, you've always wanted... that is, you always had your ideas that I, in your opinion, neglected... but it's not, you know..."

"I know," she said bitterly. "Because you chose Elsa over me."

"Forget that," he interrupted. "Quantum evolution, you say? Suppose it's true. Observation completes this strange process? Assume that's the case. As you can see, today I am willing to accept any of your... uh... ideas. And the result of this evolution – Tete's stones, the engine under the Christmas tree? If one had not looked under the tree, the locomotive would not have been there?"

"If Tete had not wanted this toy.... If photons and particles have not completed this evolutionary process in his brain..."

"I'm sorry," he said, glancing at his watch, getting up and brushing off a speck of dust, invisible even to him, off his knee. "I have to go to the station. You know," he said, helping her up for the first time in many years, hugging her plump waist, "I got a lot out of our conversation today. Not what you probably expected, but I will think it over. May I accompany you?"

He hoped for a negative answer and got it. She shook her head and removed his hand from her waist.

"If you're so sure of the existence of quantum evolution and that this process ends in observation," he said with a slight sneer, "then why do not you create a stone like the one that Tete dragged home? Right here. In order that I could see it: you didn't bring any stone with you in the pocket of this loose dress. In physics, you know, everything is decided by experiment. Observation, yes. Few believed in general relativity until Sir

Eddington..."

"Tell Elsa hello," she said. "Farewell, Jochanzel."

"Farewell, Dokserl."

Long forgotten nicknames they had given each other... almost thirty years ago. They went in different directions and never turned around. Both were well aware that she would never see him again.

Mileva sighed and walked along the shore. She walked toward her tramp ... or professor? As he passed her, he lifted his hat, shook his gray mane, smiled and said, "Good day, Frau Einstein. All the best to you."

She stood under the bridge, looking at the water, at the seagulls, at the pleasure boat where music played softly. She stretched out her hand, palm up, and thought – and there appeared a seagull on her palm. A small stone one, with white speckles, spreading its wings, ready to fly. Heavy. Mileva lowered her hand, and the figure fell on the gravel track. The edge of its wing broke off.

"Jochanzel..." a gust of wind whispered.

## (الورقة البالية) Yasser Aboelhassab

وقف إبراهيم أمام ذلك البناء الحجري الصغير الذي اعتاد أن يأتي لزيارته منذ سنوات مضت، وقد تلالأت نجوم الذكريات في عقله، ودفعته به دفعا ليوغل في الماضي ... ذلك الماضي الذي لطالما أخفاه عن الناس، وحاول هباء أن يخفيه عن نفسه بالنسيان، فلم يستطع. بل كان - بغير ... قصد - يساعده على أن يملك عليه حياته يوما بعد يوم

جلس القرفصاء، بعد أن كَلَّت قدماه ... وأخرج من جيبه ورقة صغيرة ... نظر إليها وقرأها في عقله، أو قل: وقرأها عليه عقله ... إذ كانت هذه الورقة الصفراء بحروفها التي قاربت على التلاشي قد حُفرت في عقله ووجدانه بعد أن قرأها مئات المرات. ومع كل كلمة يقرأها .. يترأى له ...فصل من فصول ذلك الماضي المنبوذ

تتجسد في مخيلته تلك الحجرة الصغيرة، والتي كان يتخذها رفيق دربه، و صديق عمره مصطفى معملا صغيرا. يحاول من خلاله إشباع فضوله العلمي والذي - في تلك المرة - كان قد فاق كل الحدود

يرى مصطفى وهو يحاول جاهدا أن يشرح له قصة "قطة شرودنجر" وكيف حير العلماء أمرها .. ترنّ كلماته الآن في أذنيه وتتجلي بحيث يتذكرها تفصيلا، بل ويتذكر وجه مصطفى المجهد والمتصبب عرقا

- لقد حاول العالم شرودنجر أن يبرز غرابة ميكانيكا الكم في قطة محبوسة داخل قفص ومعها جزيئات لذرات مشعة، وعداد إشعاعي وغاز سام. عندما تتفكك ذرة من المادة المشعة يرصدها العداد فيقوم بإطلاق الغاز السام فيقتل القطة

• وصمت برهة ليتأكد من أن إبراهيم قد استساغ ما قال، ثم أردف

- ولكن حسب ميكانيكا الكم، فالحالة الذرية احتمالية يمكن أن يوجد في أكثر من حالة في نفس الوقت، وبالتالي فالذرة و صل تأثيرها!

• وهنا، لم يجد إبراهيم مفرا من أن يتدخل، فقال بصوت لا يخلو من السخرية

- حية وميتة؟! .. هذا آخر ما يمكن توقعه

وقبل أن يكمل إبراهيم جملته، ذهب مصطفى لمكتبه القابع في ركن المعمل، وجلب كتابين، وأعطى أحدهما لإبراهيم، وقال له: - اقرأ الفصل الرابع في هذا الكتاب وستجدني لا أهدي

- لقد قرأت من قبل عن الموضوع، ولكن هذا الهراء العلمي لا يناسبني إطلاقا. طالما لم يقم أحد بالتجربة، فلن أصدقها
- وهذا ما أتويه يا إبراهيم، انظر إلى ذلك الصندوق بجانب المكتب

فأدار رأسه نحو المكان الذي يشر إليه صديقه، وهو يحاول أن يستنبط شيئا، ونظره ما زال معلقا بصديقه لثوان قبل أن يستدير بنظره، فوجد ... صندوقا خشبيا مغلقا، فلم ينتظر كثيرا قبل أن يتكلم: - إياك حتى أن تفكر في

- إنه العلم يا صديقي! .. لقد أتيت بهذه القطة وهي مخدرة الآن، وما هي إلا ساعة حتى أبدأ تجربتي التي سأصنع بها تاريخا.. قال بعضهم إن الحالة الأخرى للقطة التي لم نرها تصل لعالم آخر مواز .. فنحن سنرى القطة حية، بينما ستعبر الحالة الميتة إلى ذلك العالم الآخر.

واستطرد: - لطالما ظن العلماء أن الخصائص الكمية للجزيئات، والتي تجعل الجزيئ موجودا وليس موجودا في نفس الوقت، لا يمكن أن تنطبق على الأجسام الكبيرة كالمقطط مثلا، ولكنني قد أستطيع أن أخيب كل ظنونهم تلك. سأثبت أن تلك الخصائص الكمية موجودة حتى للأجسام الكبيرة ولكن تحت شروط معينة لم يفتن إليها أحدهم!

وسكت مبتسما ابتسامه خفيفة متهيأ للكلمات تشجيع، ولكن أبي إبراهيم إلا أن يظهر خوفه: - وما ذنب تلك القطة المسكينة؟

• تنهد مصطفى، واختفت الإبتسامة من على وجهه واخذ يبلل شفثيه بلسانه، ثم قال

- !لن تكون القطة وحدها في هذه التجربة، بل ستكون مجرد بوابة تحملني معها إلى حيث تذهب

**!رد إبراهيم بسرعة خاطفة:- تبا! .. لقد أذهبت تلك التجارب ما تبقى من عقلك**

أكمل مصطفى، غير مكترث لما قيل ومشيرا لبعض الأسلاك متعددة الألوان بجوار الصندوق الموعود:- سأعرض هذه القطة لتلك الظروف، ..وبهذه الأسلاك سأستطيع أن أرى ما تراه هي

و صمت لبرهة ثم قال:- حرفيا، سأرى بعينها

وهنا بلغ الحنق بإبراهيم مبلغه، فحاول أن يجد كلمات يثني بها صاحبه عن فعلته، الذي يبدو من كلامه مدى عزيمة وتشبته بتجربته

- **!انظر إلى نفسك، هل تعني ما تقول .. لا .. لن أدعك تلقي بنفسك لهذا المجهول**
- انظر أنت إلى نفسك .. لقد انتظرت أعواما لأصل لتلك اللحظة، بل لقد انتظرها العالم عشرات السنين، وعندما أوشكت على الوصول لها، ها أنت تحاول إثنائي عن بلوغها

ساد صمت لثوان، قطعه إبراهيم وقد هدأ نسبيا واستسلم للأمر، وبدا أن مصطفى قد استثار حاسته الفضولية هو الآخر:- حسنا، سأكون موجودا معك

- سأكون سعيدا بذلك

وما هي إلا نصف الساعة، حتى انتهت جميع الإعدادات، وبدا لإبراهيم أنه قد أخطأ عندما سائر صديقه ووافق على أن يقوم بتجربته. ولكن ولى أوان الندم؛ إذ كان مصطفى جالسا على كرسيه، واضعا قبعة حديدية تشبه خوذة المحاربين على رأسه، تتدلى منها أسلاك لا حصر لأعدادها و لا لألوانها.. تتصل نهاياتها الأخرى بصندوق حديدي محبوسة بداخله القطة المسكينة

رأى إبراهيم صديقه وقد ازدادت أنفاسه تسارعا وغرق وجهه في محيط من العرق .. كان يمسح وجهه من حين لآخر بأكامه المتسخة، حاملا في يده ساعة رقمية، يبدو أنه يحسب بها الزمن المتبقي لتلك القطة على الإفافة

وفجأة، بدا مصطفى وكأنه تذكر شيئا ما، فأخرج من جيبه قلما وورقة وكتب فيها بعض الكلمات وطواها ووضعها في جيبه، ونظر لصديقه وحاول الابتسام ثم نظر لجيب قميصه حيث الورقة

.. بدأ صوت ضعيف يصدر من الصندوق

تزداد شدته لحظة بعض الأخرى ... وللحظات، حاولت شخصية مصطفى الحنونة أن تجعله يحن لذلك المواء البرئ الساذج ... ولكن شخصيته العلمية أرغمتها على التراجع

وفي لحظة .. في لا زمن .. أغمض مصطفى عينيه، وضغط على ذلك الزر الموجود على قبعته الحديدية

....للدقيقة، بدا وكأن شيئا لم يحدث .. فتنهد إبراهيم بارتياح، وقال في سعادة بالغة:- ألم أق-

لم يتم كلمته تلك حتى ارتفع صوت القطة بالمواء، وبدأ جسم مصطفى يرتجف بشدة .. فقام إبراهيم، محاولا الوصول لصديقه، وما أن وضع يده على القبعة الحديدية ليزيلها، حتى أرغمته حواسه برد فعل غريزي، على أن يقبضها فورا، فقد كانت حرارتها لا تحتمل

ظل إبراهيم مشوشا لدقيقة أخرى حاول فيها أن يجد حلا، ولكن خانة عقله .. فلم يستطع حتى أن يتحرك قيد أنملة من مكانه، متصلبا لا .. يحرك بصره عن صديقه المغلق العينين .. حتى كفت القطة عن المواء وهذا جسم مصطفى وسكن تماما

...وعاد الهدوء سائدا

تهاوى مشهد وجه صديقه الساكن الخالي من التعبير من عقل إبراهيم، وأعاده ذلك العقل مرة أخرى إلى تلك الورقة وذلك البناء الحجري الذي يجلس أمامه منذ ما يقارب الساعتين

وكانما حاول عقله الباطن أن يجعل ذلك الوعي يقفز في شريط ذكرياته الزماني لما بعد تلك اللحظات التي حاول فيها أن ينقذ صديقه آخذا إياه إلى المستشفى القريب .. فلم يلتقط عقله سوى تلك اللحظة التي وقعت فيها الورقة من جيب صديقه وهو يحمله، فحمله شعور داخلي بأن ينحني ليأخذها

أخذها، وما هو يمسكها بعد عقود أمام قبر صديقه القديم .. يقرأها ويتأمل تلك الحروف التي حفرت في عقله ... وبنهاية آخر كلماتها، يطويها ويضعها في جيبه عازما على إحراقها ... فقط عندما يعود لمنزله

لم تكن هناك سوى كلمات قليلة .. كلمات قليلة تأخذ دهرها لقراءتها، ودهورا لاستيعابها! فقط "لا تحزن علي، فأنا حيث لم يوجد بشري من عالمك .. لطالما ذهبت إلى هناك .. ولكنني أردت أن يكون ذهابي الأخير وأنت بجواري"

Ibrahim stopped before those small stone buildings which he used to visit years ago, and the stars of his memories twinkled in his mind. They caused him to dive into the past... that past which he hid from people. He tried unsuccessfully to hide from himself, and had unintentionally helped it control his daily life.

He squatted, his feet tired, and took a small piece of paper from his pocket. He looked at it and read it to himself, that yellow piece of paper with its letters that had nearly vanished was etched into his mind after he had read it hundreds of times. With each word he read it showed him one a chapter from that forsaken past.

That small room took shape in his imagination, which his companion and old friend Mustafa took as a workshop. There he endeavoured to satisfy his scientific curiosity, which at that time knew no limits.

He sees Mustafa, who is trying very hard to explain to him the story of Schroedinger's cat and how it mystifies scientists. The words now ring in his ears and manifest so that he remembers them in detail as he remembers Mustafa's exhausted face dripping with sweat.

"The scientist Schroedinger tried to highlight the strangeness of Quantum Mechanics with a cat locked in a box with radioactive particles and a geiger counter. When an atom breaks away from the radioactive material, the geiger counter observes it and releases poison gas, killing the cat."

He was silent for a moment to make sure that Ibrahim had taken in what he said, then continued, "But according to Quantum Mechanics, an atom may exist in more than one state at the same time, and therefore it may both arrive and not arrive at the geiger counter at the same time. You could immediately predict the result that the cat will be both alive and dead at the same time."

Here Ibrahim could not help but interject, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "Alive \*and\* dead?! This is the last thing you might predict."

Before Ibrahim had finished his sentence, Mustafa went to his solitary desk in the corner of the workshop and pulled out two books. He gave one of the two to Ibrahim, and said to him, "Read the fourth chapter in this book, and you will find that I am not just rambling."

"I have read about the subject before, but this scientific prattle is completely unsubstantiated to me. As long as no one has tested it, I will never believe it."

"This is what I am getting at, Ibrahim. Look at the box beside the desk."

Ibrahim turned his head toward the place where his friend had pointed, his gaze remaining on his friend for a few seconds, before his eyes shifted to a closed wooden box. He did not wait long before speaking. "Take care not to think-"

"It is science, my friend! I have brought this cat, currently anaesthetized, and it will be a mere hour before I begin my experiment with which I will make history. Some have said that the other state of the cat which we haven't seen is that it goes to a parallel universe, its dead state passing over into that other universe."

He went on, saying, "For long scientists have believed that the quantum characteristics of molecules, which can place a molecule there and not there at the same time, cannot be applied to large bodies - like cats, for example. I may, however, be able to counter that belief of theirs. I will prove that those quantum characteristics are found

even in large bodies - under specific conditions of which not one of them is aware."

He became silent, smiling lightly and ready for encouraging words. Ibrahim refused to express anything other than his concern. "And what did the cat do to deserve this?"

Mustafa stood up, and his smile disappeared from his face. He licked his lips, then said, "The cat will not be alone in this experiment. It will merely act as a portal to carry me with it to where it goes!"

Ibrahim responded quickly, "Has this experiment has robbed you of common sense?!"

Mustafa went on, uninterested in what Ibrahim said. He indicated some multi-colored wires beside the appointed box. "I will introduce this cat to these conditions, and with these wires I will try to see what it sees."

He was quiet for a moment, then said, "Literally, I will see with its eyes."

Exasperation peaked in Ibrahim, who tried to find words to dissuade Mustafa from the experiment, but the extent of Mustafa's attachment to and determination to carry it out were evident in his words.

"Look at yourself. Do you mean to say... no, I will not let you subject yourself to this madness!"

"You look at yourself. I have waited years to reach this moment, but the world has waited for it for decades. Here you are trying to turn me away from it when I am on the verge of attaining it."

There were a few seconds of silence, which Ibrahim finally interrupted. He had calmed down somewhat, and conceded the matter. It seemed as if Mustafa's inquisitive nature had stirred up his own. "Very well, I will be here with you."

"I will be happy to have you here."

Not half an hour had passed before all the preparations were completed, although it felt to Ibrahim that he had made a mistake when he agreed to undertake his friend's experiment with him. The time for regret was over, however. Mustafa was sitting in his chair, wearing an iron cap that looked like a warrior's helmet on his head. Innumerable variously-colored wires hung from it, extending to an iron box with the poor cat locked up inside.

Ibrahim saw his friend's breathing increase in tempo, his face drenched in sweat. Mustafa was wiping his face from time to time with his filthy sleeve, holding a digital clock in his hand. He seemed to be counting down the time remaining for the cat to awaken.

Suddenly, as if he had just remembered something, Mustafa pulled a pen and paper from his pocket and wrote some words on it. He folded it up, put it in his pocket, and then looked at his friend Ibrahim. He gave a weak smile, then looked at the pocket of his shirt where the paper was.

A weak sound began to emanate from the box. It increased in intensity as the moments past, and for a moment Mustafa's compassionate side tried to make him feel pity at the sound of the innocent meow. His scientific personality however chased the feeling away.

A moment later Mustafa closed his eyes, and pressed a button on his metal cap.

For a minute it seemed as if nothing had happened. Ibrahim signed with relief, and said happily, "Didn't I sa -"

He didn't finish the sentence, interrupted by the cat's voice raised in a meow. Mustafa's

body began to shake intensely. Ibrahim tried to help his friend, but no sooner had he placed his hand on the metal cap to remove it than he was forced to pull it back, his instincts reacting immediately on touching it. Its heat was unbearable.

Ibrahim stood in a stupor for another minute as he tried to find a solution, but his mind betrayed him and he was unable to budge from his place. He stayed rigid, his gaze not leaving his close-eyed friend until the cat stopped meowing. Mustafa's body stopped shaking and became completely still.

A calm settled over the workshop.

The vision of his friend's face fell away from the manifestation of Ibrahim's mind, and his thoughts turned once again to the paper and the stone building in front of which he had sat for nearly two hours.

As if his inner consciousness jumped past the film of his memories, past the aftermath of those moments in which he tried to save his friend, taking him to the nearby hospital. He could picture nothing other than that moment in which the paper fell from his friend's pocket, an internal urge making him pick it up.

He took it, and held it decades later before the grave of his old friend. He read it and considered those letters which had been etched in his mind. After he read the last of its words, he folded it and put it in his pocket, determined to burn it when he returned home.

There was nothing written on it but a few words... a few words that took a lifetime to read and longer to comprehend. All that was written on it read "Do not grieve for me, as I am where no human from your world is. I have gone there often, but I wanted you beside me for my last departure."



## South Africa

### Dennis Lane Crime Scene

*I sit and watch as the police photographer records all of the gruesome details of the crime scene. There's something unreal about it all, I guess that watching one 'true life' show after another, detailing the work of homicide detectives, has taken away some of the mystery.*

*The object of all the attention is a headless corpse. No, scratch that, it's a corpse in two pieces. The body is sprawled on its front over a small coffee table, a thick goo of half congealed blood hanging like a tiny red stalactite from the ragged terminus of the neck. The head is a few feet away, staring accusingly at me across a scarlet pool that has turned the carpet into a squelching mess.*

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*Two hours later and the photos have been taken and the white-suited photographer has left; leaving the rest of the forensic team to get started on their work. "See here Pennywright," explains the young man in the leather jacket as he points with a pencil. "The killer cut into the brain with something. I'm guessing that the victim was fitted with a BrainSave device."*

*"But what's the point of stealing that?" asks Pennywright. "The backup node shares data with more permanent storage every night when the owner's asleep. The victim, err, Tony Basalgest, will be able to be loaded into a clone replacement and no more than a day of memories will be lost."*

*"That's true, but who knows what he witnessed on that final day? I know that, technically, the killer can only be charged with grievous bodily harm if the victim is backed up, along with a number of financial crimes related to the cost of growing a replacement body. But the punishments are harsh enough that whatever Mr. Basalgest witnessed must have been pretty serious."*

*"Well," shrugs Pennywright, "for now we need to treat the scene just like any other murder. We can talk to the backup in a couple of months when he's decanted, but, right now, we need to keep on the trail while it's hot."*

*"Yes, you're right," agrees Johnson. "Have you found anything of use in Central Records?"*

*Pennywright pulls out his tablet and reads off what he has learned. "Tony Michael Basalgest, age forty two, single. Senior researcher with Avalon Industries... I can't find details of his work, apparently that is 'corporate sensitive information'. Whatever he does... err... did, he was well paid, just take a look at his clothes. According to the front desk, Basalgest didn't have a reservation, he just turned up last night and paid cash. He was alone and the only luggage that he had was a briefcase, which isn't here by the way."*

*"Hmm, not much to distinguish him from thousands of other management types in*

hotel rooms all over the city."

The police, as usual, are concentrating too much on the crime scene and not moving quickly enough onto motive. They are losing valuable time. I want to tell them that they should get on to Avalon Industries right away and see if anyone else on their research staff is missing. But no one is asking for my opinion.

The two detectives move in an ever-widening spiral, centred on the bloody torso. They inspect and prod, they bag a variety of items that may be of use, but they don't come even close to uncovering anything that could be construed as a lead. All they have is a headless corpse with its BrainSave node removed. Eventually, they pack up their instruments and their little baggies of evidence and leave the room.

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That afternoon, after going door to door in the hotel and talking to any potential witnesses, the investigators are back, poking around to see if they've missed anything. Which, of course they have. Johnson's tablet rings and he takes the call. "Yes? When did this happen? And there's no chance of recovery? OK... thanks." Johnson turns to Pennywright, "It looks like this is a murder after all. As you know, Tony Basalgest was a senior researcher at Avalon Industries, he was working on emergency backup on the fly. Apparently his work has been stolen and his backup copy on the Avalon servers has been deleted. The Lieutenant has sent Rayton to Basalgest's house, but I'm betting that his BrainSave backup device there is also either gone or wiped. Someone somewhere didn't want this man's story out in the open."

Pennywright nods, "And they seem to be pretty good, it looks like all of the loose ends have been tied up. We may never know what really happened to him..."

'Look you idiots!' I scream silently to myself. 'It's bloody obvious! Why not make yourself a coffee, sit down and THINK! Why not heat up a snack from the minibar? That would up your blood sugar and help you to THINK! Just bloody THINK!' Treated as no more than fixtures and fittings, what I was hoping for doesn't materialise, the detectives pack up their things and leave.

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Over the next few days, every scrap of evidence that the police could find is collected. Unable to look beyond the obvious, they miss the most important item of course. Finally the cleanup team arrive to rip out the bloody carpets and bring the hotel room back up to occupancy status. On the one hand I can see that this is a good thing, more people will be passing through the room. On the other, I am still trapped...

Now; if I can only get someone to change the options on this microwave's display, I might be able to explain to them how I came to be backed up in its recipe bank.

## Pranav Ganapathiraju पहली सफ़र

नमस्कार। मैं “वी.पी.” कहलाता हूँ। अभी २०१३ ई. की तीसरी चौथाई है। मैं रॉकहॉप्पर कॉर्पोरेशन का एक कर्मचारी, और रॉकहॉप्पर फ़ाउंडेशन का एक बेजा सदस्य हूँ। रॉकहॉप्पर कॉर्पोरेशन कई प्रकार के हैंडहेल्ड पी.सी., डेस्कटॉप पी.सी., और उनके उपसाधन बनाता है। दूसरी ओर, रॉकहॉप्पर फ़ाउंडेशन एक गुप्त वैश्विक अतिमानवीय मानवपारवादियों का संगठन है, जिनमें से कई व्यक्ति रॉकहॉप्पर कॉर्पोरेशन के कर्मचारी नहीं भी हैं।

अब मैं तैयार हो रहा हूँ मेरे पहले अध्ययन-सफ़र के लिए। यह मुझे सौंपा गया, रॉकहॉप्पर के इमारतों के बहार का, पहला काम होगा। इस अध्ययन-यात्रा का नाम है “२०१३-एन.एस. इंडिया यति”

रॉकहॉप्पर फ़ाउंडेशन को २००७ ई. में एक कैनडा-वासी ने स्थापित किया था, जो “पेशेंट-ज़ीरो डर्डन-नीमो” कहलाता है, अपने माँ और भाइयों के साथ। दूसरी ओर, रॉकहॉप्पर कॉर्पोरेशन को २०११ ई. में एक फ़िन्लैंड-वासी सदस्य ने स्थापित किया था। डर्डन के वजह से ही हम रॉकहॉप्पर के सदस्य अतिमानवीय हैं। वह अपनी अतिमानवीय अवस्था को “आखरी विश्वरोग” कहता है, और हमको इस रोग के “वेक्टर्स” लेकिन, मुझे यह समझ नहीं आता कि उसने संगठन को एक पेंगुइन के जाति का नाम क्यों दिया।

सचमुच, हमें अपनी अतिमानवीय शक्तियां डर्डन के शरीर में पाए जाने वाले सूक्ष्मजीवों से मिलती हैं, और वही इस अवस्था का प्रथम रोगी है। डर्डन के तरह, सब वेक्टर्स आम मानव से ज्यादा शक्तिशाली, ज्यादा चुस्त, ज्यादा वेग, ज्यादा मज़बूत हैं; और हमारी इन्द्रियां ज्यादा तेज़। हमारे शरीरों में किसी प्रकार की प्रकाश-संश्लेषण भी होती है।

इन क्षमताओं के बावजूद, हम मानवजाति के उपकरणों के सामने कुछ नहीं। न ही हम गोलियों से तेज़ हैं, न हमारी त्वचा में उन्हें रोकने की क्षमता। हम उड़ नहीं सकते, हालांकि हम खूदके लम्बे फ़ासला तय कर सकते हैं। हम न इमारत उठा सकते हैं, न पहाड़ तोड़ सकते हैं। हमारे शरीरों में हो रही प्रकाश-संश्लेषण के बावजूद हम ज्यादा देर तक सांस नहीं रोक सकते हैं। और इस प्रकाश-संश्लेषण की वजह से, हमें अंधेरे में ज्यादा देर रहने पर अत्याधिक भूख लगती है। हम डर्डन के तरह ई-आर ब्रिड्ज भी नहीं खोल सकते हैं।

हमें बेहतर सुसज्जित करने के लिए, हमारे पास हैं सेंटिनल सूट्स रॉकहॉप्पर सदस्यों की कई परियोजनाओं में से एक, यह कोयले-से-कले कवच-वाले संचालित बहिःकंकाल हैं, जो हमारे तन्त्रिका-तन्त्र से जुड़ते हैं। यह एक तरह के कृत्रिम सहजीवी प्राणी हैं, जिन्हें डर्डन के शरीर-रचना के आधार पर बनाया गया है। हमारे मौजूदा अतिमानवीय क्षमताओं को बढ़ाने और हमारे शरीरों की रक्षा करने के अतिरिक्त, यह सूट्स हमें पृथ्वी की चुम्बकीय क्षेत्र में कहीं भी उड़ने की और नज़दीकी वस्तुओं को हिलाने की क्षमता देते हैं। इन्हें पहनकर, हम उड़ते हुए अजय देवता बन जाते हैं। मगर, शुक्र है कि हमें इस बात का सही में एहसास नहीं है।

मैं अपना सूट पहनने चला, इस सफ़र कि तैयारी में। हर बार की तरह, मुझे लगता है कि मैं एक विशाल तिलचट्टे की लाश पहन रहा हूँ। एक तेल-जैसा चिकना पदार्थ रसता है, इस कवच के अंदर के मांसपेशियों से, मेरे त्वचा पर। मेरे इस सफ़र पर जाने कि चिंता में, यह अनुभव और भी बुरा है।

मैं और सोचने लगता हूँ रॉकहॉप्पर के शुरुआत के बारे में। रॉकहॉप्पर के दस हज़ार सदस्यों में ऐसे लोग भी हैं जिन्हें अपनी परोपकारी स्वभाव या विशेष योग्यताओं के लिए नहीं चुने गए। मैं इनमें से एक हूँ - एक निंदक जिसे किसी भी कार्य की प्रतिभा नहीं है। मुझे इस संगठन का सदस्य बनाया गया था क्योंकि मैंने गलती से एक ऐसा यन्त्र बनादिया जिससे हम अपने अतीत को संदेश भेज सकते हैं। मैं इसे “पाई-पाई-स्निच” कहता हूँ। मेरे लिए यह शर्म की बात है, कि मैं अब तक न इसकी भीतरी क्रियाओं को समझ पाया हूँ, न इसका निर्माण दोहरा पाया हूँ। इस पर अब तक मुझे दूर भविष्य से एक ही संदेश मिला है। वह संदेश था मेरे रॉकहॉप्पर में भर्ती होने के बारे में। सांयोगिक बात है कि तब मेरा जन्मदिन था। और भी सांयोग की बात है कि मेरे जन्मदिन पर साल का महा विषुव पड़ा था।

सूट का निचला हिस्सा पहनने के बाद, मैं अपना हेलमेट पहनता हूँ। शुक्र है कि हेलमेट में कोई मांसपेशियां नहीं हैं। यह बस मुझे अपने सूट की स्थिति बताता है, मुझे फ़ोन-कॉल करने देता है, और हर हेलमेट कि तरह मेरे सिर की रक्षा करता है।

मैं अपने हैंडी और पाई को हेलमेट से जोड़ता हूँ और स्विच खोलता हूँ। कुछ पल के लिए मुझे गर्व महसूस होता है

हेलमेट के बनावट में मेरे दो योगदान पर। ये थे अल्ट्रासॉनिक लाउडस्पीकर एक दूसरों को “सीटी” के द्वारा संदेश भेजने के लिए, और बिनतारी परिपथ के बजाय हैंडी को हेलमेट से तार के द्वारा जोड़ना का सुझाव।

वक्त देखकर मैं आखिरकार इस सफ़र का पत्रसार पढ़ने का निश्चय करता हूँ। लिखा है कि मुझे पेशेंट-ज़ीरो डर्डेन-नीमो और उनकी पत्नी, वेक्टर गोलेम-निप्पॉन, का साथ देना है एक यति के खोज में, आज रात में कभी। क्योंकि मुझे लम्बे पाठ पढ़ने से नफ़रत है, मैं बस यति के रूपरेखा पढ़ता हूँ। यह एक गोरिल्ला जैसा लगता है - १.६ मीटर लंबा, ८० किलोग्राम का वज़न, २ मीटर की पहुँच, और पूरे बदन पर काले बाल।

इसके अलावा, लिखा है कि यह यति एक सेंटिनल सूट पहना हुआ है। मेरी इस सफ़र की चिंता अब बन गयी है आतंक उन चीज़ों की जो रात में कड़कड़ाते और सरसराते हैं। मुझे यह अहसास होता है कि हम लड़ाख इसलिए नहीं जा रहे हैं कि किसी यति का अध्ययन करें। बल्कि, हम जा रहे हैं अंधेरी रात में, पृथ्वी के उच्चतम पहाड़ों के ठंड में, एक जन्तु का शिकार करने जो किसी रॉकहॉप्पर के अड्डे से भाग निकला है। और यही नहीं, यह किसी रॉकहॉप्पर सदस्य का निर्मित महाशक्तिशाली प्राणी है, जो हम वेक्टरस के तरह एक सेंटिनल सूट के द्वारा प्रवर्धित है। अगर हम देवता हैं, तो यह यति शायद असुर।

मुझे अपने नेता के मानसिक क्षमताओं पर शक है, कि उसने मुझे इस सफ़र के लिया चुना। मैं अतिमानव तो हूँ, पर मैं किसी अति-यति से नहीं लड़ सकता!

मैं कमरे से बहार निकलता हूँ, काँपते हुए, डर्डेन से इस बारे में बात करने। इससे पहले कि मेरे मुँह से एक भी शब्द निकले, वह घोषणा करता है, “आखिर तुम निकल आये। चलो, चलते हैं। ब्रिड्ज खोल रहा हूँ लक्ष्य के १ किलोमीटर ऊपर। गिरते समय खुद को संभालना।”

पूरी तरह चौंककर, मैं बस इतना कह पता हूँ, “क्या?!”  
उर से चिल्लते हुए, मैं ई-आर ब्रिड्ज के पार गिरता हूँ। एक पल बाद, मैं बर्फ पर खड़ा हूँ: मेरा दिल धड़कता हुआ, पर बदन ज्यों का त्यों; और डर्डेन की हंसी सुनते हुए। मैं बस १ मीटर की ऊंचाई से गिरा था।

मेरी चैन तुरंत फिर टूट जाती है, जब मैं यति को दूरी में देखता हूँ। वह अँधेरा रूप, मेरे जितना लंबा, केवल उसका उठा सिर चाँद की रोशनी में चमकता हुआ, वहाँ खड़ा है अपने चार बांहों पर। हमें देखकर वह हमारी ओर चलने लगता है।

क्षणभर के लिए मैं खड़ा रहता हूँ, अंग स्तंभित, उदर जकड़ा हुआ, गला सूखा, और मन रुका हुआ। फिर, होश में आकर, मैं यति की ओर झपटता हूँ, उसकी शकल को बेशक बनाने। अगले क्षण, मेरा चेहरा जमीन को चूम रहा है, गोलेम कि बदौलत; और डर्डेन मुझपर चिल्ला रहा है।

मुझे पलटकर और हेलमेट का वाइज़र खोलकर, डर्डेन मुझे घूरता है। थोड़ी देर बाद, मेरे बर्ताव से नाराज़ और मनोरंजित, वह मुझसे कहता है, “गधा है तू, गधा। पत्रसार को तुम पढ़े नहीं होगे, है न? यह हैं पेशेंट-ज़ीरो येटी-नीमो यह गोरिल्ला सेपियन्स जाति की पहली हैं। यह अपनी अध्ययन-यात्रा पर थीं; और हम यहाँ इन्हे वापस ले जाने आये हैं। इनसे क्षमा मांगो, और नमस्कार करो।”

आखिरकार, डर्डेन की कही गयी एक पुरानी बात समझ में आती है, “रॉकहॉप्पर में कई अमानुषी व्यक्ति हैं।” मेरे पहले अध्ययन-यात्रा पर मेरी एक व्यक्ति से पहली मुलाकात हुई है, और मैंने उनको मार डालने की कोशिश की। मैंने खुद की सम्पूर्ण बदनामी करली है।

अभी भी बर्फ में शक्तिहीन पड़ा हुआ, मैं अपनी सूट की सीटी के द्वारा उनसे क्षमा-प्रार्थना करता हूँ। वे अभिवादन का इशारा करती हैं, और मैं उत्तर में दुर्बल सा इशारा करता हूँ। वह डर्डेन और गोलेम से इशारा करती हैं, शायद किसी सांकेतिक भाषा में। डर्डेन उत्तर में कुछ इशारा करता है, और मुड़कर वापस घर जाने के लिए ई-आर ब्रिड्ज खोलता है।

खड़े होकर, एक शराबी के तरह ब्रिड्ज पार करता हूँ। लड़खड़ाते हुए, मैं सूट के गोदाम तक पहुँचता हूँ। अपने हैंडी में नोट लिखता हूँ सांकेतिक भाषा सीखने और रॉकहॉप्पर के सदस्यों के बारे में पढ़ने के बारे में।

तभी, मेरे पाई पर एक संदेश दिखता है, जिसमें लिखा है, “नमस्ते, फिर से। आज तुम येटी से मिले थे। अब इंतजार करो अगले संदेश के लिए, जो तुम्हे बतायेगा इस पाई-पाई-स्निच के निर्माण के बारे में। वह तुम्हे तुम्हारे अगले जन्मदिन के बाद मिलेगा।”

मैं हूँ वेक्टर वीपी-भारत; मैं रॉकहॉप्पर का अकेला भारतीय सदस्य हूँ; और आज के घटनाओं से मेरा भेजा फ़्राई हो गया है। मैं पड़ता हूँ फ़र्श पर, अपना सेंटिनल सूट अभी भी पहना हुआ, यह आशा रखकर कि अगला सफ़र इतना सनकी न हो।

## Pranav Ganapathiraju My First Field Trip

Greetings. I am called the “VP” by friends, and it is the third quarter of 2013 CE. I am an employee of Rockhopper Corporation, and an ill-fitting member of the Rockhopper Foundation. Rockhopper Corporation makes and sells handheld PC's, desktop PC's, and associated accessories. The Rockhopper Foundation is a secret global movement of superhuman transhumanists, consisting of employees of Rockhopper Corporation among others.

I prepare now for my first “field trip”, that is, my first assignment of activities outside any of Rockhopper's buildings. The “trip plan” for this field trip is titled “2013-NS India Yeti”.

The Rockhopper Foundation was founded by a Canadian who calls himself “Patient-Zero Durden-Nemo”, with his mother and brothers, in 2007 CE. Rockhopper Corporation was founded by a Finnish member in 2011 CE, though. Durden is the reason we in Rockhopper are superhuman. He calls his condition of being superhuman “the last plague”, and the rest of us the “vectors” for this disease. Why he named the organisation after a species of penguin baffles me, though.

Truly enough, we get our superhuman abilities from the symbiotic micro-organisms in his body, and he appears to be the index case for the condition caused by them. Like Durden, all vectors possess greater strength, agility, stamina, endurance, resistance to force, and sharper senses than an average human. We also perform photosynthesis of some sort.

Despite all of these abilities, we have a noticeable disadvantage against the tools of men. Neither are we fast enough to dodge bullets, nor is our skin tough enough to resist them. We can't fly or levitate, though we can jump over considerable distances. We are not strong enough to lift skyscrapers or carve mountains. We can't hold our breath for very long despite being able to photosynthesise water and carbon dioxide into sugars. And as a consequence of performing photosynthesis, we feel starved if we remain out of the sun for longer than a day. We also cannot open E-R Bridges like Durden can.

To make us better equipped, we have the Sentinel Suits. One of the many projects taken up by Rockhopper members over the years, these are pitch-black armour-plated powered exoskeletons, interfaced to our nervous systems. In addition to greatly amplifying our existing superhuman abilities, the Suits also allow us to levitate and fly anywhere within the Earth's magnetosphere, and to levitate nearby objects. Wearing these, we become invincible flying gods, like in the comic books. But, as is said of Superman, it is thankful that we don't truly realise this.

I begin to put my Suit on, in preparation for my field trip. As ever, it feels like putting on the corpse of a giant cockroach. A greasy substance oozes out of the synthetic muscles on the inside of the armour-plating, onto my skin. My anxiety about the trip doesn't help.

My thoughts continue to drift through the origins of Rockhopper. Not all of the ten thousand members of Rockhopper were recruited because of their supreme altruistic intentions or genius work in applied sciences. I am one of these exceptional few – the bitter cynics with no real expertise in anything. I was recruited because I accidentally

invented a device which allows one send messages to one's past self. I call it the "Pi-Py-Snitch". I have not been able to understand it or replicate it, much to my shame. I have only received one message from the far future on it. It told me about my recruitment by Rockhopper. Coincidentally, it was on my last birthday; which is, coincidentally, on the day of the Northward Equinox. But, who knows? Maybe, one day, we'll catch up to the future.

Having put on the body-armour part of my Suit, I proceed to put on my helmet. Thankfully, the helmet doesn't have any oozing synthetic muscles built into it. It only provides me with a visual of the Suit's status, lets me place phone calls, and protects my head like any helmet is meant to.

I connect my handy and my Pi to my helmet and turn it on. I briefly feel pride for the two ideas of mine which were included in its design. My ideas were an ultrasonic speaker, allowing us to "whistle" messages to each other; and a simple cable to connect a handy to the helmet, instead of a wireless connection.

Since we don't seem to be pressed for time on this field trip, I decide to finally read up on the trip plan. It states that I am to accompany Patient-Zero Durden-Nemo, and his wife Vector Golem-Nippon, to recover a Yeti, sometime later in the night. I skip to the part with the profile on the Yeti because of my dislike for long bodies of text. It seems to be gorilla-like, 1.6 m tall, weighing 80 kg, with a 2.0 m arm-span, and black hair.

In addition, the Yeti is described as wearing a Sentinel Suit. My all too human anxiety of new activities turns into an all too human terror of things that murmur in the night. I realize that we are not going on a trip to investigate a Yeti sighting in the mountains of Ladakh. But, rather, that we are going in the darkness of the night, to the cold of the highest mountains in the world, to hunt down a creature that escaped from some Rockhopper base. Moreover, it was likely created by someone in Rockhopper, was engineered to have superpowers, and is enhanced with a Sentinel Suit like us vectors. This Yeti, or whatever it is, could very well be the Bizarro to our Superman.

I now seriously doubt the sanity of our leader in his decision to assign me this field trip. I might be superhuman; but, I can't fight a super-Yeti!

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I walk back out of the room, trembling slightly, to discuss this with Durden. But, before I can say anything, he announces, "Finally, you're ready. Now, prepare for the drop. Bridge to one kilometer above destination. Brace yourself!"

Caught completely off guard, I can only exclaim, "Wait, what?!"

I fall across the E-R Bridge he just opened, with my heart in my mouth. Not a second later, I find myself standing on soft snow-covered ground, in cold sweat, but still intact, hearing Durden's laughter. It was only a drop of one metre.

But, my relief is cut short immediately when I see the Yeti in the distance. The dark figure, as tall as me, with its head raised and the moon's glint on its visor, stands on all fours at a distance. It notices us and begins walking towards us.

For an instant I find my limbs paralysed, my gut burning, my mind stopped, and my throat parched. Then, I snap to my senses, and pounce at the Yeti, intent on punching through its visor and crushing its face in. Yet another instant later, I find myself slammed

face-first into the mountain-side by Golem, with Durden shouting something that vaguely sounds like words.

Turning me over, Durden opens my visor and stares into my eyes for a few seconds. He then says to me, both amused and annoyed, "You are a moron, you are. You didn't read the trip plan, did you? This is Patient-Zero Yeti-Nemo. She is the first of the species 'Gorilla sapiens'. She was here on her own field trip, and we were to be her escort back. Say 'sorry, and say 'hi.'"

I finally understand what Durden meant when he once said, "There are also many non-human persons who are members of Rockhopper." It's my first field trip, my first meeting Yeti, and I tried to kill her. This is beyond shameful.

I whistle an apology to her through my Suit, still lying limp in the snow. She waves at me, and I wave back weakly. She signs something, possibly in ASL, to Durden and Golem. Durden signs something in reply, and turns to open an E-R Bridge back towards home.

I stand up groggily, and make my way across the Bridge. I crawl into the storage room for the Suits. I make a note on my handy to start learning ASL and to read up on the profiles of prominent Rockhopper members.

I then notice a message received on my Pi, saying, "Hello, again. You met Yeti today. Now, just wait for the next message, which will tell you how to replicate the functions of the Pi-Py-Snitch. Expect it sometime after your next birthday."

Still wearing my Sentinel Suit, I collapse to the floor, much too exhausted to comprehend the day's experiences.

Arvind Mishra मोहभंग

भारत-चान्द्र एअर बस सेवा की उस उड़ान में मून टाइम्स का वेब पत्रकार निपुण भी था। "आप चन्द्रलोक पहुँच चुके हैं और जल्दी ही प्रोफेसर सुरेन्द्र कुमार के एपार्टमेंट तक पहुँच जायेंगे" एअर बस का प्रसारण मानीटर जो ठीक निपुण के सामने वाली सीट के पीछे लगा था, पल-पल की जानकारियाँ दे रहा था। भारतीय युवा पत्रकार निपुण जाने-माने अन्तरिक्ष तकनीकी विद प्रोफेसर सुरेन्द्र कुमार पर एक व्यक्ति चित्र बनाने की मुहिम पर था और विजियोफोन पर लगातार बड़बड़ाये जा रहा था। "मैं जानता हूँ कि दूसरे सह यात्रियों को भी उनके गन्तव्यों की जानकारी इसी भाँति मिल रही होगी, मेरा उनमें से किसी से परिचय नहीं है, वे हैं भी तो बस गिनती के, न तो उनमें से ही किसी ने मुझसे परिचय करने की पहल दिखाई है और न ही मेरे मन में कोई ऐसी ललक है कि मैं सहयात्रियों के बारे में जानूँ; ... .. बस कुछ सेकेण्ड्स में ही सब अपने अपने गन्तव्य पर होंगे ... .. फिर किसी से जान पहचान का कोई मतलब भी नहीं है, वैसे अन्तर्राष्ट्रीय अन्तरिक्ष स्टेशन 2047 से उड़ते वक्त और चन्द्रमा तक आ पहुँचने के कुछ घण्टों के दौरान भी हमारे बीच अपरिचय का फासला बना ही रहा है ... .. हम सभी अब ऐसे ही हो गये हैं न किसी से किसी का कोई वास्ता रह गया है और न ही कोई मतलब, परले दर्जे के आत्मकेन्द्रित लोग हो गये हैं हम सभी ... .." विजियोफोन निपुण के सामने वाली सीट के पृष्ठ भाग में एअर बस के दिशा और स्थान सूचक मानीटर के ठीक नीचे लगा था, जिसे सुविधानुसार आगे पीछे किया जा सकता था- निपुण ने उसे अपने मुँह के समीप खींच लिया था। विजियोफोन पर उसकी बड़बड़ाहट का एक एक शब्द और उसके चेहरे की भाव भंगिमा धरती पर 'मून टाइम्स' तक तत्क्षण रिले हो रही थी। प्रोफेसर सुरेन्द्र कुमार उन चन्द्र नामी गिरामी तकनीकी विदों में थे जिन्हें धरती के अपने बहुत सफल कैरियर के बाद चन्द्रमा पर भी एक अच्छी खासी सैलरी के एवज में बुलाया गया था ... .. धरती से चन्द्रमा पर पहुँचे लोगों की संख्या अब काफी हो गयी थी ... .. तकरीबन दस हजार और करीब पैंतीस स्क्वायर मीटर का पूरा चन्द्र क्षेत्र जो अपोलो 16 के अवतरण स्थल के इर्दगिर्द था, धरतीवासियों के लिए एक विशाल वृत्ताकार कृत्रिम पर्यावास में बदला जा चुका था, जिसका बाहरी चान्द्र वातावरण से अब कोई सीधा सम्बन्ध नहीं रह गया था- एक बहुत ही मजबूत नये मिश्रित धातु आर0एस0 डब्ल्यू0एम0 (रिइन्फोर्स्ड स्पाइडर वेब मैटेरियल) के 'सेन्ट्रल पिलर' जिसका अकेले ही व्यास दो कि0मी0 का रहा होगा पर धरतीवासियों का यह पर्यावास टिका हुआ था ... .. टिका का क्या था अपनी धुरी पर घूम रहा था, अनवरत लगातार ... .. ताकि 'पर्यावासियों' की

सुविधा के लिए आवश्यक गुरुत्व उत्पन्न हो सके। धरती के वेब समाचार पत्र 'मून टाइम्स' के पत्रकार निपुण की एयर बस इसी घुमन्तू पर्यावास के दक्षिणी बुर्ज के एक निश्चित प्रवेश द्वार से जुड़ने वाली थी ... .. बस कुछ सेकेण्ड्स का फासला शेष था... .. वेब पत्रकारों को प्रायः ऐसे एसाइनमेंट मिलते रहते थे और प्रोफेसर सुरेन्द्र कुमार भी कोई ऐरे गैरे व्यक्ति भी नहीं थे, चन्द्र पर्यावास की डिजाइनिंग, स्थापना और आटोमेशन के सारे ताम-झाम को उन्होंने ही तो अंजाम दिया था, या यू; कहें कि उनका इस परियोजना में एक बड़ा रोल था। निपुण को उनका इण्टरव्यू लेकर धरती पर भेज देना था। सजीव प्रसारण की अनुमति खुद प्रोफेसर द्वारा न दिये जाने से रिकाडेड इण्टरव्यू ही 'मून टाइम्स' को भेजा जाना था और वह भी प्रोफेसर सुरेन्द्र द्वारा देख लेने और एडिट करने के बाद ... .. इक्कीसवीं सदी के उत्तरार्ध में भी वैज्ञानिकों को मीडिया वालों से भय बना रहता था कि न जाने वे क्या प्रकाशित-प्रसारित कर दें और एक नया विवाद शुरू हो जाय ...

...  
"चन्द्र पर्यावास के दक्षिणी छोर के ए0पी0जे0 अब्दुल कलाम द्वार पर आपका स्वागत है, हमने चन्द्र पर्यावास से सुरक्षित लिंक कर लिया है, कृपया ग्रीन सिग्नल की प्रतीक्षा कीजिए और फिर अपने फ्लोटिंग केबिन में सवार होकर गन्तव्य तक पहुंचिये, कृपया अपने क्रम से निकास द्वार पर पहुंचे, आपका चन्द्र प्रवास शुभ हो, इंडियन चान्द्र एअर बस सेवा चुनने के लिए आपको हादिक धन्यवाद! कृपया भविष्य में भी सेवा का अवसर प्रदान करें... .." एअर बस के प्रसारण के अन्तिम शब्दों के साथ ही यात्रीगण ने उठने सा उपक्रम किया, निपुण का नम्बर पा;चवा था और कुछ पलों के बाद ही वह खुद को एक विशेष तरह के केबिन में सुरक्षित पा रहा था, कुछ कुछ वैसा ही था जैसा कि धरती के 'रोप वे' केबिन होते हैं, फर्क बस इतना था कि यह विशेष प्रकार का केबिन बिना किसी सहारे के ही वातावरण में तैर सा रहा था- यह एक खास किस्म का 'फ्लोटिंग केबिन' था, स्वतो चालन का एक बेहतरीन नमूना! चान्द्र-पर्यावास का कृत्रिम वातावरण उसके लिए इतना प्रतिरोध उत्पन्न कर रहा था कि वह एक निश्चित गति से आगे बढ़ रहा था, मानों तैर सा रहा हो। यहा भी सामने एक स्क्रीन और दुतरफा संचार की व्यवस्था थी, वीजियो फोन जैसी ही, "प्रोफेसर सुरेन्द्र कुमार आपकी प्रतीक्षा में हैं, मैं उनकी रिसेप्शनिस्ट हू; मारिया ग्रेवाल ... .. कृपया फ्लोट केबिन के स्थिर होते ही, अपने ठीक बायीं ओर के पैसेज जो अब बस खुलने वाला है से प्रोफेसर सुरेन्द्र कुमार के एपार्टमेंट 'सेलेस्टियल राण्डिवू' में फ्लोट कर जायें। आपका स्वागत है... .. मिस्टर निपुण" स्वागत के औपचारिक और पेशेवराना अन्दाज में कहे गये ये शब्द निपुण के कर्ण पटलों को स्पन्दित कर ही रहे थे कि केबिन का द्वार खुल गया और सीधे प्रोफेसर सुरेन्द्र कुमार के नेम प्लेट वाले बन्द दरवाजे से जुड़ गया जो धीरे-धीरे खुल रहा था... .. "आइये मिस्टर निपुण ... .. प्रोफेसर सुरेन्द्र कुमार बस कुछ ही पलों में आपसे मिलेंगे ... ..", फिर मारिया ग्रेवाल की आवाज गूज उठी। निपुण को अचानक धरती सरीखे गुरुत्व का सुखद अहसास हुआ।

"कृपया हिचकें नहीं, आगे बढ़ें और ड्राइंग कक्ष में बैठ जायें : परेशान न हों, मैं खुद यहा नहीं हू, मैं एक नियन्त्रण कक्ष से बोल रही हू;... .. आपकी पूरी यात्रा को मैं मानीटर करती रही हू- यह सिस्टम भी प्रोफेसर सुरेन्द्र कुमार की ही देन है... .. वैसे ये व्यवस्थायें तो अब धरती पर भी हैं... .. फिर वही मारिया की प्रोफेसनल आवाज गजी... .. निपुण के ड्राइंग रूम में बैठे, कुछ ही पल बीते थे कि सहसा सामने की दीवार में एक बड़ा गड्ढा सा बनता नज़र आया और उसमें से एक मानव आकृति साकार हो उठी... .. शायद यही प्रोफेसर सुरेन्द्र कुमार हैं, सोचा निपुण ने। उसने सम्मान में उठने का उपक्रम किया। "बैठो, बैठो निपुण ... .." अपनापन लिए हुए इन स्नेहिल शब्दों ने मानों निपुण को सम्मोहित सा कर दिया, वह यन्त्रवत् सा बैठ गया था ... .. इतने अपनेपन से सराबोर शब्दों को निपुण ने धरती पर भी अरसे से नहीं सुना था... .. भले ही वे औपचारिकता के कुछ शब्द थे लेकिन उनमें अपनेपन का जो अहसास था, मन्त्रमुग्ध करने वाला था

... ..  
एक देदीप्यमान चेहरा, स्नेहिल आखे, कलाम स्टाईल किन्तु पूरी तरह से श्वेत केश, एक अनौपचारिक सी वेश भूषा ... .. तो क्या यही थे प्रोफेसर सुरेन्द्र कुमार, सोचा निपुण ने ... .. और उनके सम्मान में पुनः सायास उठ खड़ा हुआ। अगले ही पल प्रोफेसर सुरेन्द्र कुमार ने निपुण को गले लगा लिया, सामने की विचित्र आकार की कुर्सी पर बैठते हुए, निपुण को भी इशारे से बैठने का आग्रह किया ... .. निपुण अभी भी किंकर्तव्यविमूढ़ सा था, एक महान शिखिसयत से मिलने पर शायद ऐसा ही लगता हो, सोच रहा था वह ।

"निपुण बेटे, मेरे पास तुम्हारे लिए कुल पन्द्रह मिनट हैं, तुम्हारी प्रश्नावली मुझे कल ही मिल गयी थी, मुझे खुशी है मून टाइम्स मुझ पर एक प्रोग्राम कर रहा है, मुझे रोमांच सा हो उठता है, जब धरती वाले मुझे याद करते हैं, आखिर धरती पर मैंने जीवन के 70 वर्ष गुजारे हैं... .. इस एसाइनमेंट को मैं स्वीकार नहीं करता... .. अब तुम्ही सोचो, भला सत्तर वर्ष की उम्र में यहा चन्द्रमा पर आने की कोई धरती प्रेमी कैसे सोच सकता है... .. धरती पर यह समय तो धरम-करम का होता आया है, वानप्रस्थ का रहा है ... .. और मैं अपनी संस्कृति और श्रेष्ठ पारम्परिक मान्यताओं का प्रबल अनुयायी



रहा हूँ; - जननी जन्मभूमिश्च स्वगादपि गरीयसी ... .." निपुण को लगा कि सहसा ही प्रोफेसर की आखे डबडबा आयी थीं।  
"भला ऐसी भी क्या मजबूरी थी आपको" निपुण के होठों से अकस्मात ये शब्द फूट पड़े किन्तु उनमें कुछ पेशागत आग्रह भी था।

"लम्बी कहानी है निपुण, तुम्हारे लिए मैंने अपने बारे में सारी उचित जानकारी इस आफ्टक फाइबर कैप, आई मीन कैप्सूल में लोड कर दिया है, हा,

अनुरोध यह है कि इसके डाऊनलोड वर्जन को एडिट करने के बाद ही इसे प्रसारण के लिए जारी करना ... .. इसमें कुछ ऐसे विजुअल्स और फुटेज हैं, जो मेरे निजी जीवन से जुड़े हैं जैसे गुजरात के पालनपुर गाव के मेरे पैतृक निवास के दृश्य ... .. अमेरिका में मेरे सुरेन्द्र मैन्शन के दृश्य जो स्वतोचालन का एक नायाब नमूना था ... .. इन्हें देखने पर तुम्हे यह अन्दाजा हो जायेगा कि सत्तर वर्ष की उम्र में मुझे धरती, प्यारी धरती की आश्वस्ति भरी गोंद क्यों छोड़नी पड़ी और यहा के अति यात्रक जीवन को क्यों चुनना पड़ा ... .. अब तो मैं सौ वर्ष पूरा करने जा रहा हूँ; जीवन संगिनी का साथ छोटे भी करीब 40 वर्ष हो चुके ... .. वहीं धरती पर ही जब मेरा षष्टिपूर्ति अभिनन्दन हो रहा था, वे चल बसी थीं ... .. अब तो बस उनकी यादें शेष हैं ... .. दोनों बेटे वहीं अमेरिका में ही हैं, उन्हें बूढ़े बाप से कोई लगाव नहीं है ... .. शायद कभी रहा भी नहीं था, यह अमेरिकी संस्कृति की देन थी... .. लेकिन नहीं, वही अपसंस्कृति तो मेरे गुजरात के पैतृक गाव तक भी पसर चुकी थी... .. निपुण, मैं उस समय धरती से विदा हुआ जब मानवीय संवेदनायें मिट सी रहीं थीं, लोग भौतिक सुखों की मरीचिका में पगलाये बौराये से जीवन यापन कर रहे थे... .. अपने जीवनकाल के महज चालीस पचास वर्षों में मनुष्य भौतिकता से इतना ओत-प्रोत हो जायेगा, मैंने कल्पना तक नहीं की थी, मैं भी कैसा मूर्ख था कि इतने बड़े सामाजिक परिवर्तन को भाप नहीं सका ... .. हमारे युग द्रष्टाओं ने तो इसका आभास पहले ही पा लिया था ... .. 'स्वारथ लाई करहिं सब प्रीति' ... .. गोस्वामी तुलसी दास जी ने भी कहा था। ... .. पर सचमुच क्या ऐसा ही होने वाला था... .. शायद अपने बेहद व्यस्त दिनचर्या के चलते मैं अहसास नहीं कर सका ... .. बेटों ने नाता तोड़ा ... .. बस कभी कभार वीकेण्ड पर उनकी हलो हाय सुनने को मिल जाती थी, वह भी वीजियो कैम पर। अब चूँकि मेरे अमेरिकी आवास पर सब कुछ कृत्रिम बुद्ध युक्त रोबोट के हवाले था, मेरा खान-पान, मेरे एप्वाइन्टमेन्ट्स, सभी कुछ... .. मुझे भी बिना बेटों के देखभाल के जीने की आदत सी पड़ गयी थी... .. मेरे अनुचर रोबोट मेरी भलीभाति देखभाल कर रहे थे।

प्रोफेसर सुरेन्द्र कुमार भावावेश में बोलते जा रहे थे, निपुण पूरी तन्मयता से उनके चेहरे पर नजरे गड़ाये स्वप्नवत सा सब कुछ सुनता जा रहा था, कोई गहरी टीस थी जो प्रोफेसर के आत्मकथ्य को विस्तारित कर रही थी ... .." पर एक बार जब मैं काफी बीमार पड़ गया ... .. बेटों ने मेरी सुधि तक नहीं ली, मेरे अनुचर रोबो ही मेरी पल प्रतिपल सेवा सुश्रुषा करते रहे... .. अर्धांगिनी तो साथ छोड़ चुकी थीं ... .. जीवन में इतना अकेलापन मैंने कभी अनुभव नहीं किया था- जीवन का अर्थ ही मेरे लिए बेमानी हो गया था, दुनिया मुझे आटोमैशन और साइबनेटिक्स का मसीहा मानती थी... .. पर मेरे जीवन में कोई रास रंग नहीं रह गया था ... .. कभी सोचता कि मेरे अपने बेटों, अपने खून के रिश्तों पर क्या भौतिकता ने इतना प्रभाव डाल दिया है कि उनकी सारी संवेदनायें सूख गयी हैं ... .. क्या तकनीकी प्रगति, तरह तरह की जुगतों ने मानव को इतना खोखला कर दिया है कि लाखों वर्ष के जैवीय इतिहास को महज तीन-चार सौ वर्षों के प्रौद्योगिक विकास ने परे ढकेल दिया है... .. इससे तो भले मेरे खुद के बनाये और संचालित रोबोट थे, आटोमैशन पद्धति थी, जो मेरा पल पल ध्यान रख रही थी, यहा तक कि वे मेरे चेहरे पर पीड़ा के भावों को भी भापने लग गये थे और तुरन्त मेरे मन का कोई काम, संगीत आदि की पेशकश कर देते थे ..... ..मन हल्का हो उठता था ... .. अब मेरी सारी दिनचर्या ही नहीं रात्रिचर्या भी उन्हीं मशीनों के हाथ में थी, आखिर वे भी तो मेरी ही सर्जना के परिणाम थे, यही सोच कर सन्तोष कर लेता था... ..पर मानवीय संवेदनाओं की अनुभूति, सगे सम्बन्धियों का सामीप्य तो एक अलग ही अनुभव है जिसकी कमी कभी-कभी मुझे बेहद सताती ... .. और तभी मैंने एक बड़ा निर्णय लिया" ... .. एक क्षण को प्रोफेसर रुके, हाथ में बधी एक डिवायस पर बस पाच मिनट शब्दों को धीरे से उच्चारित किया, इस बीच न जाने किस ओर से एक रोबोट अनुचर ने आकर तश्तरी में कुछ रंग बिरंगे टैबलेट रख दिये। "ये कुछ ऊर्जा देने वाले पोषक आहार हैं, स्वादिष्ट भी हैं, चख कर देखो ... .. कहते हुए वे फिर अपनी व्यथा कथा के छूटे सूत्र के सहारे यादों में खो से गये।

"हा, मैंने फैसला किया कि मैं भारत में गुजरात के अपने गाव पालनपुर में जाकर शेष जीवन व्यतीत करू, हो सकता है मुझे वहा वह मानवीय सानिध्य, वह प्रेम मिल सके, जिसकी मुझे शिद्धत से चाह थी ... .. और फिर एक दिन अमेरिकी जीवन की सारी भौतिकता, सारे यात्रक ताम-झाम को अलविदा कहकर मैं अपने मूल पैतृक निवास पालनपुर पहुँच गया ... .. वहा; पह;ुचकर मैं अभिभूत था, इतना स्नेह, इतना प्यार, इतना अपनापन ... .. आखिर यही थी भारतीय संस्कृति की वह विरासत जिसे पाने के लिए मैं तड़प रहा था ... .. ये मेरे ही परिजन थे, मेरे भाई भतीजे.. .. लेकिन अफसोस, यह सब भी अल्पकालिक था... .. मैं उनमें अपनत्व दूढ़ रहा था और वे सब अमरीका से लाये मेरे सामानों-

गैजेट्स की ताक झाक में थे ..... जिनका मेरे लिए कोई मूल्य नहीं था, किन्तु अपने साथ लाये कुछ सर्विलांस के उपकरणों ने मेरी आखे खोल दी .. .. वे सब धीरे-धीरे मेरे बैंक बैलेंस के टोह में रहते, मैं अपनी वसीयत किसको करूंगा, किसको कितना हिस्सा दूंगा, अपने अमेरिका वासी बेटों के नाम भी कुछ वसीयत करूंगा या नहीं, आदि ... आदि ... तो वे सब मेरे धन सम्पदा के भूखे थे ... .. वहा भी पश्चिम की संस्कृति हावी हो रही थी या फिर हमारे श्रेष्ठ भारतीय जीवन मूल्य तिरोहित हो चले थे, मेरा तो जैसे मोह भंग हो उठा था... .. यह सब मेरे लिए बहुत पीड़ादायक था ... .. फिर से जीवन एक बार बोझ लगने लगा था..... और तभी मुझे चन्द्रमा के मानव पर्यावास परियोजना पर काम करने का ऑफर मिला और मैंने हांमी भर दी... .. लिहाजा अब यहा हू और मशीनी दुनिया; ने मुझे अब यहा इतना व्यस्त कर रखा है कि बीते दिनों की तमाम यादें अब बहुत धुधली सी हो गयी हैं, हा निपुण कभी-कभार तुम जैसे युवा लोगों से मिलकर मुझे अपने बेटे याद आ जाते हैं, जिन्होंने वर्षों बीत जाने पर भी मेरी सुधि नहीं ली, पर मैं जानता हू वे ठीक हैं, उनका अब परिवार भी है, बच्चे भी हैं पर वे भी शायद अपने पिता की राह पर हैं... .. शायद वे भी उनके साथ वहीं करें जैसा कि मेरे साथ घटा है ..... ``सहसा ही वे उठ खड़े हुए, पन्द्रह मिनट का एप्वाइन्टमेन्ट पूरा होने को आ रहा था ... ..

``ठीक है निपुण ... .. ये सारी बातें इस कैप्सूल में हैं जो तुम्हारे काम की लगे लें लेना, पर हा; मेरे कुछ उन निजी प्रसंगों को जो मैंने तुम्हें बताया है, छोड़ देना ... .. इन नकारात्मक बातों से भला मानवता का क्या भला होने वाला है? हमें अपनी नियति को स्वीकारना होगा ... .. अब वह काल आ पहुचा है जब मनुष्य मशीनों में तब्दील हो रहा है और मशीनें संवेदनात्मक हो चली हैं... यह एक नये ... सर्वथा नये युग का आगाज है... एक नई संस्कृति का उदय हो चला है ... .. फिर मिलेंगे निपुण, शायद शीघ्र ही धरती पर आऊ, अपने एक कार्य के सिलसिले में ... .. वैसे तो अब मेरा शेष जीवन यहीं बीतने वाला है, चन्द्रमा पर मशीनों और कृत्रिम बुद्धि के अनुचरों के बीच ... मैं उन्हें प्रिय हू और वे भी अब मेरे प्रिय हो चले हैं... इन तरह - तरह के कृत्रिम बुद्धि वाले अनुचरों और उनके कार्य विभाजनों की जानकारी भी तुम इसी कैप्सूल में पाओगे, हा, मून टाइम्स की वह प्रति मुझे भी भेजना न भूलना... ..जिसमें मेरी यह व्यथा कथा प्रकाशित हो``

निपुण अपनी वापसी यात्रा में सोच रहा था कि प्रोफेसर सुरेन्द्र कुमार के जीवन के किस हिस्से को वह तरजीह दे, किसे डिलीट कर दे ... .. चलो जब कैप्सूल से डाऊन लोड होकर सारा मैटर सामने आयेगा, तब देखा जायेगा ... ..उसने विचारों से बोझिल हो रहे सिर को हल्के से एक झटका दिया और सामने मानीटर पर उभर रहे धरती के दृश्यों को निहारने में मशगूल हो गया ... .. .।

### Arvind Mishra Disillusioned

*Nipun, a web reporter of Moon Times was also on-board the flight of Bharat Chand Air Bus Service. "You have reached the moon and soon your will be reaching the apartment of Prof. Surendra Kumar," The broadcast monitor of the air bus, which was mounted at the back of the seat in front of Nipun, was giving regular updates. The young Indian journalist was on an assignment to make a documentary on renowned space expert, Prof. Surendra Kumar. He was speaking in his vigio- phone,"I know the rest of the co-passengers are also getting these updates the way I am getting them. I have no acquaintance with any of these people. Either way there are not many passengers on this flight. Surprisingly no one has showed any interest in knowing about me, neither have I any desire to learn anything about them. Within a few seconds every one will reach his destination. Then there is no need to get friendly with each other..."*

*Vigionphone was mounted at the back of the seat in front of Nipun, below the GPS monitor. It could be moved to and fro according to need. Nipun had pulled it closer to his face. Vigiohone was sending his every word and every expression back to the moon times.*

*Prof Kumar was one of the few famous technologies who had been called on moon at a very high salary after an extremely successful career on earth. The number of people coming to moon from earth was very high now.*

About 10,000 and 35 sq. meter area, which was around the landing site of Apollo 16 mission, had been converted into an artificial circular habitat for people. The habitat had no connection with the external atmosphere of the moon. The habitat was situated on a very strong pillar made of a new alloy RSWM (reinforced spider web material). The diameter of the pillar itself was some 2 km, so you can imagine the hugeness of the structure.

The entire habitat was rotating on its axis so as to provide the much needed gravitational force so that people could feel comfortable in the low gravity of the moon. The Airbus was about to dock to one of the entrances of this fast rotating structure. This docking needed a surgical precision but everything was controlled by computers so it was a regular thing for them. It was just a matter of moments when Nipun will be landing on Moon. Web journalists used to get such assignments and then Prof. Kumar was not some ordinary person. He had played pivotal role in the designing establishment of the moon habitat.

The moon habitat was a complicated structure with so many components. The automation of services was one of the most critical things. Prof. Kumar could be called the architect of the project. He was the architect behind the automation of services and the facilities on the habitat. Nipun was supposed to conduct the interview and send it back to earth. Initially, they had planned for a live interview, but Prof. refused for a live interview. He made it clear that the interview should be recorded and should be telecast only after his meticulous scrutiny and edits. Scientists were very much concerned about being misquoted often which could lead to some or the other controversy, so he was extra careful while going public.

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"You are welcome at the Southern end of the APJ Abdul Kalam Door. We have successfully docked on the habitat. Please wait for the green signal before leaving your seats. Then you can take floating cabins to reach your destinations. We wish you a great stay at Moon. Thank you for choosing Indian Chandra Air Bus service. Please travel with us in future as well."

The passengers remained seated until the green light on their site turned on. Nipun was the 5th in the queue. Few moments later he was sitting comfortably in the floating cabin. It was similar to Earth's rope way cabins. The only difference was, these cabins were floating or flying on the air. It was a special kind of floating cabin, an excellent example of automated planes. The artificial atmosphere of the moon was creating enough resistance for the cabin so that it was moving at a steady speed. The cabin had a screen and a two way communication system. A lady's voice came from the vigiophone, "Prof Kumar is awaiting your arrival. I am his assistant Maria Grawal. Once the cabin is stabilized, you can exit through the right door and you can walk into the Celestial Rendezvous apartment of Prof Kumar. You are welcome Mr Nipun,"

The cabin halted and docked with the entrance of Prof Kumar's apartment. The door

of the apartment opened once the cabin docked and locked onto the door. Nipun entered the apartment. He was greeted by the voice of Maria, "Welcome Mr Nipun. Prof Kumar will be joining you in a few minutes."

He walked into the room. He could not see her around, he understood that she was monitoring and interacting with him from some remote location. This was a usual feature of communication on Earth as well. He went ahead and sat on a couch. Suddenly he saw a crevice emerging and widening in one of the walls and then he saw that the wall had retracted to make way for a human figure. It was Prof. Kumar who emerged from the wall. Nipun got up.

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"Sit down Nipun. How was your journey?" Nipun felt a deep affection in his voice, something he wouldn't notice in the voice of an interviewee. He had not experience such affection back on earth for a long time. He had seen Prof many a times in videos and photographs but he could now notice such glow on his face and the affection in his eyes. The hair was all white and the style matched that of Kalam Sahab a president of India of yore. Kumar shook hands with Nipun and asked him to sit, as he took his seat on his chair, Nipun felt an awe of meeting such a personality.

"Son, I have 15 minutes for you. I received your questionnaire yesterday. I am glad that Moon Times is producing this programme on me. I always feel excited whenever earthlings remember me. After all I have spent 70 years on earth. I would not have accepted this assignment. You can image, which earth lover would even think of coming to moon at the age of 70? Back on earth this is the age for dharam karam, (religious duties) of "vanprastha"(an ancient ritual of going to jungle and never returning back home). I have been a great admirer of our culture's values and traditions. "Janani Janambhumish Swargadapi gariyasi(a place where someone is born is no less like a heaven for him) Professor blurted out in his vernacular Hindi language spontaneously.

"Nipun saw some moist in prof's eyes.

"But what forced you to do so?" he asked inadvertently, but there was some professional request too.

"It's a long story Nipun. I have stored all the information about my life in this fiber cap, I mean capsule. There is a request, telecast the downloadable version only after proper editing. There are some visuals and footage, some are related to my private life - for example my ancestral home at Palanpur village of Gujarat. There are some shots from my Surendra Mansion, my residence at the USA which was an awesome example of cybernetics. . After watching this all you will realize why at the age of 70 I had to leave the affectionate lap of much loved mother earth. Why I had to choose this mechanical life of moon. Now, I am about to complete 100 years. My life partner left me some 40 years ago. Back on earth when I was enjoying my "Shashtipurti welcome (A felicitation done when a celebrity reached 61 in India) "; she left for her heavenly abode. Now, she lives only in my memories. Both of my sons are in the USA. They have no affection towards their old father. I guess there never was any such affection. This is the gift of

American culture. But no, the same 'culture' has taken roots in my parental village of Gujarat as well. Nipun, I left earth when human emotions were dying off. People were living their lives trapped in the mad mirage of materialism. I had never imagined in the 40-50 years of my life that man will engage in materialism to this extent. I was such an idiot that I could not notice this major change in society. Possibly I could not notice it in my extremely busy schedule. Children broke bonds. It's only on the weekends we would get to hear about their well being. That too on the video -cam. Now, in my Mansion everything was under control of the artificially intelligent robot, my food, my appointments, everything was being taken care by the robots. I also got used to live without care and concern of my children. My servant robot was taking good care of me," Prof was speaking in an emotional flow.

Nipun was listening to him as if mesmerized. There was some sweet pain inherent in the tone of Prof. Surendra. "Once I get extremely sick. But none of my children took my care. My robot was the one who took care of me. My wife had already died. I had never experienced so much of loneliness ever before. The meaning of life had become meaningless to me. The world thinks of me to be the messiah of automation and cybernetics, but there was no joy in my life. Sometimes I would think of my children, they were so much engrossed in materialism that all of their emotions had dried out? The technological progress and advancement has corrupted the man to that extent that children forgot their filial duties? And their even biological bonding had been pushed by industrial development? My robots, the automation process, were far better than them and were taking very well care of me. They had become so advanced that they could read changes in my facial expressions and would do things to make me happy. They made me feel better. Now, not only my day time activities, but also night time activities were in control of those robots. After all they were the results of my creation. I used to feel relaxed with this thought. But, human emotions, closeness of relatives were just non existent which used to hurt me very much. And then I took a big decision." he paused for a while. A device alarmed 'only five minutes remaining'.

In the meantime an android came from somewhere and put a plate with some tablets on the table. "These are energy-giving, healthy tablets. They are tasty as well, try some." he said and lost once again in the chain of his memories.

"Yes, I decided that I should go and spend the rest of my life in my ancestral village of Gujarat. May be there I would get that human closeness, love and affection which I desired for a long time. Then I bade goodbye to the materialism of the USA and went to my parental village of Gujarat. I was full of awe when I reached there. There was so much of love, care and concern. That was the legacy of Indian culture which I was dying to get. Those were my relatives, my brothers, cousins, nephews. But alas, it was all only apparent. I was looking for affection while they were looking for the high-tech gadgets that I had bought from the USA -- which I had no value for.

Surveillance equipments that I had bought with me opened my eyes. They were talking in low tones about my bank balance, who was I going to include in my will, who

will get how much share, would I put something for my USA settled sons or not, etc. They were thirsty for my money. The western culture was taking over the minds of those people as well. Or was that our value system had started to decline? It was like a broken dream. I was totally shattered and disillusioned. It was very painful for me. Life appeared to be a burden. That was the time when I got the offer for the Moon project and I immediately accepted. Though now I am here and this mechanical world is keeping me busy so much so that the memories of the past have faded. But, sometimes, when I meet young guys like you it reminds me of my own children who have not showed any concern about me in all these years. But I know that they are OK. They have their own families, their own children, but may be they are also following footsteps of their fathers. May be they will also repeat all that had happened to me." Suddenly he got up, 15 minutes had vanished ...

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"OK Nipun, all this is in this capsule, you may use which ever information is useful to you. Just leave these private parts of my life which I told you. Either way what good are these negative thought going to do to humanity? We will have to accept our fate. The time has come when the man is converting into machine and machines are becoming humane. This is the dawn of a new, a brand new, age.

A new civilization is dawning. We may meet again Nipun, I may come to earth for some work. Otherwise I am going to spend the rest of my life here on the moon, among the machines and all my AI servants. I am loved by them and I love them. You will get more information about these androids and their work distribution system in this capsule. Yes, please don't forget to send me the copy of moon times in which this story will appear."

On his return journey, Nipun was thinking which part of Kumar's life he should focus on and which one he should delete. Then he decided that once all the matter is downloaded only then he will choose. He shook his head which was getting heavy with these thoughts and got busy in the sceneries of earth appearing on the monitor.

Abhishek Mishra Satyamev Jayate

Abhishek Kr. Mishra

Since last 11 years Professor Jaffery's mornings were uneventful and it was same even today. In his self imposed exile Dr. Jaffery that morning like other mornings was submerged in his work when the telephone bell severed his contemplation. He rose towards the phone to find Raj's number flashing on the small screen.

Raj was a research scholar under him who had currently taken into freelancing and writing science fiction. It was Raj among the very few who had access to his telephone number. Dr. Jaffery picked up the receiver to find an exhilarating Raj on the other side.

"Sir you did it finally...your research is eventually a success! The American Paleontologists' Organisation has commended you for your extraordinary discovery.

What I have just heard that the Indian Paleontologists Association has hurriedly summoned a meet to reconsider their earlier decision of denounce your findings..."

Listening to Raj's excited chatter the professor's eyes had suddenly centered on Puja's framed photograph on the wall. Raj's speech in the phone gradually faded away as the Professor drifted into the hazy past. The receiver slipped from his hand as he plopped into his couch and Puja's smiling face emerged amidst the mist.

Puja was one of his devoted research scholars who literally worshipped the ground the professor walked upon. Those were the days when Jaffery was occupied in the discovery and research of the archaic fossils in the Vindhyan range. Through radiometric investigation it was learnt that the Vindhyan range was possibly formed about 1400-1100 million years ago. Before this period the rocks were created from molten lava of the Achaean Era, which were metamorphosed later on. Therefore it was widely believed that chances of finds of fossilized remains here were bare minimum.

The Indian scientific fraternity too was opposed to the idea that life could have subsisted under such hostile circumstances. Nevertheless very primitive fossilized life forms were being discovered around the globe in analogous terrains. Jaffery was a kind of a scientist who would never walk on the treaded trails; he would prefer to make his own.

The rocks of the Vindyan range relentlessly coaxed Dr.Jaffery for their profound study. Puja being much interested in field-works always accompanied her professor permeating in him inspiration which eventually led to the momentous discovery. And ultimately Professor Jaffery discovered fossilized relics of minuscule cocooned microbes in the Vindhyan mountain range.

Now what was mandatory for Dr.Jaffery was to find similar organisms elsewhere to brace up his discovery. Dame luck seemed to be on the professor's side as he soon learnt that identical microorganisms had been identified in the Mussorie range of the Lower Himalayas. Proper scrutiny of the organism revealed that the rocks of the Vindhyan range were of relative newer age which could be of an age between 600-500 million years.

These finds of Dr.Jaffery shattered the basic ideas of Geology in India. Such an innovative theory did not go down well with a selected lobby of prominent scholars and scientists who did not lose time in branding Dr Jaffery's discovery as being motivated from self promotion and indicate it as being against scientific principles. Such an assertion from the geologists was intended to restrain Jaffery from further research work. Jaffery had full faith in his own research which was catalytical in braving all the odds on his way.

Puja oblivious of this dirty facet of the scholarly world was quite at bemused at it. The entire brouhaha pushed her into a dark stage of depression from which she was unable to recuperate. She died thereafter leaving the professor alone in this hostile world to face its heat.

Raj stood by his side like a Rock of Gibraltar who tried to keep the issue alive with the support of the press and the media.

Today was his big hour; Puja's sacrifice, Raj's toil and the professor's patience had paid rich dividends; Dr.Jaffrey's discovery had found a world wide acceptance, appreciation and recognition. All the misgivings on the age of the Vindhyan range and

on the discovered orgasms had finally subsided.

It appeared Dr. Jaffrey's endurance paid off; seeing the world view the Indian Paleontologist Organisation decided to honour Dr. Jaffery in a gala function. This abrupt change in their stand towards him seemed atonement to their previous bearing on the scholar and in the process chose to return him his former position. The date of the function was fixed and an invitation to the ceremony was sent to Professor Jaffery and to other dignitaries of the world.

That the Indian Scientific sorority had been jostled to the reverse on account of Jaffery's episode could be perceived in the professor's address speech.

The Professor lashed out at the organizers, "...like their western counterparts, India has all the potentials amongst her newer generation of research scholars to accomplish radical research on innovative subjects. But who would encourage this newer breed? Who would furnish them with their required amenities? Do they not deserve the support of our long earned experience in research? But we do not provide them any...lest they become more eminent than us.

"To become world leaders in research our nation needn't lament looking at the west, on the contrary motivate our younger generation to forge ahead with pioneering research work... we do have it in ourselves...just introspect. Any such step would placate the agony of Puja's sacrifice and validate my hard work."

The calm that descended upon the distinguished audience of the packed auditorium apparently illustrated their consent to the dissertation of the honourable professor. The applause which began on a lose note became thunderous within no moment of time.

And Raj was looking towards the slogan carved on the wall - " Satyamev Jayate..." (Truth alone Triumphs.....).

(This Story is based on the real life and struggle of Dr. R. J. Azmi from Wadia Institute of Himalayan Geology, Dehradun)

G.S. Unni Krishnan Nair Hair of Derkowitz

Dear friend,

It all began with an advertisement in the newspaper. The advertisement was like this "New method for growing hair on bald head, Result assured". Below the title it was written that a scientist named Dr. Derkowitz has found a method for growing hair on baldhead by prolonged research. The contact number of Derkowitz's office was given with the advt. below it was written that payment be made only if the hair grows abundantly on the bald.

The advt was more than tempting for a young bald man. On that day itself I fixed an appointment with Dr. Derkowitz through phone. On the next Monday I met Dr. Derkowitz

at his office in the city.

"I am Derkowitz"

An old well built man introduced to me.

To my happiness he said that since I am the first respondent to the advertisement my



treatment will be completely free. I felt very happy. Dr. Derkowitz explained that the Clinic is away from the city and I have to stay there one month for treatment. He assured

that hair will grow thickly on my baldhead. Before I left the clinic Dr. Derkowitz said that

no visitors will be allowed during the treatment, and nobody including my wife should

know about it.

“Complete hygiene is essential for the success of the treatment young man”

He said.

I lied to my wife that I am on official training for one month. As fixed earlier I reached Derkowitz's office on the next Friday morning. From the office they took me to the clinic

in a vehicle. The accompanying person insisted that I should cover my eyes during the Journey. After reaching the clinic a nurse gave me sandwiches and soup. When I ate Food, the nurse scrapped little skin from my neck and asked me to sleep. I dreamed of

thick black hairs.

Next morning after breakfast Dr. Derkowitz greeted me.

“Dear young man, I am starting your treatment from today, I expect maximum Cooperation from your side”

I nodded my head in approval.

“As we progress you may feel some discomfort, don't be afraid, sometimes we may tie your hands and legs, don't worry, it is all part of the treatment.”

I was little confused. Then doctor injected a fluid into my nerve. Some sensors were Connected on my body and a close circuit television was fixed inside the room. Injection

Continued for six days. On the seventh day just after the injection I felt a strange Tickling sensation throughout the body. Nurse tied my hands and legs. Injection continued for three more days. On the tenth day all the sensors were removed from the body.

“Success my dear man, Success”

Dr. Derkowitz said loudly.

He placed me before a mirror. To my greatest amusement I saw hair growth on my

*baldhead.*

*“Now you should know something more about the treatment”*

*-He said and asked me a question*

*“Are Chimpanzees bald?”*

*I was surprised as to why he asked such a question.*

*“No man, no, chimpanzees, ‘Pan troglodytes’ never get bald”*

*-Dr.Derkowit replied with laughter.*

*“You may be amazed as to why I am asking such a question; there is a reason, man”*

*“What reason?”*

*I asked.*

*“Chimpanzees never get bald, because they carry a gene that prevents baldness,*

*I have traced the genes responsible for your baldness and modified it to resemble Chimpanzee’s gene by chemical mutation”*

*I was very much shocked to hear this and as if someone was piercing an iron nail into my heart.*

*“So are you trying to make me a chimpanzee?”*

*I asked angrily*

*“Cool down mister, you will get chimpanzees, s hair only, but...”*

*”What but?”*

*“It is an experiment and something unexpected may happen, no problem, we will do the*

*necessary treatment, and you need not spent a penny”*

*“Why don’t you tell it to me earlier?”*

*I shouted ferociously.*

*“Then you might not have agreed, everything needs a beginning and a person for that”*

*“Are you making me a laboratory rat, mad doctor”?*

*He laughed heartily and said, “Control your feelings young man, genetics is making revolution in the world, now through you, then there is a lot of possibilities, a man*

secreting musk, we can use musk deer's gene, then what about a 'Donkey man' mating like a donkey or a 'Lion man', a 'Bull man'. So much possibilities".

He gave out a mad laughter and said.

"Anything is possible"

It was the breaking point of my patience. I caught Dr.Derkowit at the neck. Suddenly two men came and caught me. Then they threw me into a closed room. They used to put food through a gap in the door. Day by day I became aware that black thick hair was growing throughout my body and I am turning into a beast. Then on one day a small projection was formed at the lower end of my backbone, which later turned into a tail. I spent each day in horror and sadness. Urge to escape became stronger and stronger in me.

Then on one day I pretended to be sick and when they took me out for treatment I fled with my full strength through an open window. I had developed the ability to climb and run like a chimpanzee by this time. I ran during the night, hided during the day and reached my town at last. Now I am hiding in an old building behind the city press. I am scrolling this letter with an old broken pen dipped in my blood on an old post inland. All these I got from the rubbish dumped behind the press. I am loosing ability to write and read .My brain is not working properly. Friend, you can perhaps help me.

With love,

Binu Kumar

I was very much shocked and sad after reading Binu Kumar's letter. It was almost six Months since Binu left. His wife has reported the miss to police as well as in Newspapers.

As no response was there every one believed that Binu is dead. I decided to meet Binu's wife the next day and tell her the happenings. Then they can take him to a good clinic for treatment.

The next day early morning I went to Binu's house. I was surprised to see a gathering near the house.

*“What happened sir?”*

*I asked one man.*

*“Yester day night a beast resembling chimpanzee came to this house, It knocked at the door, Late Binu’s wife opened the door and saw this beast. She cried loudly in horror.*

*Then her son and the servant beat the beast with an axe at the head.”*

*I saw Binu’s body laying dead on the floor. The body was almost like a chimpanzee. Head was broken with brain out.*

*“The beast may have escaped from zoo”*

*One person was saying.*

*I was very sad and horrified to see Binu’s body. I thought of telling every thing to his wife, then what is the use? Who is going to believe it? Evenif a genetic test is done the body may be identified as chimpanzees.*

*I turned back and walked towards my home. To whom will I tell all these secrets, who will believe that Chimeras, Ganapathies and Narasimhas are coming?*

# China

## *Fei Dao War of the Gods*

*“It’s a pretext,” he said, waving his hand dismissively. “Every time they start a raid, there’s always some high-minded reason, but, really, they don’t care whether the civilization is a problem or not. They change things because they don’t like it. This time, it’s pure revenge.”*

*I was amazed by his answer: “Revenge? What did the people of Earth ever do to Pluto?”*

*Smiling, he answered, “Isn’t it true that Earth decided a while ago that Pluto should not be considered a planet?”*

*“Just for that? That was done by a few astronomers on a whim.” I was transfixed.*

*“But that’s what the cleaners are like. They’re very vain, and they don’t take disrespect lightly.”*

*The thought of these extraterrestrials being so narrow-minded gave me pause.*

*Text:*

*He wore glasses with a silver frame, very refined, and, at first sight, I took him for a con artist. Despite that, I decided to take him seriously. Anyone else would have just thought he was crazy.*

*“Is this place safe?” He was a little nervous.*

*“As the head of the National Security Bureau, I guarantee our conversation will not be overheard,” I assured the stranger.*

*He nodded, leaned forward and raised one eyebrow: “Tell me, why did the dinosaurs disappear?”*

*I stared at him for no less than thirty seconds, and—besides the sound of the persistent “tick tock” of the wall clock—everything in the room was silent.*

*His eyes were full of temptation and excitement, with a certain mischief to them; he licked his lips and asked: “Where did the Mayans go?”*

*I was fully aware of the gravity of the situation. I put on a serious face and told him: "Go on."*

*We spent half an hour in that room, full of his nervous narration and the persistent ticking of the wall clock.*

*Thirty more seconds of silence.*

*"Let me get this straight," I said, breaking the silence: "On Pluto, there are intelligent beings called "cleaners". They consider themselves to be the supervisors of civilizations in the universe. That is to say, whenever a certain civilization on a certain planet develop to the extent that they become a danger to civilization as a whole—for example, resource exhaustion or environmental pollution—they intervene. Dinosaurs became too prosperous, so the cleaners decided to redesign them into...kangaroos. As for the Mayans, the cleaners changed them into ants...Did I understand all of that correctly?"*

*"Right." He appeared elated that I was accepting such an absurd story and answering in such a serious manner. Having deemed me worthy, he decided to reveal more: "As far as I know the pyramids were built by cockroaches; as for the mice, do you know the statues on Easter Island?"*

*In that moment, I realized he was saying that all of the great wonders of the world were built by the filthy creatures all around us. I had goose pimples, but I suppressed my indignation. Feigning apathy, I asked: "So, do you mean to say that it's the humans' turn?"*

*"That's right." His expression became serious; he wasn't stringing me along anymore. "Maybe you don't believe it, but it doesn't matter how vast the universe is. The cleaners' spies exist anywhere there is civilization. Earth is no exception. These spies masquerade as common people, they observe human activity, and report back to Pluto frequently for them to evaluate the situation. They believe that human civilization has lost control, that humans can't fix the current crisis by themselves. The situation could bring problems for Pluto. For this reason, it is necessary to intervene personally. Now, on Pluto, the cleaners are arguing without rest; they will vote to decide what they will change humans into.*

*"They have a democracy on Pluto?" I asked curiously.*

*"Democracy?" His face flashed with contempt: "Heh, they are just thugs, arrogant, conceited, moody people. They say that the people on Earth hate each other, they kill each other, and human civilization is about to collapse. They have rated earth as a second-class ecological contamination and decided to exterminate the infestation. Some have suggested reducing humans to gregarious insects similar to ants. They say this will solve the problem of natural resources and would be beneficial to solidarity and friendship among them. Also, it will put human beings on a rung in the food chain that*

won't threaten the survival of Earth anymore.”

I was secretly shocked: “Do they really believe that?”

“It’s a pretext,” he said, waving his hand dismissively. “Every time they start a raid, there’s always some high-minded reason, but, really, they don’t care whether the civilization is a problem or not. They change things because they don’t like it. This time, it’s pure revenge.”

I was amazed by his answer: “Revenge? What did the people of Earth ever do to Pluto?”

Smiling, he answered, “Isn’t it true that Earth decided a while ago that Pluto should not be considered a planet?”

“Just for that? That was done by a few astronomers on a whim.” I was transfixed.

“But that’s what the cleaners are like. They’re very vain, and they don’t take disrespect lightly.”

The thought of these extraterrestrials being so narrow-minded gave me pause. I thought for awhile before my next question. “So, how did dinosaurs offend these aliens?”

Impatience was written all over his face: “They say it was because of RB music. Dinosaurs invented it and loved it, but the cleaners hated that lowbrow music. Now look, you don’t need to keep asking about all this boring old news. You are facing a catastrophe; I’m on special trip to inform you. I hope you can rid yourself of your doubts and report all of this to a higher authority as soon as possible.”

His seriousness again aroused my curiosity. “So, are you from Pluto?”

He looked clearly embarrassed and the muscles of his face revealed his annoyance: “Do you really think that I’m crazy?” With that, he jumped off the chair and threw his silver-framed glasses away. For a single moment, he looked massive, gold brilliance oozed from his face. He sang with a soft, calming voice:

“Ignorant humans, I reveal my terrifying visage to you. You no longer respect the gods and have forgotten humility—forgotten the very appearance of the gods. I am a God of Mount Olympus. In days gone, you prostrated yourself in worship to us, gaining protection at our feet. Today, you sacrifice no cattle or sheep. The world is full of the ghosts of the wronged, falsehood and cruelty. The suffering gods have already been forgotten. As Hermes, who lost all of my companions, I endure alone on this cold, solitary, alien land, waiting for the morning sun to illuminate the dark universe, to have my vengeance.”

The song was so beautiful. I was so engulfed in the sound, I took a full minute to collect myself: "So, all the gods of Mount Olympus were redesigned? Why were the cleaners dissatisfied with you?"

Hate of a thousand years boiled in him; Hermes gnashed his teeth and snarled: "They accused us of being impetuous."

I sighed without judging: "Excuse me, Messenger of the Gods, O' Great Hermes, are you the last of the gods left?"

The light fell from Hermes' face as his mood calmed; he picked up the glasses from the floor and put them on, sitting down in front of me. He changed back into the middle aged man he was before, but it seemed as though a fury was rolling in his eyes. "That's right. We were defeated in a war against the cleaners. All of my companions have been humiliated and transformed. I only survived because I went to Pluto before the war disguised as one of the cleaners." With this, his face took on a pleased, mischievous look: "The cleaners aren't the only ones who can spy. Of all the gods, I was the most cunning, so I was given this grave responsibility. Through the years, step-by-step, I was able to infiltrate their high-level authorities and learned of their top-secret plans and schemes. I have come here personally to pass on the message. Please, have no doubts or hesitations, prepare as soon as possible."

"Prepare for what?" My fascination was intense and upsetting. I wasn't able to hide it anymore. The whole thing was just too exciting.

"Their interstellar transformation device can undo its previous alterations, but it can only be used after a vote. I will create a diversion after they vote to transform humanity and seize the chance to start the machine. After that—" Hermes eyes were filled with splendor and hope, "—all the gods will be back."

"You mean, Zeus, Hera, Apollo, Athena...everyone will be back?" I asked with caution.

"Yes, and you need to prepare a large reception and help us defeat the cleaners. After that, we will enjoy an eternity of prosperity."

Images of the ancient Grecians and the post-modern world unfolded in front of my eyes: bodies covered in olive oil and hands grasping weapons, fighting against aliens in the sky; on the ground, long-range nuclear missiles are ready to fire at Pluto, with mice, flies, and cockroaches crawling everywhere. "Hey, we could revive all of the divine powers if necessary, so they could be our back up. Think about it. If we revive all the gods, East and West, wouldn't that be a magnificent scenario?"

"Still the hesitation?" the great Hermes asked resentfully.

Waking from my own surrealist scenario, I immediately changed the cordial



expression on my face to show him my sincerity: "Hmm, you know, these things are very important. Before taking any action, I have to ask a few questions to better understand the situation and make a wise decision."

From then on, I asked about the particulars of the situation on Pluto, and Hermes' under cover operations there. After I was clear on every detail, I asked nervously: "You know, everything you said is essential; have you told anyone else?"

The great Hermes said proudly: "I haven't. This information is too dangerous, I came to Earth to inform high level authorities."

"Good." I softened my tone; I felt relieved. I stood up and gave the Messenger of the Gods a steaming hot cup of tea. "I'm terribly sorry; I forgot to offer you a drink. For coming such a long way, I want to show you my sincere gratitude as a delegate of Earth. Please, drink up. I'll pass this report on to my boss." Hermes seemed satisfied.

I decided to act right away, pressing a key on the phone to call out: "Mary, please send Smith into the office."

The situation was clear: there were some problems, but the outlook is still optimistic. In a rare moment of ease and trust, I casually asked: "So, what did those horrible catfish on Pluto transform the Gods of Olympus into?"

Hermes, stupefied, said: "How do you not know? Their external form has changed, but they are the most loyal friends a person can have, they stand by you and protect you."

I was understood his implication and laughed: Gods, with us morning and night. Hermes lowered his head and drank the tea. As he did, I smiled at him, pulled out my tranquilizer gun and shot him.

I ordered files on my desk as Smith entered, pointed at Hermes who was sleeping soundly in the chair and said: "This gentleman is very interesting. He told me some whoppers, and now he's tired, sleeping very soundly. Wait until he wakes up to deal with him. I'm afraid he's spreading some truly absurd rumors. You know, in this world there are always people like that, claiming to be the savior of humanity. Send him to the care facility for people like him.

Smith nodded. I locked up my drawer and took the key with me, putting on my coat and heading outside. "But, in future if you find people like this again who want to see me, please let them in. I still want to talk with them. Even if they're nuts, one of them might have something useful to say."

I walked out of the office and into the sun. It didn't look like the world was ending. In the street there were people of every shade and description, gentlemen, gangsters,

celebrities and politicians, beggars, each with their own false notions and ideas. Nobody cares if Earth is permeated with fatal toxins, if millions suffer from hunger, if millions of species go extinct. Would they even care if they knew that there is a group of catfish-like aliens on Pluto who want to turn human kind into ant-like insects? or of the existence of conspiracies and legends from 10 thousand years ago—a hundred thousand years ago? What they need now is the warm sunlight that guides their short, gloomy existence. It doesn't matter if we let them die in ignorance.

At home, I was met by my dog, Bread, as he heard me opening the door. He ran up to me, rubbing my knee on his head. I locked the door and sank into the sofa. What an exciting day. I could finally breathe free.

There's a lot of work to do, work that I can do much better than those barbarians from Mount Olympus. Those impulsive savages can't do anything right. They are disgusting and they deserved their punishment from those catfish aliens on Pluto.

It's not just Gods and cleaners who can do the spying. My people also have extraordinary talents. When the time is right, the world will be back into our hands. The kangaroos will rise again. We will defeat our enemies and take back our kingdom from these barbaric, blockheaded humans.

Bread barked at me twice, I smiled and gave him two doggy treats. He chewed happily as I patted his soft ears, humming some soft RB to myself.

## Han Song 噶赞寺的转经筒

### 一、奇异的转经筒

小荧去西藏旅游,有一天来到了噶赞寺。

这是后藏的一座黄教寺院,已年久失修。比较引人注目的是,主殿周遭悬挂着一圈铮亮的转经筒。

转经筒有一百零八个,小荧很快发现,其中一个颜色异样,隐隐有绿光闪烁,而其余的呈金黄色。这个转经筒,因此显得更加沧桑。

从顺时间方向数去,这是第三十六个转经筒。

她逐个拂转它们,一边默默为自己许愿。绕行到三分之一的时候,忽然狂风大作,飞沙走石。她吓得急忙逃回大殿。

当晚,她在寺中住了下来。

风兀是刮个不停,并下起了暴雨。雷闪像要撕裂天地。

少女栖住在无比陌生的地方,睡不着。半夜,听见风雨声中青藏高原的巨大抽泣,不禁想起自幼失母,与父亲相依为命的经历,便用被子捂住头嚶嚶恸哭。

忽然,她听见还有一个人在哭泣。

那是一种尖厉的女人般的声音,又细若游丝。小荧想到了鬼。

她吓得不敢哭了。

虽然知道喇嘛就住在隔壁,却也不敢出去,或者叫喊。

次日，天空却晴朗如洗。她把昨夜所闻，告知喇嘛。

喇嘛笑了，说，并非鬼哭，而是转经筒在号叫。

转经筒在号叫？她殊感惊异。

进一步，喇嘛说，是其中一个转经筒。由顺时针方向数去，是第三十六个。

历史上，噶赞寺曾多次被毁。每一次，转经筒均有失落或损伤，而仅有这个，保存了下来，已有一千三百年的历史。

在几次山洪和泥石流的爆发中，它也曾经遗失，后来却神奇地被找了回来。

它在风雨交加和天气变化时，便发出那不可思议的声音。

小荧仔细打量它，它却静默无声。她用食指触碰它，顿然有浓烈的苍凉感涌出，瞬间传遍了她的周身。她弹击它，转经筒发出持久的嗡嗡声。

无法想像，就是这东西，发出了昨夜那样的悲鸣。

喇嘛说，这是一只有灵魂的转经筒。

喇嘛的脸上浮现出了沧海一般的色调。

但这从时空深处走出的不寻常物件，竟然跟这么多平凡的转经筒，并排在了一起。想到这里，小荧眼泪夺眶而出。

## 二、再探神秘

返回火星，她把在西藏的奇遇告诉父亲。

父亲大笑，说：“这有什么稀奇？这是地球上静电的结果。”

他列举了那遥远蓝色星球上的众多例子，来向她说明。

比如，有一座山谷，会在雷雨天发出兵马之声；还有一口水潭，会在傍晚发出音乐之声；再比如，某座寺庙中的一口古钟，会在夜深人静时忽然自鸣。

“这都是大气中静电积聚太多的缘故，它们与地面的金属物或矿物相互作用，便发出了那样的声音。地球，就是如此啊。女儿呀，你不必要再害怕了。”

小荧才心下释然，却又有些乏味和失落。父亲的解释消解了恐惧，却也消解了令人心悸的神秘。

在小荧的心目中，西藏，应该是有某种鬼哭的，虽令她惶恐，却不会令她失望。

她回到自己的房间，砰地关上门。她无缘无故生起了闷气。父亲叫她吃饭，她也不理。

一年后，小荧又去到西藏，并且，特意再次拜访了噶赞寺。

“是来看转经筒的吧？”

喇嘛笑道，眨巴着洞悉一切的黑亮眼睛。小荧忽然觉得，这里的喇嘛个个帅气逼人。

她不好意思地告诉喇嘛，那不过是静电什么的。

她又害怕他们不快，忙补充道：“这只是我父亲的观点。”她本来是来重观转经筒的超现实奇异的，但又忍不住说出了科学方面的话语。这其实是一种很矛盾和微妙的心情，暴露了火星人与地球人之间的心理位差。

喇嘛不恼，只是微笑。

“上次你只呆了一个晚上，所以，听到的仅是一种声音。然而，它还会发出千百种声音。静电？那是做不到的。”

“真的？”

她的心又跳到了嗓子眼，感到了一道怪影就在身后紧随，就此忘掉了父亲的告诫。这回，她倒并不害怕了。她又在寺中住了下来。

在一个天气变化的夜里，转经筒果真又鸣叫了。这回不是鬼哭，而是人声。又有车声辘辘，一会儿，竟是机器轰鸣，像是一个大工厂在开工。过了一阵，还传出了连续的爆炸声。

几个晚上，小荧听到了不同的声音。

有一次是音乐声，是好几首曲子在连奏，仿佛是管弦丝竹齐鸣，又夹杂有藏鼓、根把和鹰笛之音，但都是小荧从未闻听过的曲调。

她欣喜无比，又深怀不安，这样过了一个月。

而喇嘛们安之若素，也不对她再做解释了。

在离开噶赞寺的那一天，小茈带走了一大包录音磁带。

### 三、幽闭的宇宙

三个月后，小茈又来到了噶赞寺。这次，随同她一起来的，还有父亲和父亲的一个研究生。

原来，父亲在听了磁带录音后，脸色也凝重起来。他决定要亲自去一趟，看个究竟。

他说：“现在看来，这声音非同寻常，恐怕不仅仅是静电吧？需要认真研究。”

来到噶赞寺，他和研究生绕着转经筒走了三圈，却没有看出任何名堂。晚上，一行三人在寺中住了下来。到了半夜，转经筒又铮铮作响了。

父亲和学生披衣冲出，只见那转经筒正在微微颤动，周身泛着一层茸毛似的红光。声音的确是从其腔子里发出来的。父亲抬头，见夜空隐隐发紫，四散飘零的星星都聚拢了，在凝神倾听。

转经筒的声音忽而喜悦，忽而哀怨。又有许多种声音，是他毕生不曾听到过的。

这时，他发觉身后有人。回头一看，是一位中年喇嘛。喇嘛的脸膛上荡漾着黑色的光芒，喇嘛在诡黠地窃笑。父亲心头一阵哆嗦。

他疾步回到寺中客房，看到女儿也醒了，好端端地坐在床头，这才放下一颗心。但小茈神色不安已极。

第二天，父亲对研究生说：

“太妖邪了。这肯定是一台录音机。但恐怕不是大自然生成的。”

“录音机……”

“是一种远古时代的奇异录音机，或许，跟史前消失的神秘文明有关。它录下了当时一些原始的声音。”

“难道，它里面不是藏着一个宇宙吗？”研究生忽然大声说。

“一个宇宙？”父亲吓了一跳，心忖年轻人的想法就是不一样。

“我就是这么一个感觉。在那转经筒中，有一个跟我们这个宇宙一样的宇宙。”

这些年，太空中的人们一直在寻找微型宇宙的存在，但始终没有结果。父亲的学生，在这方面也很痴迷。

父亲脸色微变，连连摇头，说：

“不可能，不可能！”

研究生说：“那不过是昨夜我面对它时产生的强烈感受吧。比如，有一种声音，像是黑洞在旋转呢，还有一种声音，像是流星划过呢，还有其它的声音，是超新星爆发呢，是星系在诞生呢。还有，那里面有生物，有人，有跟我们一样的文明！”

这么一说，父亲也有些迷恍了。许多年来，学术界一直有一种说法，就是宇宙是有无限多的，而其大小竟是等价的。但是，这仅是少数人的看法。父亲还是不愿相信。他是属于学者中的大多数的，那是坚持宇宙独此无二学说的传统和主流阵营。

他便说：“你还是我的学生吗？宣扬这种理论，连我都为你感到害臊。宇宙只有一个哩。”

研究生这才意识到自己说得太多了，有悖师道尊严的礼仪，连忙致歉，却不知为什么，死活不愿在关键结论上让步。

雪域高原使人行行为乖戾。

师生关系呈现了前所未有的紧张局面。一连几天，他们都无精打采。父亲与学生之间没有话说，寺后的雪山却更加灿烂灵动了。

而小茈却对学生很有好感。她觉得，他的那个猜想，是很大胆的，很勇敢的。

在火星上，男孩子经常来到她的家中。年轻人常常就宇宙间的疑难与父亲展开争论，直争得脸庞飞起了红霞。小茈便在一旁安静而有趣地倾听，竟听得忘了时间。这两个男人，显现出了他们各自的可爱之处。

现在，她想，那学生要是带着她，俩人一块儿走进那个微型宇宙中去，又是多么的妙趣横生啊。

在一个宇宙中终此一生，总是乏味的。

是的，正受着青春期反叛欲火撩动的火星女孩，要顽固地站在年轻学生的一边。而父亲总是可以用来撒气的。

她便主动找到那学生，与他热烈地讨论起来。

她说：“那个可怜的宇宙被禁锢在了里面。它不能运行，不能演化，不能用任何一种肉眼和望远镜看见，只能发出声音来诉说它的身世，引起人们的垂注。它是多么的无辜啊。它甚至不知道外面的时代已与它格格不入了。”

“你怎么知道它不能行动，不能演化呢？你怎么知道它需要我们的同情呢？也许，事实正好相反吧。总之，它与我们的宇宙并无不同。”男孩子怜爱地看着女孩，说道。

察知到女儿对这出格学生怀有这样的亲近感，父亲心中不是滋味。

他注视转经筒的眼光，也变得恶狠狠的了。他觉得那是一个恶性肿瘤，不合时宜地生长在这平安无事的世界上，扰乱了人间的秩序和理智。

他产生了切除它的强烈冲动。

一天，他向喇嘛提出，因为科学研究的目的，要把转经筒带走。

听了这话，女儿和学生都震惊了。

“老师，您不能这么做，转经筒是属于这个寺的啊，属于西藏的啊。”

“爸爸，您不能把它带走，它只有在这里，才会发出它的声音啊。去了别的地方，它会死去的！”

父亲只是冷笑，打量着喇嘛，等待他们的回答。喇嘛大概是没有想到会有人提出这样的要求，一时有些不知所措。父亲心想，他们是不会同意的。但他是火星人，永远是傲慢和自恋的。他说：“开个价吧，要多少。”

喇嘛们闻言脸色大变，匆匆聚拢来，头碰头用他们那奇妙的方言低声商议了一阵。过了一会儿，喇嘛中一个年纪大的，大概是这个寺的住持，走上前说道：“施主要带它走，那便带它走吧。世上还有什么东西是割舍不得的呢？这也是它的宿命啊。”

这回，是父亲大大感到意外了。

看着喇嘛平静如水的脸庞，小荧和学生都怔住了。

#### 四、结束与开始

父亲缓缓摘下了转经筒，转经筒很重，他几乎托它不住。

这时候，寺中所有的喇嘛都拥出来了。他们伫立在大殿前，齐齐垂着头，吟诵起了佛号。

父亲把转经筒搬到寺前的空地上，放好它，歪着头打量它。

小荧和研究生都不知道他下一步要做什么。

忽然，父亲枭鸟般怪笑了一声，猛地拔出激光剑，向转经筒劈去，一边高声叫道：

“就让我们来看看这里面藏着个什么样的宇宙吧！”

小荧和研究生大惊失色，上前阻止却来不及了。哐当一声，转经筒被劈成了两半，一左一右，侧身倒在了地上，还在不停地摇晃。

里面空空的，什么也没有。

喇嘛的念经声戛然而止。天地间万籁俱寂。小荧觉得心里好不踏实。

过了一会儿，天空漆黑了下来，满天星斗离头顶是那么近！

大家都不安地仰头看去。

这个时候，天庭中部一道白光闪现，天空无声地裂成了两半。

从那天裂处，飞出了亿万只鸟儿，不，是无数疾飞的转经筒！不，不是转轻筒，而是小荧从没有见过的宇宙飞船！它们在慌不择路地四散逃逸。

喇嘛齐齐叩起长头。

这个时候，瓜瓣般裂开的两大片天空，又开始沿着中间那道白线，慢慢折叠过来。

大地也折叠了过来。山峰的阴影像交战的巨兽朝一个中心点疯跑，一重重挤压在了一起。

小荧低头,看见自己的身影也开始弯曲,像遭了病虫害的禾苗,并从腰部齐齐折断了。很快,阴影便从两边合拢来,吞噬了所有的人,所有的山峰与河流,所有的海洋与星星。喇嘛的笑靥,作为最后的闪现,是一道弧光。没有人能够看到真正的宇宙大爆炸是如何开始的——那与人类的假说太不一样了。

### *Han Song The Wheel of Samsara*

*She travelled in Tibet and one day arrived at Doji lamasery. It was a small temple of Tibetan Buddhism now in a bleak, half-ruined state. What caught her eye was a string of bronze wheels hung around the wall of the temple. They were called the Wheels of Samsara.*

*There was a total of one hundred and eight wheels, moving in the wind; they symbolized the eternal cycle of life and death; of everything. She quickly noticed that one of them was a strange colour of dark green, singling itself out from the others, which were yellow.*

*It was the thirty-sixth wheel when counted clockwise.*

*She touched the wheels one by one, and made a vow to Sakyamuni, the Great Buddha. Midway through a sudden gale began to blow and a heavy mist fell. She was scared and she ran back to the temple.*

*She stayed in the lamasery that night.*

*The gale continued and became a rainstorm. Thunder and flashes of lightning were splitting the mountains and the sky.*

*She could not fall asleep on such a night, and at midnight she thought she could hear of the sob of the Tibetan plateau, which reminded her of her dead mother and her lonely father on Mars.*

*Suddenly, she heard a cry.*

*It was a miserable sound, weak as a hairspring and harsh as a woman's weeping, and it made her think of a ghost.*

*Fear stopped her own cry.*

*Though she knew lamas were sleeping in the next room, she didn't dare to go out or shout for help.*

*Winds and rain died out the next day and it became sunny. She told the lamas what she had heard the previous night.*

*They grinned, telling her it was not a ghost. "It was the howl of the wheel of Samsara," they said.*

*The howl of the Wheel of Samsara? She was surprised.*

*The lamas explained that it was one of the wheels. To be exact, it was the thirty-sixth clockwise.*

*According to the lamas, Doji lamasery had been destroyed several times in the past five hundred years. Each time the wheels were lost, but only the thirty-sixth one had been well-preserved to date.*

*Though it disappeared in a number of landslides and floods, it was finally re-discovered.*

*When gales and rain approached, it gave out unexplainable sounds.*

*So she looked at it carefully, but it simply kept silent. She touched it with her*

forefinger, and it emitted a sense of bleak dread, which flooded directly into her heart.

It was hard to imagine that it was the wheel that cried the previous night.

"It was a wheel of soul," a lama murmured.

The lama's face was dark, his expression cryptic.

So it was an unusual wheel which had encountered so much rain, so many winds, but now it had to join such a string of ordinary wheels. Realizing the fact, she could not hold back her tears.

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She returned to Mars and told her father about her finding in Tibet.

Father laughed and said: "Could that be called strange? The phenomenon was simply caused by static electricity on that remote blue planet."

Her father, a scientist, knew a lot of cases like that.

For instance, some valleys would emit the sounds of horses and dead soldiers in rainstorms, and some lakes would play music in the evenings. Documents even recorded a bronze bell in an ancient temple that could ring without anybody striking it.

"Once the air accumulates too much static electricity, it would trigger the strange sounds. All this can happen at any moment on Earth. Never be scared, my daughter."

She felt relieved, but also dull, and lost. Father's explanation expelled her fear, but also cheated her of the mystery she craved.

In her mind: there should be some sort of ghost in Tibet, who would frighten her, perhaps, but won't disappoint her.

She went back to her own room and shut the door. Without any reason, she was out of sorts. She turned a cold shoulder to her father when he called her to dinner.

The next year she went to Tibet again and made her way directly to Doji lamasery.

"You came for the wheel, right?" the lamas said, grinning, and winked their pearl-like eyes which could see through everything.

She felt a little timid, and told them about the static electricity theory.

However, she was afraid that they would be unhappy with the explanation.

So she added: "That was just my father's view."

The lamas did not feel unhappy. They smiled. "Last time you stayed here for only one night. So you could hear just one sort of sound. The wheel can send out thousands of different sound. How can static electricity do that?"

"Is it true?"

Her heart jumped to her throat again, and she felt a mysterious shadow following her closely. She quickly forgot her father's words. She did not feel scared this time, and decided to stay in the temple.

The wheel cried again on a dismal night. This time it was not a ghost cry, but the sound of a man. Then it became the zigzag of vehicles, then the roaring of machines in a factory. After a while, a string of explosions were heard.

For several consecutive nights, she heard many different sounds.

One night it was a piece of music, but the tune was strange, of a kind she had never heard before.

She felt joy mixed with a bit of fear. One month passed.

The lamas saw it with equanimity. And they explained no more to her.  
The day she left Doji lamasery, she carried back with her a bag of tapes.

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Three months later she returned to Doji lamasery, with her father and one of her father's postgraduate students.

It was the sounds she had recorded that made her father serious, and he decided to look for himself.

"Now I realize that the sounds truly were unusual. Can it really be static electricity? Anyhow, it is worth studying," he said.

Upon arriving at Doji lamasery, father and the student walked around the wheels of Samsara six times, but they saw nothing strange. The three of them stayed that night at the lamasery. At midnight, the wheel cried again.

Her father and his student put on clothes and rushed out, seeing that the wheel was quivering slightly, and its body was covered with a circle of red light. The sound came out of the body of the wheel. Her father raised his head toward the sky and discovered that it had turned red and all the stars had gathered together, listening to the sound with fixed attention.

The sound of the wheel changed tune, from happiness to grief. Then there were a lot of sounds her father had never heard before.

Suddenly he felt that something was behind him. He turned and saw it was a lama. The lama's face was indigo and hung with a tricky, secret smile.

Father ran back to the temple. Seeing his daughter sit on the bed in safety, he felt relieved. However, the girl herself was uneasy.

The next day her father told the student:

"It was monstrous. I thought it was a magic tape recorder. Maybe it was not a product of nature."

"Tape recorder..."

"Yes, a bizarre tape recorder left by human history. Maybe it had something to do with an extinct civilization. It contains some strange sounds of ancient times."

"But, does not a universe hide inside the wheel?" The postgraduate student suddenly shouted out.

"A universe?" Father was startled. Young people always had different ideas, he thought.

"That is what I believe. Inside the wheel there is a universe, the same as the one we are living in."

For many years people had been searching for a mini universe but the attempts had all failed. However, the student was still obsessed with the notion.

Father's face lost colour, and he shook his head again and again.

"Impossible, impossible!"

"That was what I strongly felt last night. A sound seemed to have been emitted by a circumvolving black hole, and another seemed to have been created by a dropping asteroid. And there were more sounds, reminding me of the explosion of a supernova and the birth of a galaxy," said the student, with a trembling voice.



Father thought it over and admitted the possibility. However, he was reluctant to believe the conclusion. He was a stubborn academician who held that there was only one universe.

“Are you my student?” he said. “How dare you talk about things this way! I am ashamed for you.”

The student realized that he had spoken too much and violated the dignity of his teacher. He apologized for his abruptness; however, he refused to take back his words.

For several days they lethargic. There was a dead silence between her father and his student. Nevertheless, joculars behind the lamasery turned more brilliant and graceful.

Only his daughter felt that the student got it right. He did raise a wonderful hypothesis, she thought.

When on Mars the young man often visited her home. The student usually launched a dispute with her father on the unexplainable universe. When the two men’s faces turned red owing to the quarrel, she sat aside quietly, listening to and watching them with a curious expression. How lovely the men were.

Now she anticipated if the student could take her to the mini universe in the wheel, and that would be the most exciting journey of her life.

She’d always take the student’s side. It was the side of unorthodoxy.

“The universe is trapped in the wheel. It can neither move nor evolve, and it can not be observed with eyes or telescopes. It can only give out some poor sounds to tell about its past and attract passer-bys’ attention. How innocent it is. It does not even know that the era out of the wheel is against its own,” She said, red-eyed.

“How do you know that it can not move or evolve? How do you know that it needs our pity? Maybe the truth is the other way around,” said the boy, looking at the girl with a tender expression.

Being aware that his daughter might like the bothersome student, her father felt unhappy.

His sight became ferocious when it fixed on the wheel. He began to regard it as a tumour growing on the planet, and it was threatening the order and intellect of the human world.

He should cut it off.

One day he told the lama that he would carry the wheel to Mars for the purpose of scientific research.

Her daughter and the student were shocked upon hearing the request.

“Professor, you can not do that. The wheel of Samsara only belongs to the lamasery, and it only belongs to Tibet!”

“Father, you can not take it away, it can only give out its voice here. It will die if you take it to a different place!”

Father just sneered, and gazed at the lamas, waiting for a reply. The lamas seemed to have no clear idea about her father’s request, and they were all at a loss. Her father thought that they would not agree with him, but he said: “Let’s make a deal. How much is it?”

The lamas gathered and murmured for a while. Then an old lama, possibly the living Buddha of the lamasery, stepped forward and said to father: “My benefactor, if you really want it, just take it away. Is there anything in the world that we can not give up?”

*And it is the wheel's fate."*

*The reply went beyond father's expectations.*

*Watching the lama's peaceful face, the daughter and the student were also stunned.*

*\*\*\**

*Father picked the wheel up. The wheel was so heavy that he could hardly hold it up.*

*At that moment, all the lamas walked out of the temple. They lowered their heads and began reciting sutras.*

*Father removed the wheel to the ground in front of the temple, placing it well, and stared at it with a thoughtful expression.*

*The daughter and student did not know what he was going to do next.*

*Suddenly, father burst into a bewildering laughter, just like an owl, and he pulled out his laser cutter, waving it toward the wheel.*

*"Let's see the real face of the so-called hidden universe!" he cried.*

*The daughter and student were frightened. They stepped forward to stop her father but it was too late. The wheel was cut into two pieces down the middle, falling apart to the solid ground.*

*It was empty. Nothing was inside.*

*The lamas suddenly fell silent. So did the mountains and the sky. She felt extremely uncomfortable.*

*After a while, the sky became dark, and stars were just inches away from people's heads.*

*Everybody looked upward in astonishment.*

*At that moment, a silent, bright white light flashed across the sky, splitting the sky into two pieces, just like the laser cutter had cleaved the wheel.*

*Millions of wheels appeared in the sky, just like flocks of birds. They were spaceships she had never seen before. They were escaping something, in haste.*

*The lamas kneeled down and began to pray.*

*Then the split sky began to fold along the white light in the middle of the universe.*

*And so did the vast land. The shadows of mountains rushed to an unnamed centre, just like fighting beasts, and their bodies huddled together.*

*She lowered her head and saw the shadow of her body begin to bend, just like a tree eaten away by insects, and it finally broke from her waist.*

*Then all the shadows folded together from opposite directions, swallowing all the people, all the mountains and rivers, and all the oceans and stars.*

*The lamas' smile flashed as an arc on the last second.*

*Nobody could see how the Big Bang started – it was quite different from all of humanity's previous hypothesis.*

*Xia Jia The Demon-Enslaving Flask / 夏筋：關妖精的瓶子*

*ALTHOUGH James C. Maxwell was a rigorous physicist, he could nonetheless remain unfazed when confronted with supernatural phenomena. This was probably all due to his wife's enthusiastic interest, over the years, in all types of folk tales and legends.*

Right now the uninvited guest was sitting next to the fireplace, looking somewhat shabby. It was only after repeated entreaty from his host that he finally—and reluctantly—took off his hat. It was a heavy wrinkled pointed hat of olive green, which he was now fiddling on his knee, leaving exposed his sweatsoaked brow and a pair of furry, iconic ears.

‘Excuse me for a moment,’ Maxwell said to him and left the living room. Mrs Maxwell was by this point standing at the end of the hallway, holding a cup of coffee.

‘So this is the legendary demon?’ she asked with curiosity.

‘At least he says so himself.’

‘He’s rather large in stature,’ she commented, ‘though ineffectual-looking.’

Indeed, sitting next to the fireplace, that—what might one call it? Thing?—was devoid of any appearance of grace, enigma or even the ability to instill awe. He was wearing a rough coat and looked like a farmhand who had just emerged from a field of corn, despite the fact that he had indeed landed in Maxwell’s laboratory in a shroud of smoke accompanied by that proverbial boom.

‘This must be some kind of a joke,’ Maxwell said, ‘though I cannot understand why.’

‘Still, be prudent. We shouldn’t judge people by their appearances, much less demons,’ Mary said without any hint of anxiety. The two of them returned to the living room together.

After downing a cup of hot black coffee, the demon seemed visibly more at ease. So Maxwell took up the original conversational thread: ‘Mr Ro ... pardon me, you said your full name was ...?’

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‘Cornelius Gustav Rumpelstiltskin,’ said the demon, looking almost embarrassed.<sup>1</sup> ‘It was given to me generations later; an ancient Germanic name.’

‘Yes, yes, sir, but let us continue—we were talking about Archimedes just now.’

‘Right, he was my first master, you see. But to be perfectly honest with you, he was a bloody old lunatic,’ the Demon said, pulling a long face. ‘For dozens of years I was at his beck and call, and I built pile after pile of useless things. The night before the Romans barged into Syracuse, he sealed me under slats of stone. It’d be another hundred plus years before I could come out, you see.’<sup>2</sup> Quite amazingly, the demon’s eyes grew misty at this point, and he used the back of his furry hand to wipe them hastily.

Maxwell cleared his throat. ‘I quite understand. But you haven’t told me about the wager you two made back then.’

‘Wager? Yes ... it was so long ago and all rather ... fuzzy to me,’ the demon stammered and continued to fiddle with his hat. ‘The odds were against me from the very start—I’m sure you know what a curmudgeon he was.’

‘Very well, then. But how did you emerge again out of Mr Faraday’s laboratory notes?’

‘That was a long story, with many things happening in between. If you knew the long list of people I served, you’d probably guess it all, and I wouldn’t have to ramble on needlessly here.’ The demon lifted his face toward Maxwell with a plaintive look. ‘You physicists are a crazy lot, when it comes down to it. You take for example that Mr Faraday. One day I was wrapping wire coils for him, as usual, when he suddenly said to me, “Well, you’ve been with me long enough, and I don’t have much more for you to do

here,” and just like that he sealed me up in that notebook without so much as a farewell. And then I somehow ended up here. I’m not kidding, all those years I was with him, it was all coils, coils, coils. It’d never occurred to him to ask me for even a copper.’

Maxwell was about to express his own opinion on this matter, because, as we all know, Faraday was his mentor, but just then Mary appeared elegantly at the door.

‘James? Are we not going to ask our visitor to stay for dinner?’

1 The name of the demon is purely the author’s invention. The surname Rumpelstiltskin comes from Grimm’s Fairy Tales, in which a dwarf asks the queen to guess his name, and if she failed to guess correctly, he would then take her child.

2 In 212 BC, when Roman soldiers conquered the city of Syracuse and barged into Archimedes’s room, they saw him working on geometry drawings on the floor. He said to the soldiers calmly, ‘Don’t trample my diagrams,’ whereupon an angry soldier killed him with a sword. What the demon recounted took place the day before this.

### The Demon-Enslaving Flask

The demon was instantly ill at ease. ‘No ... don’t go to all that trouble, good madam, sir. I would rather that we take care of our business right now.’ He fished out a piece of parchment from his pocket. It was oily and ancient, much the worse for wear.

Maxwell spread it out and began reading the paper carefully, while the demon continued speaking next to him: ‘In any case this is how it works. We make a wager, and if I lose I’d become your servant; if you lose, your soul and property are all given over to me and I gain my freedom.’

‘Must we do it this way?’ asked Mary, leaning over.

‘Old rules, madam, for thousands of years. I’m sure you’ve heard it all.’

‘Wagering with a demon is not necessarily a profitable thing,’ Maxwell lifted his head. ‘So what can you do for me?’

‘Lots of things.’ The demon stretched out his furry hand and a few glittering gold coins materialized in his palm; he deliberately let them drop to the ground, clinking loudly. ‘Wealth, power, status—whatever you desire.’

Maxwell looked into his palm curiously. ‘Well, whatever else it may be, this does seem like an opportunity,’ he muttered to himself. ‘Very well. Dinner can wait, Mary, and bring me a pen.’

The rule of the wager was like this: Maxwell raises a difficult problem; if the demon fails to solve it within twenty-four hours, Maxwell becomes the victor. Of course, the condition being that this problem must have a specific solution.

‘Don’t try to stump me with ambiguous problems, sir. You can ask me to circumvent the American continent, but don’t ask me to raise a question that even I myself cannot answer.’ 3 Maxwell agreed.

‘This may not be so simple, dear,’ Mrs Maxwell seemed uneasy. ‘How can you be sure you will win this wager?’

‘Listen, Mary,’ Maxwell cautiously lowered his voice. ‘I read over the contract carefully. Guess what the most interesting part was? That long list of signatures—Aristotle, Galileo, Newton, Copernicus. Almost every physicist I know is there, with encyclopedic completeness. This is nothing extraordinary, but think of it this way: in over several thousands of years we’ve never heard of any physicist losing his life from having made a

deal with the demon. So I hardly think I'm going to be the first.'

Mary blinked rapidly.

3 This is actually an unsolvable paradox. Ancient Greeks loved working on paradoxes, so the demon must have suffered at their hands as a result.

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'Poor demon,' she said, sighing. 'How are you going to put him to the test?'

'We will see. Actually I'm not so sure myself.'

Just when the demon was scrunching up his sweat-soaked hat for the one hundred and eighth time, Mrs Maxwell, with an amiable smile, invited him into her husband's laboratory. On the way, she hung up the much-abused hat she had carefully rescued from the demon's hands. At this point Maxwell was adjusting the experimental equipment that was just beginning to take shape.

'I think this ought to do it,' Maxwell said, taking out the rubber-stoppered end of a flask from the sink.<sup>4</sup> 'Come—the entrance is here.'

The demon looked at the set of glittering glass vessels near despair. The equipment's main component was a large glass flask with rubber stoppers at both ends. It contained a colourless liquid. The middle of the flask was divided by a vertical glass partition.

'Are you going to put me in there?' asked the demon weakly.

'Correct. To see if you can find a way out,' Maxwell replied. 'And it will be a most worthwhile experiment.'

The demon stood at the side of the empty flask and hesitated for a moment. With resignation he shrank his body and slipped into the flask and after a brief flurry of sounds, the opening was stoppered. The demon floated in mid-air and looked around. The curvature of the glass's shape distorted the objects outside. The Maxwells were looking into the flask with curiosity.

It was impossible for him to get out directly. It is a truth universally known that in any fairy tale, once a demon spirit is imprisoned inside a flask, he can never escape. (This odd fact perhaps shows the limits of the demon's transformative powers, since he could theoretically shrink himself to an atomic scale and exit through the orderly lattice of silicon dioxide molecules.

5 Although we cannot be sure that he wouldn't be suctioned onto a covalent bond from the forces of static electricity.) Obviously, Maxwell had already considered this detail in this intriguing experiment—I mean—life-and-death wager. So, there was only one way to escape, predetermined by the experimenter.

The only way.

To be fair, the demon Cornelius Gustav Rumpelstiltskin in fact possessed a 4 This is a simple way of testing the tightness of a sealed vessel. One uses the temperature of one's palm to heat up a vessel and submerge it in water, then watching to see if air bubbles escape.

5 The crystal lattice of silicon dioxide is a three-dimensional, beehive-like structure. The covalent bond between two silicon atoms is attached to an oxygen atom. Strictly speaking, however, glass is not made of pure silicon dioxide; it contains many impurities.

The Demon-Enslaving Flask sound scientific mind, or, the very least, after having been around physicists for several thousand years, he had acquired some scientific habits of mind. Now, after he got over his initial gloom, he tried to shrink himself even further,

investigating every inch inside the flask. After the Maxwells finished a cup of coffee and went into the laboratory to check the experiment's progress, the demon had restored himself to a size visible to the naked eye. He looked quite gloomy.

'I found two small holes on the partition, not much larger than the size of air molecules,' he declared. 'But the air is really terrible in here. I feel a bit dizzy.'

6 'There is ether in the flask, of course,' Maxwell said somewhat apologetically, 'for the purposes of the experiment.'

The demon scratched the back of his furry head.

'I think I will soon be able to grasp your meaning,' he said. Then he disappeared again. When the Maxwells were walking out of the laboratory, Mrs Maxwell winked like a mischievous girl and said, 'I'm beginning to think that you'll win for sure, my dear. Though it's not so extraordinary that a fisherman couldn't do just as well.'

7 How did you manage it, if I may ask?

'I wanted to see if it was possible for him to separate the cold and hot air molecules—you know, the fast-moving ones and the slow-moving ones. This is about reducing entropy,' he went on. 'As you know, the Second Law of Thermodynamics dictates that systems of low internal energy cannot be converted into high internal energy without loss. In other words, the degree of disorder in a system—entropy—can only ever increase. This is why a cloud of hot gas can freely expand, but can only be compressed through external work. Bread goes stale, roses wilt, people grow and age, the universe will eventually diffuse into a mass of thin uniform gas, and the stars will stop burning: all this is due to the Second Law.' 86 Ether, as a vapour, can be used as an anesthetic. Here it is used primarily for its ease of vaporization at low temperature.

7 This refers to the story of the fisherman and the genie in One Thousand and One Nights. If an ordinary fisherman could trick the genie back into the bottle, one might ask why Maxwell went to all this trouble. All I can say is that playing too straight loses the game.

8 The first line is the Kelvin statement of the Second Law of Thermodynamics, that heat cannot be unconditionally converted into work. The next line is the Clausius statement, and the two statements are equivalent. 'Entropy' is a thermodynamic quantity which measures the degree of internal disorder in a system. When a cold gas mixes with a hot gas, its entropy now equals to the sum of the entropy of the two gases from their original state. According to the Second Law of Thermodynamics, entropy is always increasing, and therefore diffusion, growth, rotting, etc., are all irreversible processes.

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'It sounds rather sad,' Mary said quietly, squeezing his hand.

'I don't like this law.'

'Well, at least I didn't come up with it,' Maxwell smiled gently.

'But maybe it doesn't have to be absolute. I was thinking, if there were a clever and agile

demon the size of a gas molecule, someone who could channel fast-moving molecules to one side and slow-moving molecules to another, then after a while the gas could be partitioned into cold and warm halves. As a result, entropy would decrease, and this unpleasant law would be nullified.'

*‘Can that be done?’ Mary’s eyes grew wide.*

*‘Hypothetically, yes, but I had never thought that I would have the chance to confirm it experimentally. Theoretically the Second Law is irrefutable—and now, you see, our lives and possessions are all riding on it.’*

*‘This is not a comforting thought.’*

*Smiling, Maxwell put his arm around his wife’s shoulder and a kiss on her forehead. ‘Why don’t you go to bed first, dear. I’d like to observe a bit longer.’*

*An hour later, when he went to look again, he saw that the demon had already gotten the hang of it.*

*‘I shrank to the smallest size possible, and these molecules are just dashing around me like mad marbles,’ said the demon, out of breath.<sup>9</sup> ‘I was thinking that if I could control the molecules passing through and only let the fast ones enter this side, the temperature on this side would go up and make the liquid ether evaporate. Then it would turn into gas, force open the rubber stopper and then I could get out!’*

10

*‘Looks like you really do know some things,’ Maxwell praised him. ‘Well, carry on. If you get the chance, do also note the velocities of those molecules coming*

*9 Indicating the vigorous movement of heated gas molecules.*

*10 Here we come to the meaning of this story’s title—the concept of ‘Maxwell’s Demon,’ a topic of great interest in thermodynamics and originally raised by Maxwell himself. The Second Law of Thermodynamics indicates that heat cannot be unconditionally transferred from a low-temperature system to a high-temperature system, for in this process there will be a necessary energy loss. Yet Maxwell pointed out that if there existed a microscopic ‘demon’ able to react quickly and control the gateway of a closed system, separating fast- and slow-moving molecules into the two halves of the system, the demon could then separate hot and cold gas by its random molecular movement. If this were possible, then ships could sail on the ocean from the work extracted from the heat of sea water, ejecting ice as it goes along, in effect violating the Second Law of Thermodynamics. Although this hypothetical situation is absurd, it evoked much important discussions and led to the concepts of negative entropy and information entropy. This example once again tells us that scientists can keep a lively imagination and a childlike mind even when studying seemingly serious questions of physics.*

*The Demon-Enslaving Flask*

*your way, so that I can perhaps verify my theory on velocity distribution,’ he said, then left the room.*

*11 The next day, after having breakfast and having enjoyed a Schubert piano impromptu, the Maxwells walked toward the laboratory with a spring in their steps. A fresh morning breeze carried the scent of roses from the garden into the room.*

*‘How goes it?’ Maxwell leaned over the equipment to take a careful look. The pool of liquid ether had not changed noticeably. ‘It appears that you were not very efficient last night.’*

*The demon did not show himself, but only shouted, ‘You ought to try this for yourself, sir—it’s like a forest of flying bullets—ow! To you the molecules may look well-behaved,*

but in actual fact they fly around like mad—they never stop. If I could only stand still for a minute ... ouch! Ouch! It's like separating a herd of stampeding cattle! This work is dangerous!

Maxwell shook his head. Mary came up from behind him.

'You look disappointed, James?' she asked him gently.

'Perhaps a little.' He turned and kissed his wife's sweet-smelling curls. 'Our demon may not be very nimble, but he's been working hard.'

'Our?' Mary blinked mischievously. When her husband left the laboratory to go to his study, she carefully closed the curtains, to prevent the warm morning light from interfering with the experiment's accuracy.

When they returned from their evening walk that day, they finally saw some small change. The temperature on one side of the bottle did increase, but not nearly enough.

'I should have thought of this: the demon needs to do work in there, too. This was too difficult for a demon of this scale,' Maxwell said thoughtfully. 'In any case, the Second Law triumphed.'

The two of them sat aside and waited calmly. When the giant clock struck nine, they heard a 'bam' sound and saw the demon's flat nose angrily plastered to the inside of the flask.

'I admit defeat!' the demon shouted hoarsely. 'Let me out of here this minute.' Attentively, Mary brought bread rolls and hot coffee. After devouring everything, the demon seemed to have regained his stamina.

'I've never done such exhausting work. I would quite like you to try it yourself.'

11 This is the Maxwell Speed Distribution, a formula used to describe the probability distribution of molecules at different velocities in the same system. Another way of putting this is the distribution of probabilities at different speeds as a molecule's velocity changes at random.

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Smiling, Maxwell puffed on his cigar, his expression inquisitive.

'That would be interesting indeed. Yes, were it possible, I would love to see that marvellous microscopic world, just as you did.'

After a brief silence, he seemed to have remembered something, and from his breast pocket took out the scroll of parchment on which the contract was written. Glumly, the demon scrawled his name there, signifying the beginning of his new servitude.

'I will be at your service from now on,' the demon said, and began chewing his fingernails one by one. 'But can you explain to me what just happened? There must be some principle that you can tell me about, right?'

Maxwell scratched his head and stood up: 'All right. Come with me to my study. There are a few books I've written myself that can start you on the fundamentals ...'

He left with his arm draped across the demon's shoulder. Mary sighed, and dutifully gathered together the cups and plates on the table—tasks she had hoped could be turned over to the demon. But in fact she should have anticipated this: that physics was precisely the kind of thing that gets someone hooked and distracted.

In any case, there was much to look forward to in life from this point on. This was the story of how Maxwell easily conquered the demon. Alternatively, the story of how the



demon Cornelius Gustav Rumpelstiltskin once more met with defeat after having met Archimedes and begun his miserable millenniaspanning experiences. But the story is not yet finished.

After the Maxwells passed away, they tended a small rose garden in a corner of heaven. No physics research disturbed their quiet and leisurely days, though the kind-hearted demon occasionally came to visit them.

‘What have you brought us?’ Maxwell asked him, sitting in a chair, his wife standing beside him with her gentle demeanour, assuming the same positions and postures as when they were alive.

‘A photograph, master and mistress.’ The demon took out the thin glossy piece of paper from behind his back, looking slightly diffident. ‘I took it myself.’

Maxwell held the photograph close and scrutinized it. In it were people he did not know.

12 This is an actual photograph, showing twenty-nine famous physicists including Einstein. It might be called the world’s most powerful group portrait.

### The Demon-Enslaving Flask

‘Let me guess ... which one is your current master? Which one read my manuscripts?’

‘Front row middle, that one—no, a little more to the right. Can you believe it? He was only sixteen back then. I more or less watched him grow up,’ the demon said, sighing. ‘He looks slovenly now, as if his hair had been hit by lightning—back then he was a handsome lad.’

‘What did he ask you to do?’ Maxwell asked curiously. ‘He said to me, “Go chase after this light beam, run as fast as you can, and come back to see me when you catch up with it.” You tell me, is this something This is the photograph taken by the demon: First row (left to right): Irving Langmuir, Max Planck, Marie Curie, Hendrik Lorentz, Albert Einstein, Paul Langevin, Charles Eugene Guye, C. T. R. Wilson, Owen W. Richardson.

Second row: Peter Debye, Martin Knudsen, W. Lawrence Bragg, Hendrik Anthony ‘Hans’ Kramers, Paul Dirac, Arthur Compton, Louis de Broglie, Max Born, Niels Bohr.

Standing: Auguste Piccard, Émile Henriot, Paul Ehrenfest, Edouard Herzen, Théophile de Donder, Erwin Schrödinger, Jules-Émile Verschaffelt, Wolfgang Pauli, Werner Heisenberg, Ralph Howard Fowler, Léon Brillouin. 10

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you are allowed to make someone do?’ 13

‘Of course, of course ...’ Maxwell seemed deep in thought. ‘This is a tremendous idea. As we all know, the speed of light is constant, something I proved long ago.’

‘I don’t quite understand,’ Mrs Maxwell said gently. ‘It does sound rather taxing.’

‘There was more, madam.’ The demon blinked, tears welling up in his eyes. ‘Look at this man. Who knew what he was doing behind my back? He then became very enigmatic and made me go inside this box. I learned my lesson from you, you see, so I suggested that he put a cat in there instead and let me guess what might happen. To this day I don’t know whether the poor little creature is alive or dead.’<sup>14</sup>

‘You don’t know if it’s alive or not? Why not?’ Maxwell asked.

‘This has to be explained more slowly, but you’ll understand eventually. It’s not quite

like what you were studying before,' said the demon with some satisfaction. 'And then there's this old bloke—yes, him—he lectured me on the structure of matter for an entire morning, all smiles and patting me on the back about how quickly I was absorbing it all. Then, at the end, he took a piece of red chalk to draw two small circles on a blackboard covered with diagrams, and said to me, "You win if you could make these spin in the same direction." '15

Maxwell shook his head with bemusement. These topics were clearly outside his areas of expertise, but there was no question they provoked his interest in physics again.

13 It has been said that Einstein first raised the idea of Special Relativity when he was sixteen. He wrote in a paper: 'If one were able to travel at the speed of light, one would see next to oneself electromagnetic waves that are simultaneously stationary and vibrating—what a remarkable contradiction.' This idea came out of Maxwell's theory of the constant speed of light. Ultimately Einstein boldly conjectured that if the measurable speed of light remains constant, the only thing that could change would have to be the contraction of space itself. So in the end, as every elementary school student now knows, the demon could not ever catch up with that beam of light.

14 This refers to 'Schrödinger's cat,' a classic metaphor given by Schrödinger when describing the uncertainty of quantum mechanics. A cat is put into a closed box along with a radioactive particle, such that when such a particle decays, it activates a bottle containing poison that can kill the cat. Before the box is opened for observation, the probability of the particle's decay versus non-decay is one in two, so in effect, the cat remains in an extraordinary state of being half dead and half alive. The act of observing the cat will disturb the system and ultimately determine the life or death of the cat.

15 Meaning the Pauli Exclusion Principle. Pauli believed that for fermions, two electrons occupying the same energy level must have opposite spins.

### The Demon-Enslaving Flask 11

'I will raise these topics at tea this afternoon. Would you like to join us? Perhaps you might like to see your former masters? You now know far more than we do.'

'Do they all attend?' The demon asked timidly.

'Most of them will, assuming Archimedes doesn't lose track of the time, and that Mr Newton is not feeling unwell.<sup>16</sup> We have tea every afternoon, a tradition that has continued for thousands of years.'

'Archimedes? You mean Mr Archimedes?' The demon leapt from his chair, grabbing that pointed hat of his that never left his side. He looked around anxiously. 'Actually, no, thank you, I just realized I have another engagement ...'

'That's unfortunate—are you really so averse to seeing him again?' Maxwell stood up to walk the demon to the door. 'So, can you tell me what question he asked you? I've never been able to figure it out.'

The demon turned around. A quiet celestial afternoon light spread out across his furry ears and sad yellow eyes. It was so warm and serene, but still, he shrugged clumsily, as if that excitable old man were standing in front of him right now, issuing an exhilarated challenge to the whole world.

'Actually he was a very agreeable old fellow; sometimes I really do miss him,' he answered. 'But he had no business shouting to me, "Give me a point to stand on!" That is

something not even God could deliver ...'17

16 Newton was in poor health during his last years, having suffered from anorexia, insomnia and sporadic episodes of paranoid delusions before he died in 1727.

17 These are the famous words uttered by Archimedes: 'Give me a point to stand on, and I can move the earth!' Poor demon.

1.

# Japan

## Akiko Kawabata Der Mond am Himmel

Wir Japaner haben seit alten Zeiten geglaubt, dass auf dem Mond die Hasen wohnen, weil das Muster dort so aussieht, wie ein Hase den Reiskuchen stampft.

\*\*\*

Hallo, mein Name ist Mai, ich bin eine von mehreren Hofdamen unserer Kaiserin. Jeden Tag schreiben wir mit dem Pinsel und der schwarzen Tinte Gedichte auf das feine Papier, plaudern hinter dem Wandschirm mit der Kaiserin, selbstverständlich mit unseren schönen Fächern in den Händen, in zwölf geschichteten schönen Kimonos aus Brokat. Hin und wieder machen wir einen Ausflug, um Kirschblüten zu sehen, oder um Kuckucke zu hören (im Frühling, natürlich). Zudem fahren wir auch mit dem Ochsenwagen zu einem Tempel, um Sutras zu hören und Gottes Beistand zu erlangen. Im kaiserlichen Palast gibt es auch viele Feste, auf denen die Musiker des kaiserlichen Hofes schöne Melodien mit ihren Flöten, Saiten und Lauten spielen.

Es war ein sehr kalter Tag und ein mächtiger Schneesturm wütete im Winter im vergangenen Jahr, als ich eine Hofdame wurde und eine Prüfung mitgemacht habe, in der die Herrin, die in ihren Armen eine schwarze Katze hielt, mich plötzlich fragte: »Mai, wie mag wohl der Schnee auf dem Koraho aussehen?«

Ohne Zögern lief ich zum Fenster hin und öffnete den Fensterladen und rollte den Vorhang hoch hinauf. Die Kaiserin lachte vor Vergnügen und sie stellte mir ein paar Fragen, ich antwortete, warf mich zu Boden, die schwarze Katze miaute und ich wurde ihre Hofdame.

Die Leute haben zuerst nicht verstanden, worum es dabei alles gegangen war. Es ging um das Gedicht von Litai-pe, in dem er schreibt: »lüft' ich den Vorhang aus Bambus und erspäh' des Koraho schneeig strahlenden Gipfel«. Das war das Gedicht, nachdem die Kaiserin mich gefragt hatte, und ich kannte es sofort und reagierte sehr rasch. Das gefiel meiner Herrin.

\*\*\*

Jetzt ist es Herbst. Heute war es am Tage sehr sonnig und wir plauderten lustig mit der Kaiserin, die mich plötzlich fragte: »Mai, wie mag wohl der Mond am Himmel aussehen?« Freilich lief ich zum Fenster hin und öffnete den Fensterladen und rollte den Vorhang hoch hinauf. Die Kaiserin lachte vor Vergnügen mit ihrem schwarzen Tier im Arm, weil der Mond so hell, groß und rund war. Die schwarze Katze miaute.

Unerwartet fiel etwas mit großem Lärm und Geräusch herab.

»Was ist denn das?«, fragte unsere Kaiserin mit ihrem schönen Fächer auf ihren Lippen.

Sofort ging ich dorthin, von wo man den Ton hörte.

Das war ein Hase. Oder etwas wie ein Hase. Der Kopf des Tieres war genau wie der eines weißen Hasen mit langen, spitzen Ohren, aber sein Unterleib war wie ein Mensch und hatte zwei Beine. Der Hase (oder das, was einem Hasen glich) schlug seine Augen auf. Er stand auf. Er trug ein seltsames Kleid. Das war glänzend, transparent und sein flaumiger weißer Körper war durchsichtig. Er verbeugte sich zu der Kaiserin, zu mir und den andere Hofdamen, und rezitierte ein Gedicht mit dem hellen, schönen und großen Mond in seinem Hintergrund. Er sang das Gedicht sogar:

Es war, als hätt' der Himmel  
Die Erde still geküsst,  
Dass sie im Blütenschimmer  
Von ihm nun träumen müsst'

»O wie schön!!«, sagte die Kaiserin. Sie war sehr begeistert. Der Hase setzte fort:

Die Luft ging durch die Felder,  
Die Ähren wogten sacht,  
Es rauschten leis' die Wälder,  
So sternklar war die Nacht.

Mein Herz begann zu klopfen. Der Herr Hase war viel eleganter als alle Herren im kaiserlichen Hof. Er sang die letzte Strophe mit seinem schönen Bariton:

Und meine Seele spannte  
Weit ihre Flügel aus,  
Flog durch die stillen Lande,  
Als flöge sie nach Haus.

»Bravo!!«, klatschte unsere Kaiserin und unter uns, bei den Hofdamen, brach der Beifall aus. Die schwarze Katze miaute in den Armen der Kaiserin.

Der Hase stand für eine Weile still, mit dem goldenen Mond im Rücken, dann verneigte er sich noch einmal, ganz tief, mit seinen ‚Armen‘ vor sich. Perfekte Manieren. Hinter ihm war ein Objekt, mit Farben glänzend wie sein Kleid, aber das Ding war wie ein zersplitternder Spiegel völlig kaputt.

Die Kaiserin gab ihm ein Zimmer, neben meinem, und auch der Kaiser ließ ihn zum kaiserlichen Hof zu. Aber ich hatte bemerkt, dass er am rechten Arm eine Blutung hatte. Sofort ging ich zu einem Maulbeerbaum im Hofgarten und schnitt ihn, um weißen Saft in einer Schale zu sammeln. Ich strich den Saft dick auf seinen Arm, gab ihm einen heißen, japanischen Tee und fragte ihn, wie es ihm ginge. Der Mond war noch am Himmel, hell und schön. Wir waren in seinem Zimmer.

Er sagte: »Vielen Dank, es geht mir besser«, und sah mich mit seinen runden,

schwarzen und großen Augen an. Seine Augen waren so hübsch, aber unerwartet hörte ich ihn sagen: »Sie haben sehr schöne, lange Haare, Mai.«

Ich errötete. In der Heianzeit, im Mittelalter, hatten alle Hofdamen solch lange, schwarze Haare. »Danke«, sagte ich einsilbig und fand ein zersplittertes Ding im Eck der Kammer. Das Ding sah wie ein Ei aus, war rund und transparent, glänzend, aber überall kaputt. Der Herr Hase, der jetzt mit einem braun-gelbem Gewand mit Stielblütengras-Muster bekleidet war, bemerkte meinen Blick und sagte:

»Keine Angst, Mai. Ich bin ein Ingenieur. Ich kann das reparieren.«

»Was ist denn das? Das scheint wie ein Ei.«

»Das ist ein Kahn, der im Himmel fährt.«

»Der Kahn fährt auf dem Wasser, nicht im Himmel.«

»Doch, ich bin vom Mond mit dem Kahn gekommen. Ich mag Reisen.«

Wir setzten uns auf die Matte aus Stroh, die Vorhänge schwankten im Herbstwind, die Grillen zirpten, alles unter dem hellen, runden Mond. Der Herr Hase setzte sich mit aufrechtem Rücken, betrachtete seinen heimatlichen, schönen Mond. Was ein seltsames Wesen! Schicker und feiner als alle andere Herren im Hof, intelligent sowie gelassen. Unwillkürlich summte ich:

Hase, Hase

Was siehst du und hüpfst du?

Du siehst und hüpfst

Den Vollmond in der fünfzehnten Nacht.

Darauf stand er auf, vor dem Mond, mit einem feinen Fächer – direkt vom Kaiser gegeben – in seiner Hand und fing zu meinem Liedchen an, sanft und leise zu tanzen. Ich war erstaunt.

»Sing weiter, Mai!«, sagte er. Und ich führte fort.

Das Liedchen war nur eine Strophe, ich wiederholte die gleiche Lyrik vielmals, und je öfter ich summte, desto lustiger wurde er. Er drehte sich geschmackvoll und ästhetisch, stampfte lautlos mit seinen weißen flaumigen Füßen, und hin und wieder sah er mich in seinen Augen an, lustig und mit einem Lächeln auf seinen Lippen, und dann hüpfte er zu dem Wort ‚hüpfen‘ tatsächlich, immer höher. Seine Silhouette mit langen Ohren flog an dem Mond vorbei, mit seinem Fächer und seinen Hosen, schneller, aber taktvoll.

Das war die schönste Nacht, seit ich am kaiserlichen Hof als Hofdame war.

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Aber unerwartet verschwand er von mir und vom kaiserlichen Hof am nächsten Morgen. Das Ding, das einem Ei glich, war auch weg, statt des ‚Kahnes‘ fand ich doch einen Brief:

Liebe Mai,

schönen Dank für Deine Freundschaft!

Amüsant war das mit Dir

unter dem Mond zu tanzen,

Nie werde ich Dich vergessen,  
Und wenn Du in Not bist,  
werde ich auf jeden Fall  
Dir helfen!

Dein weißer Hase,  
der hüpf.

Im Brief lag eine kleine Ähre Stielblütengras. Ich drückte das Gras an mein Herzen.

Im Sommer 2020 findet die Olympiade in Tokyo, Japan, statt. Es kommen Athleten aus der ganzen Welt. Die Stadt ist mit den verschiedenen Blumen, Fahnen und Illuminationen schön dekoriert und auch die Zuschauer versammeln sich in großen Mengen in der Metropole.

In den vergangenen sieben Jahren hatten wir sehr grausame Kriege, viele Leute wurden umgebracht, schnell und schlimm. Die Bevölkerung ist drastisch gesunken, doch hatte ich Glück, weil ich weder enge Freundinnen noch Familienmitglieder verloren habe.

Japan war seit alten Zeiten ein sauberes Land, aber es ist nach dem Krieg 'sauberer' geworden. Das heißt, wir haben beispielsweise kein Geld mehr, jeder hat eine Identitätskarte, in die alle persönlichen Informationen wie Name, Adresse, Alter sowie Kredit enthält. Kredit ist das Geld, das wir von unserer Arbeit erhalten. Wir haben weder schmutzige Geldscheine noch Kleingeld im Portemonnaie, sondern machen alles im Alltagsleben mit der Plastikkarte elektronisch. Wenn ich die Karte in meinen Computer einfüge, startet eine Software, in der kann ich sofort eine Übersicht all meiner Transaktionen finden. Außerdem bietet die Software Vorschläge zur Verbesserung an. Da ich mein Geld nicht immer gut verwalten kann, bekomme ich ab und zu eine 'Vorladung', um meine Schulden zu bezahlen. Aber das ist auch nicht immer so schlecht und finde ich manchmal sogar recht spaßig.

Wenn ich beispielsweise meine Schulden bezahle, gehe ich zu einer Einrichtung, die wie ein Vergnügungspark aussieht. Zunächst ziehe ich meine Identitätskarte durch das Terminal, dann werden im Display die Optionen angezeigt: 1. Sex 2. Drogen 3. Spiele 4. Märchen.

Märchen wähle ich normalerweise, weil ich Märchen von Andersen und Grimm mag. Ich wurde von den hunderten Schwänen verfolgt oder von der bösen Königin guillotiniert. Es ist alles Computergrafik, aber sehr realistisch mit Farben, Tönen und sogar mit Geruch, doch immer mit dem gleichen Ende. Ich werde mit der Maschine unter den Flügeln der Schwäne oder im Fallbeil festgehalten, dann kommen mehrere Nadeln, mit denen werde ich so schmerzlich in die Haut gestochen. Das Medikament wird in meinen Körper injiziert, so viel und abrupt, dass es mir sehr wehtut, meine Sinne schwindelig und nebelhaft werden und ich es kaum ertragen kann, sodass ich weine und vor Schmerzen laut schreie. Dann folgen Blitz und Donner, und ich höre ein großes Gelächter von zahlreichen Männern, die vom anderen Zimmer zu mir hin gucken. Dann sagt ein Mann: »Du machst das nicht wieder, Mai?«, und sage ich: »Nein.« Aber er sagt: »Lauter!«, so schreie ich: »Nein!« Er sagt weiter: »Du wirst stets unsere treue Sklavin sein?« So sage ich wieder ja, aber er fordert mich, dass ich in einem ganzen Satz sehr laut zehnmal wiederhole. So rufe ich

zehnmal sehr laut und ELEND: »Ich werde STETS Ihre treue SKLAVIN sein!« Dann werde ich entfesselt, das Zimmer wird hell mit der grausamen, schmutzigen Maschine. Ich habe gehört, dass das Medikament mein Leben verkürze und die Kosten dieser Vorladung (oder Strafe) inklusive des Medikamentes von meiner Karte elektronisch abgezogen würden. Und die Männer, die mich jedes Mal beleidigen, seien die Direktoren von 'Big Pharma.' Ich bin eines von ihren Lieblingsspielzeugen.

Andere Optionen habe ich bis heute nie probiert, weil ich keine Droge nehme, kein Computerspiel mag.

Heute aber wähle ich die Option 1. Sex, weil ich schon 20 Jahre alt bin und noch keinen gehabt habe. Und nach dem Gesetz, hätte ich das schon mehrmals gemacht haben müssen. Weil 'sie' sagen, dass Verschlechterung und Dekadenz für die Jugendliche wichtig sind. Wenn ich keinen Sex hatte und 20 Jahre alt werde, würde ich weiter bestraft und 'sie' würden von meiner Karte noch weiter Kredit (Geld) abrechnen. Und wenn ich noch einmal eine Minusbilanz hätte (ich habe die Minusbilanz seit sechs Jahren), wäre ich 'Game Over'. Das heißt, dass ich nicht mal mehr eine Sklavin sein und meine Identitätskarte deaktiviert würde. Ich würde in das Niemandsland deportiert, wo Könige und Prinzen, Königinnen und Prinzessinnen, sowie Präsidenten und Direktoren der multinationalen Unternehmen mich als eine Beute frei und nach Lust und Laune jagten und erschössen.

Ich lege meinen Finger auf eine 'Sex'-Schaltfläche und will sie drücken.

»Halt!«, sagt eine Stimme. Ich sehe in die Richtung der Stimme und finde einen weißen Hasen. Er steht wie ein Mensch auf seinen zwei Beinen. Warum ist ein Hase hier? »Mai, lass uns von hier fortgehen!«, sagt er. Zu meiner Überraschung kennt er meinen Namen. Er fasst mich am Arm und wir laufen mit höchster Geschwindigkeit. Die Wächter verfolgen uns und beginnen, uns mit dem Maschinengewehr zu beharken, ich bin bereit zu sterben. Aber er hält mich in den Armen und hüpfert wie ein Hase – oder er war tatsächlich ein Hase.

»Ich bin auf Zeitreise und wir trafen uns in der Heianzeit. Erinnerst du dich nicht!?«

Wir gehen aus dem 'Vergnügungspark' und hüpfen in das Ding, das wie ein Ei aussieht. Es ist bereits Nacht und der Mond hängt am Himmel. Der Kugelhagel verschwindet vor dem Glas des Kahnes, als der Hase die grüne Schaltfläche auf dem Armaturen Brett drückt. Er stellt die Zeit mit der Gleitschiene ein. Der Kahn oder die Zeitmaschine wechseln in den Automatikfahrmodus und der Hase sieht mich an.

Ja. Ein Déjà-vu. Er sieht mich mit seinen runden, schwarzen und großen Augen an. Seine Augen sind so hübsch. In seinen schwarzen, großen, runden Augen spiegelt sich mein Gesicht.

»Herr Hase. Wir haben uns vor langer Zeit irgendwo getroffen.«

Herr Hase lächelt und fängt an zu summen:

Hase, Hase

Was siehst du und hüpfst du?

Du siehst und hüpfst

Den Vollmond in der fünfzehnten Nacht.



Dann erinnere ich mich. Wir trafen uns im Palast des Kaisers. Ich war eine Hofdame. Und er hüpfte zu dem Lied.

»Wohin?«, frage ich. Alles was ich von der Zeitmaschine aus sah, war eine vollkommene Dunkelheit.

»2013, Japan«, antwortet er, die Einstellung auf dem Armaturenbrett sehend.

»Aber erzeugen wir kein Paradox durch die Zeitmaschine? Im Jahre 2013 gibt es doch eine Vorfahrin von mir!«

»Ja, dazu haben wir eine innovative 'Integrationstechnik' erfunden. Du wirst in die Vorfahrin integriert.«

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So bin ich im Jahre 2013, in Tokio, Japan.

Der Ministerpräsident Abe sagt, dass er die Trans-Pacific-Partnerschaft besprechen wird.

Das Atomkraftwerk in Fukushima entlädt schon fast drei Jahre nach dem großen Erdbeben immer noch mit Strahlung verseuchtes Wasser ins Meer.

Die Eierstöcke junger Frauen sind durch Gardasil zerstört: Merck »hat vergessen«, die Wirkung des Impfstoffs auf die weibliche Reproduktion zu untersuchen.

Was eine schöne Welt!, denke ich surfend im Internet.

Trotz alldem müssen wir weiterleben!

Der Mond am Himmel strahlt unverändert hell und schön.

Ende

# Phillippines

Kristine Ong Muslim Pet

*When I heard the familiar yapping followed by scratching against the doggie door which I hammered shut days ago, I realized that it was back, and it wanted to get inside the house.*

*I wrinkled my nose as I approached the back door. That smell was something I could never quite wash off its fur during the days I had no choice but to bathe it. It had gotten stronger now, like the putrid stench of decaying carcass.*

*I let it loose in the wild five days ago, hoping that it would not find its way back to us. I overfed it before I left it by the side of the road near the woodland area in Bardenstan. It was too dazed, too sated with its meal of artificial celery stalks and meat when I slammed the car door and sped away from its stunted form.*

*It used to walk upright before we adopted it from the shelter. Government regulation – each family should own one. Now it crawled on all fours, the posture of the submissive, after three months of torture.*

*My father beat it twice a day with a stick for no good reason but because he felt like it. My little brother once tied fireworks stick on its tail, lit it. It reduced the tail to shreds, which made my brother laugh so hard. As usual, the tail grew back two days later. A long time ago when men were still gullible, it might have been misconstrued as a creature of myth, a creature that was sacred. These days, we all took it for what it was -- a creature to quench our appetite to maim others.*

*I remembered reading that the amount of pain we inflicted on others showed how much we hated ourselves. Sometimes, it scared me to admit that it might be true.*

*My little brother killed himself last month. He slit his throat using the same cutter he used to carve Chief, his wooden toy Indian. As for my father, I saw him cry once after the funeral. Before the week was over, he died in what I wanted so much to believe as a freak car accident, doing 95 against a concrete embankment.*

*The neighbors brought enough casseroles to feed me for a year. What to do with the leftovers took my mind off the onset of grief.*

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*Sliding the kitchen curtain, the vinyl one with painted on green apples, I tiptoed by the sink. I took a peek at what it had become. It had grown emaciated. Its fur was matted with dirt. It stank -- the familiar odor of deprivation, hopelessness, and death. It nuzzled the doggie door, hoping it would someday open.*

*I wished I had the stomach to kill it. I hated its lack of will to fight, its unending devotion to the people who would never love back.*

*I returned to my accustomed place in the couch.*

*I watched television all day. There was an old cartoon showing the interior of a castle spire where black birds exited with a flurry. The tar man had awakened, and he unruffled*

*the feathers on the black birds baked into the king's pie. The birds shrieked when cornered.*

*On the evening news, the storm in the Pacific continued to broil. A volcano was predicted to explode in Eastern Europe. The black market brimmed with forgeries of wives to replace nagging ones. A religion centered on worshipping a radioactive potato began to sweep Nebraska into a frenzy. The news went on and on, lulling me to sleep.*

*\*\*\**

*It came back the same time the next day. The smell was not as strong as before. The sun must have done something to it, kind of disinfected it.*

*When I inspected it from the kitchen window, I noticed that its hair had receded. Like five-day stubble.*

*It was also standing upright. A little limp and a bit of wobble on the left leg, but other than that, it now walked like a human. I half-expected for it to say hello.*

*I did not know what to make of its transformation. It must have wanted so much to be home and be accepted that it willed itself to change into something it's not.*

*It went away after a few hours. I did not know why I suddenly felt lonely as if something had been taken from me when I watched it amble away and disappear behind the bushes. I imagined it spending the day taking in the suburban scenery, ducking behind the bushes once cultivated using hydroponics and were transplanted to line the reinforced concrete walkways.*

*Later that night, I woke up, crawled to the fridge, and wolfed two of the casseroles my spinster neighbor brought for me. It felt natural to crawl on all fours, to eat with my hands (or paws?), to lick clean the sides of the glass tray, to soil myself when I was too full to move.*

*I could not understand what was happening to me. I felt too tired to think. Maybe, things were supposed to end this way.*

*I dozed off on the tiled floor. My fur kept me warm. I don't know -- I must have dreamed about strolling on the beach. I remembered that it was cordoned off by the military a long time ago. I'm not sure but I could be wrong.*

*\*\*\**

*It came back the morning of the next day. I expected it to emerge from the doggie door, but it turned the knob on the front door.*

*Oh, how it knew its way around the house. It switched on the television, started the percolator, and hummed to itself while it chopped vegetables, real ones, on the countertop. I liked how its footsteps echoed as it sauntered about the house. It looked like it knew what it was doing.*

*I've got my nose pressed against the floor, sniffing the underside of the couch when it shooed me, swatted me with yesterday's newspaper. But that was it. It did not do anything to hurt me.*

*Indonesia*

## Handi Yawan Travel to Atlantis

The world's nowadays has fever-stricken spacecraft Time Travel as a result of the success of a project that creates a time machine and even introduced commercially. Time Travel Service users can see the past directly like they watch TV in 3D iMAX theater building. With this time machine technology, one could actually enter the world of the past and leave a vehicle that takes them directly to enters the foreign world of interaction. Everywhere people were talking about the thrill experience of people who have ever tried to go to the past. This sensation beat other spacecraft ever made such as; RollerCoaster, Thunderbolt, the outbound tour package to mars, and others become obsolete by the TimeTravel. A time traveler package which is the most sought after travel to the Atlantis, and simultaneously prove the research results of Prof. Arysio Nunes dos Santos ' (Ph.d.)

that Indonesia was once Atlantis The Time Machine is the development of scientists who take advantage of the existence of the neutron. A revolutionary scientist managed to correct the record during this time that the neutrons are particles as well, but until recently anyway no one scientist who was able to capture neutrons contained in which-where in the universe. These scientists get the fact that it turns a neutron is non particles and there is no any objects were able to catch it, but with the help of a magnetic field. Because it is non particles, Neutrons are able to cut through anything, even space and time. And scientists are aware that neutrons record each incident in the universe. This is the principle of the creation of time machine, i.e. utilizing neutron for tracking record in every neutrons, so people could see footage of past and present really enter the world of the past. therefore, by reason of the trip can only be done to the time backwards.

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Because of negligence, A girl named Farah lost and lost Atlantis in age when doing ramble.

The owner of a vehicle to form a search team led by Marwan because she is an anthropologist who knows how to bring them back home to the present. Then a volunteer named Herman, who turns out to be her boyfriend Farah participated in search contents of Farah.

Finally, Marwan and team sent to the 10,000 years ago with the consequences do not know what kind of future risk in the face in a foreign world they are going to visit. They ride a time machine that actually does move everywhere, only time is moving backward and stopped according to the setting of the time on the time-locker.

Marwan and Herman are the first step on the foot in the world of atlantis to be amazed and lost of words to reveal all he sees in front of her eyes.

Marwan and Herman's current standing in the middle of town mega city. Nevertheless, Despite being given the knowledge that the world of atlantis is far more advanced than a human ever reached in the present, nonetheless they both thought was still in a futuristic cyberspace. Haven't they ever seen hi-tech views like this, even beyond imagination.

Team moves away leaving a vehicle manned by two people to secure a vehicle that rides safely and they could return home. The meeting point has been determined, groups of Marwan was welcomed by other groups who came to see them. It turns out the Group was team Search returning appropriate time Farah agreed. They came to report search efforts have not been successful. The new group then comes back home with a split up the spacecraft carrying the team and its work was continued by Marwan team Marwan.

Marwan became worried because he had been predicting would happen a tidal wave of ocean water could submerge all of life on Earth and global weather to the freezing point. Marwan himself does not yet know what causes disasters that makes these past lives destroyed. He just gave the theory of collective memory on any ancient civilizations that relate to this universal natural disaster with the arrival of a dragon from the sky. Therefore, Marwan had to rushed search for Farah. But their efforts were nil anyway and eventually decided to return to the present time because the disaster predicted Marwan is getting near.

Beyond the alleged Herman was determined to continue the search and the team was unable to prevent Herman desperate continue searching for Farah, her boyfriend. Then place that they split up. Marwan and team back to their original place to go back to his time. But before Marwan give time-locker to Herman.

Herman must help itself if it had a chance to find a time machine in that period in order to be able to return home.

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Herman went on to own search and found with a little effort, it's easy to understand the technology of cyberspace herman at that time who turns out to be a simple how to operate it, so with advanced search internet age of atlantis, He could meet Farah in what is now known as the complex of pyramids of giza, Egypt.

At the same time the world community are doing a mass pilgrimage to Egypt so that it is easy for Herman took flight with them. And in this place, finally Herman and Farah met again.

Egypt at the time of Atlantis turned out to be the north pole of the Earth and the center of world civilization. Conditions of pyramids are very different, and good thing because with age yet. And the more astonishing was the face of the Sphinx when it faces towards the rising sun. The climate is not frozen as the polar regions now, even warm and every day bathed in light from the Sun is not shining.

Herman recalled a conversation with team Marwan before they split up. The theory of the continental plate shifts Marwan many shortcomings to explain mystery phenomena that many ancient buildings are scattered in the world, But this theory of Alfred Wagener until now used. But according to him, the North Pole is always interesting to have a negative charge on the positive elements of the South Pole, It is natural if huge terrain (pangeae) there are only Northern Earth handy just as Herman look now and the southern part is just the ocean. And it is evident from this place, Herman sees the sun rise

over the horizon, do not climb on top of the head like when standing in tropical or subtropical.

Farah explains that the people of Atlantis is a devotee of the Sun and currently there are festivals celebrating the new millennium in this place before sunrise. Farah explains that the people of Atlantis is a Sun worshipper and currently there are festivals celebrating the new millennium in this place before sunrise.

All of a sudden at the exact moment when the sun began to rise, ROAR from the sky breaking feasts and stop all human activities. All do not know what happened, just because of the glare of the eye the sky is ablaze in excess of its light by sunlight. The earth shook as if the quake so eroded the spirit of every man. Until the panic in the hearts, the wind started blowing hard and the sky glow also instantly dazzle the eye immediately darkened by black clouds that come quickly.

Gruesome sights in the sky is getting scared man, how did the black skies filled with various types of birds fly from the South and certainly not soft sand blown by the wind direction, toned The storm started coming hit, but instead it just makes everyone die of fear. Overflow of the water comes from a variety of majors and rise quickly swept all that interrupt the course. Not yet lost his wonder, the human flood-ravaged by sea from the South who came quickly reach tall buildings all over the world, tossing them into a fabulous world that also plagued the sudden extreme weather changes into a freeze.

Herman was already told by Marwan that would come a more devastating disaster, become aware and invited to find a place on the highest Farah could be quickly achieved.

Lucky, Herman and Farah to a skyscrapers and use the elevator to go up to the highest floor. While everyone else is precisely the opposite direction to the running around looking for help.

After they arrived at the highest floor of the building, Herman told Farah that the dazzling light and a thundering sound coming from the sky above is a comet coming into the solar system. And he also described the Comet almost dragging the Sun resulting in the position of the poles of planet Earth switching places with the existence of equilibrium on the relationship of the Sun to the Earth.

The Earth is constantly rotating its polar axis, suddenly switch places so that water from the South Seas sweeping across the Mainland and sink the whole life. Another consequence of the appearance of comets which turned out to be the symbol of the Dragon of the sky, the Earth is like a pendulum moves away from the line of an eclipsing spectroscopic binary in orbit around the Sun, so that the Earth experienced ice ages.

Herman and Farah have been desperate as any other, let alone to find a time machine has no power, shaken by the influx of disaster.

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At the time critical, a man came to see them and know the man that Herman and Farah did not come from that time. The man show where a time machine is located on

the condition he could join them. Arise again the spirit of Herman and Farah, and then follow the man was gone.

Time Machine in the atlantis has been banned, because it turns out a lot of the time anomaly occurred causing many deaths. The vehicle is not used it is to be used by all three save yourself from this period. They are lucky, before the tidal wave of sea water as high as skyscrapers are larger, the Atlantis had them leave.

But apparently people who shared the two teenagers did not come from the time of Atlantis. And it turns out they also brought the people into the future, the year 2125.

Arriving in the future, they left behind that person in order to be able to return to his own time. Now they just found out, his helpers came from the future to the times of atlantis who escaped using the time machine that they use now. The spacecraft was discovered by the helper from the rest of the spacecraft that became the stuff of the Museum of mankind in the Herman and Farah.

But Herman and Farah abruptly canceled plans to come home and decided to find out what's going to happen on Earth in the future?

In the same world unfamiliar with the past Herman and Farah should avoid conflict between the two forces that constantly fought to seize the remaining land because of flooding caused by sunk by ice at the North and South poles up to melt the rest of the natural disasters in the age of Atlantis. The pendulum effect that occurs as a result of the arrival of a comet in the age of atlantis were declining and the Earth orbit again started parallel to the lines of an eclipsing spectroscopic binary, so get as much sunlight as in the age of Atlantis, so did the temperature rise on Earth and then melt the Ice at both poles.

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Countries have many islands that disappeared was sunk by water which comes from the ice at the North and South poles are melting (Global warming).

The villagers who survive from Countries that disappeared, including Indonesia, immigrating to the Mainland. Due to mass immigration, destination countries unite and form the tyranny so that immigrants could not enter their territory as a result of the food crisis and resources.

The power of Tyranny had the support of Aliens from the planet Venus. They come to Earth by 2020 and indeed had plans to invade the Earth.

The immigrants outside the fortress of technology very much different with people who live in large castles. The tyranny of life much more prosperous because it is aided by men from Venus developed technology hi-tech. while outside the fortress, the people live like in the middle ages and food shortages that many fights among themselves to survive.

*Their arrival back in mind the tyranny and are considered to be harmful to them for bringing advanced knowledge from the times of Atlantis, so should be arrested for holding the secret of Earth's past, save energy resources they need anyway.*

*Army of the tyranny of destroying the time machine, but Herman and Farah got away.*

*The army of the tyranny of the continued pursuit of Herman and Farah who found a dirt bike which has not been used yet because it is still using Fuel that no longer exist at that time. So the human society in the future will feel strange to see Herman and Farah used motorcycles.*

*Finally Herman who gives Farah made it to the coast where it had been waiting for the helper with a motor boat for use by Herman And Farah to the destination of their flight.*

*They separated in that place again for their own business the last time.*

*In the middle of the ocean, the tyranny of stop the pursuit, and wonder why the hunting fled to the most dangerous places in the world.*

*Herman and Farah fled to The Bermuda triangle because they know it is the South Pole at the time of Atlantis and in place that they could have a way back home.*

*The storm that occurred in the Bermuda triangle thus saving a lot of neutrons and energy will assist Hurricane Herman and Farah pushed back to their appropriate his time-locker gives a chance to have a great time.*

*Finally Herman and Farah could return back to their home in peace time. Their arrival just when team Marwan departing to Atlantis to search Farah..*

*The arrival of Farah from an unexpected place of course surprised everyone. Even though they were puzzled by this incident, but Farah was more confused, because the Herman came with him gone. While Herman would participate with team Marwan welcome Farah happily without having to traverse hazards.*



# Australia

David Conyers *The Nanofabricated Truth*

Despite his fluency in Mandarin, Brian Arctor couldn't read the Chinese menu, hacked as it was by a nanovirus.

The spammer was a competing restaurant from across the road. Between roaming lines of white noise, the menu flickered from one dish list to the next, never static long enough to digest either offering. 'Why eat quality poor establishment you now?' asked the intruding menu in staccato translated English. 'We cook superior noodles. Go ready Ghan Train!'

What the spamming menu could never appreciate was that Arctor had a comfortable seat in this restaurant, the aromas of spices and cigarette smoke weren't as pungent or offensive as in the 'Ghan' and most important of all, this establishment was discrete. He would remain where he was thank you very much.

Recognising that he was indeed hungry, Arctor offloaded an anti-spam from his skin screen and watched it crawl onto the menu. It quickly blended with the spam only to have a local brothel exploit a gap in the nanocoding. It offered instead of food, 'tasty women.'

Arctor signed as he threw the corrupted sheet onto the pirated IKEA table. Menu or not there was a limit to the cuisine in Kashgar. He'd been stationed in this remote corner of China long enough to appreciate the good dishes from the bad. He would guess at a local delicacy for his breakfast, and chances were, the chef could make it.

Mind made up he signaled the waiter. The young Chinese man acknowledged Arctor with a nod then returned his attention to the blue haired young lady he was tripping over himself to serve. Arctor shook his head impatiently then sipped at his tea.

The hairs on Arctor's neck tingled.

Sensing he was under observation, he glanced discretely around the restaurant quickly identifying the only other Westerner. That man was staring back at him and wasn't hiding the fact. With eye contact established, he approached Arctor's table.

"I take it your Paul Hadley?" Arctor offered the stranger a chair.

The thin man accepted his seat with a practiced smile. Like the restaurant, his clothes were nanofabricated, an Armani suit and shirt with fabrics designed at the molecular level that couldn't crinkle, stain, fray or tear.

"Sloppy tradecraft Arctor," Hadley's words oozed with self-satisfaction. "I presume it's Arctor? You did identify me before we exchanged inner-agency code protocols."

"What's the point?" Arctor shrugged. "I've had you under surveillance since you arrived in town."

"Really? Are you sure?"

"Yes. I know who you 'claim' to be."

A grin etched into Hadley's otherwise grim expression. The smile didn't match the concern behind the eyes. "What exactly do you mean by that?"

"Relax, drink some tea." Arctor poured them each a cup, but the man refused his, like

he refused to break Arctor's stare. "Look, Hadley, you're definitely the same man who contacted me three days ago, I'll give you that."

"If we're laying cards on the table, what exactly is your problem with me?"

"Well, as for you working for the CIA..." Arctor left the sentence hanging so Hadley could draw his own conclusions. The man had appeared in Kashgar suddenly and unexpectedly, claiming to be a CIA operative long deployed in Arctor's geographical portfolio, only Arctor had never heard of him.

"You think I'm some kind of double agent?" The man's response was forced. "What? Let me guess, a Russian spy?" His arrogant and confident businessman persona was starting to fray, even if his clothes would not. He talked on when Arctor refused to fill the silence. "That's ludicrous."

"But plausible. The Russians have wanted China destabilized since the Molecular Wars of '58."

"Like I said: ludicrous."

"I don't know. The Russians working through me in this anti-Chinese hotbed of hatred seems inspired."

"You mean through the Uygur Separatists, that you have contacts with?"

Arctor nodded.

Hadley laughed. "That's very imaginative of you. But seriously, the US wants China brought down too. I'm American. I'm loyal."

Arctor eyes wandered to the mostly Chinese patrons busy eating. None were glancing their way, or obviously eavesdropping, and that was encouraging. But with the latest nanowasp tech now being nanofabricated on the black market, an enemy agent didn't need to be located inside the restaurant. Arctor just had to hope the Chinese Secret Service weren't interested in this man called Hadley; weren't listening with robotic surveillance drones the size and structure of a mosquito that would never be seen.

"No, we don't. Not while the US makes trillions each year from the world's richest superpower."

Hadley finally lifted his tea, but he still wouldn't drink it. "You still haven't told me what your problem with me is?"

"My problem is you don't exist, at least not on any records I can access."

"Is that so?" Hadley lent into his chair. He was still trying to appear sophisticated, but in Arctor's view of the world he was failing miserably.

"Hadley, I've been working Xinjiang for fifteen years. You've never once figured in it anywhere."

The man finally drank his tea, all of it at once. "You hungry?" He checked the flickering menu, before he too gave up as Arctor had. When he brushed the skin screen on his left forearm, it lit so he could trawl the Net until presumably the same menu uploaded uninterrupted upon his flesh. "Tea is all well and good, but I'm famished. What do you want to eat?"

"I'd suggest the kebabs and naan—if you can get the waiter's attention."

"Kebabs and naan?"

"You can't be sure anything else has been cooked long enough not to give you gastro."

"Even with the latest antibacts?"

Arctor raised an eyebrow. Hadley should have known the locals didn't care much for hygiene, didn't understand its importance. If Hadley was CIA as he claimed, he was the worst trained operative Arctor had encountered in his twenty-five years of services.

"These people don't fabricate what they don't think they need; detergents and soaps included."

Hadley shrugged, clicked his fingers to attract the waiter, who appeared quickly, surprising Arctor that Hadley could gain the locals' respect this quickly. Perhaps he had been in Xinjiang longer than just a few of days. He ordered for them both with a command of Mandarin as good as any native speaker. Arctor pondered if Hadley could speak Turkic as fluently, the language of the local Uygur Separatists.

He was about to comment on this when his forearm lit, indicating incoming NetMail. As he read, he hid the screen with his other arm so Hadley couldn't read it too.

The message was from his boss, Section Head Penny Winterbourne. She confirmed Hadley's backstory and this meeting today. More surprising, Winterbourne had been uncharacteristically courteous enough to provide a recent photograph of the mysterious man. Normally she left disgraced agents like Arctor to work out that kind of intel detail for themselves. Perhaps he had performed for a change and she was rewarding him, but that was not like her at all.

"Something important?" Hadley asked.

With a sinking feeling in his gut, Arctor felt he was missing an important detail he should already know, but couldn't place a finger on what that detail was. "It seems you are who you say you are."

"That's nice." Hadley showed no concern. Rather, he looked pleased with himself.

"What is your cover, exactly?"

"An arms dealer."

"You operate locally?"

Hadley nodded. "I sell small arms to the Separatists and local crime syndicates. The idea is that in by buying small arms from me at a discounted rate they don't spend their illicit funds on bigger weapons that can do real damage. I only broke NOC because I have a situation which requires a direct Langley initiated solution."

Arctor knew plenty of arms traders operating in Xinjiang. Some were Westerners. None were flagged as assets or under a non-official cover, and definitely not with 'protected status' as Hadley should have been, were he really CIA. But Winterbourne had confirmed Hadley was legitimate. Arctor should trust that information—so why didn't he?

"Still, I've never heard of you."

Hadley's smile was sly. "I've heard of you though, the legendary Brian Arctor."

"Sure you have."

"It's true. You haven't really been in the Xinjiang fifteen years. Eight years ago you headed up Project Surface Scape, back in Langley when nanotech was just starting to take off. Now that was quite something you achieved there."

Arctor was quick to take a sip of tea to hide any unintentional expression that confirmed Hadley had guessed right.

"When it all fell apart, you must have upset someone pretty important."

"Is that what you think happened?"

*“Why not? You’re in exile here, in remote low-tech Xinjiang.”*

*Arctor sighed. “If you’re CIA and know about Surface Scape, then prove it.”*

*“If I must. Its aim was to rewrite all the religious texts of the world, by initiating upskilled hunter-seeker nanoclouds.”*

*“It didn’t work though, did it?” Arctor offered, curious to see where Hadley went with this line of questioning. So far the man had divulged nothing that was classified.*

*Hadley shrugged. “Oh I don’t know, send plagues of nanoclouds out into the world and onto the Net, to seek out every copy of the Bible, the Koran, etcetera. Rewrite them so the fanatics no longer had easily construed scriptures to wave around justifying their atrocities.”*

*“Yes, that was essential it.”*

*“Subtle though, one minimally revised edition released each year, until all religious texts became very precise, spouting absolute non-violence against anyone under any circumstances, including against women and children—and gays too, which I always thought was a nice touch. Oh, and that despite there only being one truth faith—in said religion’s view of the world—all of them spouting that all religions are equal.”*

*“And everything you’ve spouted so far can be found in public records.”*

*“Okay then, you used InTangler Deep 7 protocols. Your first test target was the Korday MetaLibrary of Damascus. You—”*

*“Okay, you’ve proved you know \_Surface Scape\_,” Arctor interrupted, before Hadley revealed something the Chinese Secret Service didn’t already know, should they be listening.*

*Examining the room he examined the establishment’s décor, realising that nanotech was everywhere these days, and any of it could be spyware. In recent years local restaurants had become too expensive-looking and clichéd for his tastes, nothing like the food dens he had known and come to love when he was first transferred to Xinjiang Province, when architecture and furnishings reflected the culture and the geography of the region that spawned them. Today the tables and chairs were the latest IKEA catalogue, only pirated, as were the ‘original’ oil paintings from the European Renaissance. Diamond glassware and silver cutlery on every table held no value. Any of them could be bugged, or worse, a chameleon weapon.*

*Food preparation, at least, had remained an art form. There wasn’t a nanotech company anywhere that had successfully imaged the chemical complexities of biological substances. So when their meals arrived, there was a comfort in knowing it would be sliced from a recently deceased and very real animal. But when biological nanotech was perfected, did that mean he could be replicated again and again, work and die for the CIA endlessly for a thousand years or more? Could the Chinese replicate him fitted with internal biological transmitters, replacing his real ‘self’ with an identical ‘self’ that unknowingly reported to the enemy everything thing he said and thought.*

*Arctor shook his head. It was hard enough dealing with the implications of known nanotech capabilities of today, let alone what might be possible.*

*“So, why didn’t it work out?”*

*Arctor realized his mind had wandered, so returned his attention to the young man. “It failed because Langley’s directors wanted quick results. I pushed for changes to be rolled out at generational pace, altering the scriptures just enough so as not be noticed*

with each version. But to rewrite those texts so quickly in just a few years...well let me just say, some fanatics memorize their beloved scriptures to the letter.”

“And not just fanatics, scholars and priests as well, people who actually find good in all those books that you corrupted.”

“Exactly,” Arctor said, feeling the buried guilt of too many years. Now Arctor was justifying who he was, and he didn’t like this one little bit.

“Why didn’t you hack the fanatic’s memories while you were at it,” Hadley laughed, “so they didn’t notice the changes?”

“You know as well as I do, no one has perfected biological nanofabrication, especially brain hacks.”

“I know that, yes.” Hadley spoke quickly, backtracking. “But sometimes I do wonder what our masters really come up with behind all those closed doors, with all those multinational corporations advising them.”

Before Arctor could respond the waiter arrived with their food, kebabs and naans as ordered. Both men thanked him in their perfectly enunciated Mandarin, competing to prove better fluency. Only when the waiter was beyond earshot did they resume their conversation, again in English.

“No one has perfected bionano hacks, Hadley. Don’t expect so for years, decades even.”

“Well if anyone would know, it would be the legendary Brian Arctor.”

“Can we drop the subject, please?” With the second mention of the pretentious title, Arctor again felt compelled to scan the restaurant. Again, no one seemed interested in them, but a skilled spy—human or otherwise—would never reveal themselves.

“Fair enough.” Hadley shrugged, turned to his food. “By the way, I believe you are who you say you are,” he quipped before he bit into a kebab. “You know what, this isn’t bad.”

Suddenly hungry, Arctor ate too. “You still haven’t told me what this dire situation is, that forced you to break NOC and seek me out?”

Hadley kept chewing, and chewing, his teeth fighting with a chunk of meat that refused to reduce to swallowing size. Eventually he gave up and spat it onto his bread plate. An action a practiced, well-dressed businessman would not succumb to.

“That’s easy, Arctor,” he said while he dabbed his mouth with a silk-imitation napkin. “Uygur terrorists have nanofabricated a working nuclear bomb, and now they plan on using it on the Chinese.”

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Two hours later, Arctor and Hadley were driving east, and fast, headed deep into the Taklimakan Desert. Neither said it, but neither hid from the other, that this new development had scared them both. If a working nuclear fission bomb could be nanofabricated, then why stop at one?

When they passed a mountain-sized lump of infected nanotech fused into the side of the Kunlun Range, Arctor’s anxiety grew. The lump with its thousands of dozen-meter long silver-chromed tendrils was a former warlord’s attempt to recreate the Taj Mahal from severely corrupted nanodesigns. Wriggling like a gigantic sea anemone, it was the unofficial ‘no man’s land’ marker dividing Chinese and Uygur forces. The Chinese

tolerated Arctor in their territory, the Uygur did not.

The wasteland opening up before them was hostile territory. The tiniest rock could be a nanofabricated landmine. A shrub might be an armed spiderbot itching to execute its sniper programming to devastating effect. Invisible cyanide nanoclouds might be hovering above them even now waiting for them to stop and get out taking a leak, to kill them then and there.

“What I don’t understand, Hadley,” Arctor said while his eyes remained focused on the road ahead. White-knuckled hands were firm on the wheel of his armoured car as he sped them onwards, “Is why you think a nuclear bomb is a ‘small arm’ that can’t do ‘real damage’?”

“Not that long ago, all nuclear weapons were harmless,” Hadley quipped.

Arctor knew to what Hadley referred. When the US Government finally acknowledged that nanofabricators were a real threat to national security, their only option to counter their prolific nanofabrication was to flood the Earth’s atmosphere with hunter-seeker nanoclouds, specifically designed to deconstruct all sources of nuclear fuel, to destroy it or deposit it in deep sea subduction zones. The plan worked, but too well. With all fission fuel eradicated, the fission power industry collapsed, as did the deterrent of missile shields protecting the borders of old nations, and any hope of the human race colonizing the Moon, the Lagrange Points, and further afield. The global suffering that followed, however, was far more preferable than allowing a terrorist with a pirated WMD to mass-murder tens of millions of people.

Luckily, the world had yet to perfect fusion power plant on a scale smaller than an office complex building, otherwise nanofabricated fusion bombs would be powering up everywhere and powered on heavy water, a fuel impossible to eliminate without causing insurmountably bigger problems.

“This was supposed to be a tactical approach to controlling terrorists,” Hadley explained. “Sell them a WMD that will drain their funds to acquire, that without a fuel source, ultimately ends up being useless. How was I supposed to know the Russians would develop nanoclouds that protected and shielded plutonium?”

“You know by reading every report that hits your CIA NetMail. Or you anticipate that something like this would happen eventually.”

Fuming, Hadley would not look at Arctor.

“None of this is important. What is: is how you plan to fixing this? And why you need me?”

“The plan, Arctor, is to buy back the WMD. I contacted the Separatists this morning. They agreed to meet, and provided me with a rendezvous, where I’m taking you now.”

“You want me along as protection?”

“Essentially, yes. This will be a simple op. They think their WMD is faulty. They want a refund, or for me to fix it.”

“Aren’t you afraid they’ll have guessed it’s only faulty because there is no fuel? Why didn’t the Ugyurs work this out earlier? They’re not stupid.”

The thin man smiled, made quotation marks with his fingers. “It ‘worked’ when I ‘demonstrated’ it. I told them it came with a fuel cell that was hunter-seeker resistant.”

“A nanofabricated lie that became the nanofabricated truth?”

“Arctor, I know they haven’t yet acquired the Russian plutonium.”

*“You’re hoping they haven’t acquired it.”*

*“Well, that’s why you’re here, just in case they have.” Hadley stared at the empty road ahead. “Regardless, whatever happens let me make it clear we need to get that WMD back in one piece.”*

*“Not a chance. You got me into this, so we destroy it.”*

*“The hell we do! This is a Spearman Fast Breeder, a top of the range model. Tailored hunter-seeker Netclouds destroyed all known specs years ago. Useless until today, with the Russian fuel source back in play, we can reverse engineer it and they’ll now be worth a fortune.”*

*Arctor let it slide that Hadley seemed too focused on returning the WMD in one piece, when saving the lives of millions should have been their only priority. But Arctor was doubly concerned because this wasn’t the first time he’d heard of Spearman, a defense contractor who’d been employed several times by the CIA on highly classified projects.*

*Arctor noticed his arm, where his skin screen would be visible were he to activate it. The one element of this desperate situation that still confused him was the NetMail from Winterbourne. How could she trust Hadley when the man’s cover was just too suspicious?*

*Without that message, Arctor knew he would have cut Hadley loose long ago and dealt with the WMD on his own.*

*\*\*\**

*Late in the afternoon, as the sun dipped into the Kunlun Range behind them, they spied a convoy of shiny new military vehicles, each armed with multiple clusters of smart weapons, and all accelerating towards them.*

*“There they are,” Hadley said unnecessarily.*

*Their vehicle’s array of sensors detected them too. The windscreen’s heads-up displays were already executing its highly secretive CIA programming, singling out individuals in the group, identifying each Uygur and confirming them as the bombers and murderers their files listed them to be. Arctor counted eighteen men, but the HUD highlighted there were at least fifty insurgents within its visual range.*

*Those men that Arctor could see brandished AK2100 assault rifles and MigRo grenade launchers, and yet they harked from an era that the rest of the world had left behind; proud of their traditional embroidered caps, concealing face scarves and leather coats. Many of the shiny new trucks carried bleating goats in their trays with bales of hay for them to feed upon.*

*“You sold them all that?”*

*“Except the goats,” Hadley forced a laugh. Then he shuddered. “It’s different, isn’t it, when you see all those weapons together, in the arms of angry men.”*

*“Welcome to my world.”*

*Hadley stared accusingly at Arctor. “What do you mean, your world? I’m with the Agency too.”*

*“So you keep saying. But you know what they say, Hadley, in Langley, about the first rule of negotiating with terrorists?”*

*“I’m sure I have. I’m sure you’re going to remind me.”*

*“If you want things to turn out your way, bring the biggest weapon.”*

*Hadley shuddered again. His skin became white and clammy. “We didn’t do that, though, did we?”*

*If Hadley were really CIA, he would be hardened to complex and stressful situations like this one.*

*Several of the armed Separatists approached, yelled for them to get out of their vehicle. The HUD flashed red over three Uygur grenade launchers, warned that these weapons were locked onto their vehicle and primed for firing.*

*“They’re going to kill us. Why do they want to kill us?”*

*Arctor didn’t answer. He instead positioned the vehicle’s laser targeter. “Is that the WMD, on that truck?” He pointed to one of the largest vehicles towards the center of the convoy, where he was certain he already recognized the bomb.*

*The thin man nodded. “That’s it, yes, but—” With lightning reflexes, he pinned Arctor’s arm against his body. “What the fuck are you doing? That’s the very expensive piece of hardware I told you not to touch!”*

*Despite Hadley’s restricting grip, Arctor spoke quickly into the radio. “Alpha One to Alpha Zero. Target locked. Code: Albedo, Strabismus, Brimstone, Pepperjack.”*

*A sharp pain surged through Arctor’s arm where Hadley had just punched him.*

*Responding on instinct, Arctor’s martial skills took control of his actions, so when Hadley punched again, Arctor was ready, and deflected the blow. Then he pinned the other man’s arm in such a way it would be agonizing to resist.*

*But Hadley resisted, screamed when he realized he was immobilized. He wasn’t looking at Arctor though, but at the approaching Uygurs. The men outside had become animated. One fired a volley of bullets into the air to get their attention.*

*“Do they want us to talk to them? Explain perhaps?”*

*“Stay where you are!”*

*An impermeable anti-light struck the convoy, the detonation signature of a broad-spectrum nanomissile, launched from a military satellite that had just come into range in low orbit above. The explosion unfolded silently and suddenly. Now a thick black mist like the ink of an octopus swallowed the atmosphere. Men and goats coughed and cried as they ran from the cloud. Some men wore the cotton and wool clothes they arrived in. Nano-fabricated materials and metals had disintegrated, so some ran naked. All the terrorists were unarmed, the missile had seen to that.*

*When the black cloud dissipated, the convoy and the WMD were gone. Only residual oil droplets remained that rained from the sky, as clumps of complex carbon molecules generated in the blast. Like snowfall in the negative.*

*Arctor released Hadley, opened the vehicle and pushed the man onto the dusty road. He followed quickly, chambered the first round of his multi-ammo then pointed his sidearm at his foe. The round was a soft-bullet loaded with stun gas, not that he would reveal this. He wanted Hadley to believe he was about to die.*

*“You idiot, Arctor! You just destroyed a fifty million Yuan weapon. You think this won’t come back and ruin you?”*

*Arctor pointed his sidearm at Hadley while he removed a pistol hidden in the arms dealer’s waistband he had seen earlier. From his peripheral vision, Arctor watched to ensure the Separatists did not return for round two, but in their fear and*



embarrassment, they were running for the mountains.

In that moment, seeing their raw and naked bewilderment, Arctor felt sorrow for the Uygurs. They were a minority ethnic group without rights or resources in a land that no longer wanted them. They fought because the Chinese had taken away everything that had once been theirs. That was an honorable enough reason to fight dirty wars in Arctor's view of the world, but not justified with weapons of mass destruction.

"I've been wracking my brains, Hadley, as to why the Spearman Corporation was so important to all of this. Then I remembered. Spearman was the private contractor that developed most of the nanotechnology behind Project Surface Scape."

"So?" Hadley moved to stand, but Arctor waved his weapon to indicate this was a bad idea. Hadley remained where he was, in the dirt rubbing his injured arm.

"You're not really CIA."

"Your boss confirmed that I was."

"Did she? And how did you know that anyway?" He lowered the multi-ammo. They were far enough apart that if Hadley moved suddenly it would be a simple matter to shoot him. "The Spearman Corporation, who you really work for, knows all about nanoclouds, because Spearman developed them for Surface Scape. You knew in our earlier meeting today things weren't going well for you, that you needed an extra something to keep me interested. You weren't checking the menu, but sending a nanocloud to my skin to create a fake NetMail from my boss. That was a nice touch by the way. I almost believed it."

"Okay, you got me." Hadley raised his arms in defeat. "But that doesn't change why we're here. We needed to get that WMD out of the hands of those terrorists."

Arctor chuckled. "You don't get it, do you?"

"Get what?"

"You sold terrorists a WMD, but worse, later, when you realized how dangerous it was, your only priority was to get it back intact. You're seriously going to tell me Spearman's plan wasn't to reverse engineer it to resell its nanospecs on the market again?"

The truth revealed, Hadley remained silent.

Arctor tisked, shook his head. He couldn't believe the Spearhead Corporation had hoped to dupe him, and that they had almost succeeded.

"So what happens next?" Hadley looked small against the backdrop of the vast and empty landscape. "You going to shoot me here, or do you plan on leaving me in the desert to die of dehydration?"

Switching the multi-ammo's safety back on, Arctor holstered his weapon. "I'm doing neither."

"What, you're going to let me go?" Visibly relieved, Hadley stood.

This time Arctor did nothing to stop him. "Actually, it's not that simple. Spearman might pay your wages, but you work for me now."

The arms dealer cocked a tight smile. "How do you figure that?"

"I'm betting that WMD isn't the only one you've sold, and with the Russian's mass-producing plutonium protecting nanoclouds, I can't imagine you'd be a very popular man if the truth gets out about what you've done here." He pointed to their armored car, indicating that Hadley should get inside. "We've got to go."

Hadley walked slowly to the vehicle. He had likely been amassing a small fortune on commissions with the weapon sales he must have been making, but that was all about to change. He would soon be unmaking them all.

“What exactly is it you want me to do?”

“First, we need to get out of here, in case further Separatists decide to investigate.”

“And then what?”

“Then you’ll take me to all the buyers you’ve sold WMDs to, and we get them back or destroy them anyway we can.”

“Arctor, you’ve been in the wilderness too long if you think that will work.” Hadley stared into the sky, where oily raindrops of by-products still fell, adhered to their skin and clothes when it landed upon them. “These are cunning buyers you’re talking about, and ruthless. You think it will be easy to find any of these WMDs, let alone get them back?”

“No, but we neutralized one, so having you on the team is already proving worthwhile.”

“Well, the next thing you should do—”

Before Hadley could finish his sentence, an intense light flooded the sky. Arctor was momentarily blinded by the whiteness searing his vision. The anti-darkness lasted several seconds, before it faded just as quickly. When his vision returned he noticed Hadley shielding his own eyes against the unexpected brightness. The attack then was not localized, not nanofabricated across his irises, but as a more generalized attack.

“What the hell happen?” Hadley exclaimed.

A tight knot twisted in Arctor’s stomach, for he understood the truth. He looked west, seeing what he expected to see and wishing that he hadn’t, a city-sized mushroom cloud of debris forming on the horizon.

“Was that Kashgar?”

Arctor checked his skin screen, called up live-feed satellite imagery of the Xinjiang Province. CIA intel building on his flesh confirmed that a WMD had just disintegrated the city.

“I had friends there.” Hadley said, scratching his head.

“So did I.”

For a very long time, the two men stared. Arctor felt numb and worthless, powerless against any effort that might have reversed what he now witnessed, because this was not something that could ever be undone.

“We were in Kashgar only this morning.”

Arctor couldn’t take his eyes off the mushroom cloud. If one WMD could be detonated this easily, it wouldn’t be the last.

“Does this change anything between us?”

Arctor shook his head. He couldn’t alter this outcome, not now, but he might still do some good for other populous centers across the Province, if he acted quickly.

“No. Like I said, I need you to take me to all the other buyers you’ve sold WMDs to, any still left alive that is, and fast.”

“Arctor?”

“Listen to me Hadley,” he spoke quickly as ideas formulated. “We need to destroy every last WMD whatever it takes, and quickly, before another one does some real

*damage again. Oh, and this is important, how many exactly, have you sold?"*

1.

# Chile

Martín Muñoz Kaiser La Mirada

Muchos especulan sobre la fuerza de la mirada, las ancianas le asignan poderes ocultos y los poetas la ensalzan cual plato de pastas sin gracia, como si ella necesitase que alguien le cantara lo que en realidad puede lograr por si misma.

Torvo, era una marioneta de cartón apelotonado y cola fría, sin embargo este muñeco poseía una fuerza que residía no en la habilidad de quién manejaba sus cuerdas, si no en sus ojos, que hacían parecer que aquel muñeco inerte, poseía realmente un espíritu, un alma propia.

Algunos expertos en parapsicología, especulan sobre la posibilidad de que demonios, o entidades espirituales no humanas, pueden o no poseer cuerpos de seres humanos, animales y casas. Pero la verdad es que Torvo, era un muñeco nada más, él no estaba poseído por ningún demonio ni espíritu del más acá o del más allá.

Torvo tenía unos ojos privilegiados dibujados con madreperla y cristal de murano, mezclados cuidadosamente y delineados con tinta de carbón de Asia menor. El muñeco de cartón era una rareza, y permanecía sentado, medio desarmado en medio del pequeño teatro que lo había visto actuar cientos de veces.

Sus piernas estaban dobladas entrecruzadas sus manitos en su regazo y su cuello quebrado hacia la derecha le daban una expresión melancólica que se acentuaba con el antiguo fondo de la caja de madera que lo contenía, la cual poseía una ventana cuyos bordes estaban tallados como una cortina de anfiteatro recogida.

Torvo estaba en el escenario de su vida, olvidado y polvoriento, Torvo, no sabía del tiempo ni de los sentimientos, y sin embargo con los años, su aspecto parecía cada vez más triste y taciturno, como si necesitase la mano cálida y amorosa de su dueño, para que lo rescatase de la muerte con el ejercicio tiránico de tirar de las cuerdas, que le infundían el movimiento que le daba sentido a su existencia.

Luego de años de vetusta agonía, Torvo se encontró acariciado por unos dedos fríos y calculadores, ojos positronicos analizaban su figura con interés desmedido.

El robot 75K2-12001244511.456 estaba realmente excitado, el grupo de autómatas excavadores había cavado varios días seguidos en aquellas ruinas en busca de los hallazgos que les harían entender a las maquinas cual era su propósito.

El último humano había muerto hace ya cien años, y las casas continuaban limpiándose, los pastos continuaban regándose, el agua desalinizándose y las otrora atestadas ciudades llenas de seres de carne y hueso solo veían pasar a sus homólogos de silicio trabajando para mantener intacta una ciudad eterna.

En algún momento, después de la desaparición de sus amos, concertados por medio de una red inalámbrica de comunicaciones, los robots comenzaron a comunicarse, y la primera pregunta que surgió de la mente colectiva fue.

¿Para qué?

Es simple pregunta motivó la creación de un nuevo modelo, el 75K2-12001244511.456 era un robopologo, y había hecho el más grande descubrimiento de

*la historia de la robótica, el eslabón perdido estaba ante sus ojos. La mirada de Torvo era la respuesta al misterio de la existencia de su raza.*

1.

# Argentina

M. C. Carper Los Crímenes del terrestre

El hombre intentó reconocer el lugar. Una sala circular con veinte estrados, ocupados por alienígenas. El terrestre estaba justo en el centro. Molesto, cambiaba el pie con que soportaba su peso cada tanto. Mientras hacía sonidos con la boca para mostrar su hastío.

Un ser con cara de equino y gesto adusto, golpeó tres veces un martillo de madera en el estrado.

—Damos comienzo a la evaluación de conducta número 796543/6. Se ha seleccionado al azar al Señor Eduardo Miguel González, un nativo típico del planeta en cuestión. — dijo.

El terrestre carraspeó fastidioso, levantando la mano para pedir la palabra.

—Esto es un rapto. ¡Devuélvanme ya mismo a la Tierra!

—¡Silencio! ¡El nativo debe guardar silencio! Los delitos que lo traen ante este tribunal son los siguientes: Contaminación del hábitat, Polución en el aire, la tierra y el mar. Extinción provocada de numerosas especies. Deforestación indiscriminada y masiva. Esclavitud de congéneres y otras especies. Uso de la tortura y asesinato de semejantes y otros seres vivos. Que incluye depredación y flagelos. Violencia gratuita hacia toda forma de vida. Mala praxis de la ciencia para desequilibrar el ecosistema. ¿Cómo se declara?

Eduardo buscó algún gesto delator entre los presentes. ¿Qué tenía que ver él con todo eso?

—¡Inocente! —respondió con voz alta y clara.

En ese momento se abrió un panel lateral por el que entró una figura encapuchada envuelta en un manto. El rostro invisible entre los pliegues de la ropa. Una especie de vapor blanco se escapaba entre las arrugas de la vestimenta. Se ubicó ante el humano y dijo: —Soy el Fiscal, señor González. Dígame ¿Almorzó hoy?

—Sí —respondió—, una hamburguesa con papitas y un huevo frito. ¡Riquísimo!

El encapuchado se volvió veloz hacia el estrado.

—¡Que su respuesta quedé asentada, su señoría! —exigió exhalando vapor—. El acusado admite alimentarse del cuerpo triturado de un esclavo indefenso, de tubérculos atacados por sustancias envenenadas y de cigotos producidos bajo tortura. ¡Tres crímenes monstruosos para la obscena práctica de devorar conciudadanos!

El humano agitó los brazos hacia el juez.

—¡Paren! ¡Paren! Así es la costumbre en mi planeta. ¡No es un crimen! No se considera un delito, es sólo comida.

El encapuchado humeante se alzó intolerante ante el hombre.

—La forma en que minimiza ese acto revela su naturaleza, señor González. Yo he visto como se tortura a las aves en las granjas. Tenemos grabaciones de la actividad de los mataderos y de sus aeroplanos arrojando veneno en los campos. Tóxicos que enferman incluso a sus congéneres. —Se giró hacia el Juez—. Esas grabaciones se adjuntan a las

pruebas, su señoría. Quiero que vea la prueba número veintiséis.

El humeante mostró a todos los presentes un objeto manual dentro de una bolsa transparente. Lo extendió hacia Eduardo.

—¿Puede decirnos que es eso, señor? —pidió el Fiscal.

—Sí, es... —comenzó a decir el humano contemplando el objeto. Se mordió el labio anticipando las intenciones del encapuchado—. Esto es una honda de fabricación casera. Es para practicar puntería. Se coloca una piedra en el extremo y se tensan las tiras elásticas, luego se dispara. Es un juguete para niños.

—Tenemos grabaciones con infantes humanos usando estos “juguetes” contra seres inocentes e indefensos. Los destrozan y dejan moribundos por horas. Se trata de una especie de diversión humana.

Un murmullo de asombro inundó la sala. Eduardo entendió que aquel circo no iba en broma. La cosa era muy seria. Tenía que exponer una defensa creíble. Alzó la mano.

—¡Señor Juez! ¿Si se me encuentra culpable cual será mi castigo?

El ser parecido a un caballo indicó al Fiscal que respondiera la pregunta del acusado.

—En el Universo aparecen criaturas destructivas que eliminan toda clase de formas de vida, dejan por completo estéril su hábitat y luego terminan extinguiéndose ellos mismos. Por eso se formó el Consejo de Evaluación de Conducta. Si su especie demuestra capacidades para corregirse, se le concederá un plazo para rectificar sus atropellos. En el caso contrario, procederemos a eliminarlos hasta el último individuo.

El humano sudó en abundancia al sentirse perdido. No se le ocurría ningún argumento para salvarse.

—¡No somos todos así! ¡Es injusto condenar a toda una especie por el error de algunos! —protestó Eduardo.

—Por supuesto que hay excepciones —coincidió el Fiscal—, pero el porcentaje es insignificante. Los humanos son peligrosos en grupo y como individuos. Hacen apología de la violencia en cada una de sus acciones. Recompensan la agresividad. Basan su existencia en el éxito, sin ningún escrúpulo. Si usted poseyera un arma en este momento no dudaría en usarla. ¿no es así?

—Los humanos poseemos valores —dijo el hombre con voz temblorosa—. Tenemos un sentimiento que nos impulsa, el Amor. Amamos a nuestros padres, a nuestros hijos, a parejas y amigos.

—Sin duda —afirmó el encapuchado—. Pero combinan al amor con arrebatos hormonales incontrolables. Con ansias de posesión, sumisión y despotismo. ¿No dicen ustedes que todo vale en la guerra y en el amor? Ponen en el mismo nivel de importancia al genocidio masivo con el cariño. Su sociedad usa un concepto virtual para controlar la economía. Le ponen precio al agua y a los medicamentos. Inclusive al amor.

Eduardo se dirigió desesperado al círculo de magistrados.

—Ocurre que los gobernantes sólo buscan enriquecerse, descuidando las necesidades del planeta...

El fiscal dijo:

—¿Y quién escoge a sus gobernantes, señor González?

A Eduardo le demandó un gran esfuerzo continuar de pie. Estaba cansado de responder.

—¡Nosotros! —Rugió Eduardo con el rostro desencajado— ¡Nosotros escogemos a los

*malditos! ¡Nosotros! Es claro que todos ustedes ya tenían decidido el veredicto antes de traerme acá. ¡Esto es una parodia! –acentuó apretando los dientes.*

*–Con todo lo expuesto no es difícil anticipar la decisión de este tribunal. Voy a ponerlo al tanto de un artículo que puede beneficiarlo, es válido para el tribunal presentar a un testigo de inteligencia desarrollada. Este testigo tiene que haber sido víctima de los abusos que motivaron la evaluación. Si en su declaración, el convocado declara a favor del acusado, serán levantados todos los cargos resolviéndose la total inocencia del acusado.*

*En los ojos de Eduardo apareció un brillo animado. No importaba a quien llamaran. El propio instinto de supervivencia lo haría aliarse con su igual. Eduardo haría todo lo posible para convencer al hombre que trajeran.*

*–Este tribunal convoca como testigo a la última ballena yubarta, cuya especie está extinta. Sus hijos y nietos fueron asesinados por humanos.*

*Eduardo miró abatido la punta de sus zapatos. No esperaba aquello. Para él, las únicas criaturas inteligentes y parlantes de la Tierra eran los humanos. Tuvo ganas de llorar.*

*–No tengo preguntas, su señoría.*

*Mario Daniel Marín Cibersoldado*

*Después de un día de intenso entrenamiento, les dijeron que los iban a poner en una máquina que les permitiría remontarse a través de su árbol genealógico hasta llegar al primer hombre. Para cada uno de sus ancestros masculinos tendrían un minuto, el minuto del orgasmo que logró la concepción.*

*Los acostaron y les pusieron los cascos. Una especie de sábana de siliconas empezó a envolverlos. Las conexiones para simular virtualmente los sentidos se fueron implantando y coordinando con los cascos. Luego comprobaron que todos tuvieran una buena conexión, sobre todo en los genitales, y les sugirieron tratar de resistir lo más posible el orgasmo. Les avisaron que les sacarían una muestra de sangre, para leer los cromosomas “Y” de su ADN y así determinar la cadena de orgullosos patriotas que portaban en sus venas. Sintió un pequeño pinchazo en su pierna izquierda, y un dolor más profundo en la base de la columna, en su espalda.*

*Por casi quince minutos no pasó nada. Y se encontró de pronto en la alcoba de sus padres. Lo sorprendió la ternura de su padre cuando lentamente hacía el amor con su madre al concebirlo, y la insoportable incomodidad ante ese encuentro tan edípico se transformó en excitación animal ante la fogosidad sexual y los alaridos del orgasmo de su abuela Emilia con 18 años recién cumplidos durante la luna de miel en la costa, donde fue concebido su padre. Nunca hubiera imaginado que esa fuera la misma amable anciana que de niño le traía la sopa a la cama cuando estaba enfermo. Su bisabuela era más bien una tabla que aguantaba la obligación conyugal de acostarse con su marido. Y ni siquiera lo dejaba que le sacara el camisón porque para ella el acto sexual era pecaminoso. Pero esa pasividad obviamente excitaba a su ancestro, sobre todo cuando lograba sacarle, casi clandestinamente, un gesto de reticente placer.*



Su tatarabuelo, el jardinero amante de su tatarabuela y no su verdadero esposo, no tenía que hacer muchos esfuerzos para obtener gemidos de éxtasis de esa exuberante mujer. Su bisabuelo fue concebido sobre una parva de heno en una tarde esplendorosa de verano en el que los genes del jardinero le robaban el apellido a su detestado patrón. Esa mujer sí que se entregaba. Y era bellísima, con pechos abundantes, muy parecida a su prima Julia, a la que él siempre había codiciado. Allí no pudo aguantar más, y comulgó en su orgasmo con el bastardo impostor. Era incómoda esa sensación de traicionar a su familia, pero también un alivio saber que, por suerte, su tatarabuelo no era un extranjero de un país aliado con sus enemigos en esa guerra interminable que pronto conocería. El padre del jardinero hacía ahora el amor calladamente con una criada de la familia de su tatarabuela en una modesta choza de adobe, vecina a la gran casa de piedra que alguna vez fue de su familia. Era tarde a la noche, era también en el verano. En el único dormitorio de la casa tres niños y la madre de la criada dormían besados por la luz de la luna. El abuelo del jardinero era un soldado raso en las guerras de independencia, y volvía a acostarse con su esposa después de tres años en el frente, en ese mismo dormitorio, en esa misma choza, en una gris mañana de invierno. Ella estaba arriba, y llevaba el ritmo. Sus heridas de guerra en la pierna izquierda y la espalda le dolían mucho, pero ese dolor también lo enorgullecía, como su reencontrado patriotismo.

Vinieron luego otros y otros en mundos cada vez menos familiares, y hasta inverosímiles. Más allá del placer, había, en esos seres sobre los que él sólo sabía teóricamente que existían, y en los que en realidad nunca había pensado, una monótona cadencia de dominación, lujuria, aburrimiento y ocasionalmente ternura. Pero poco a poco todos esos encuentros de un minuto se transformaron en cotidianos, pasaron a segundo plano en su conciencia, y sólo quedó una amargura sorda, su amargura. Y el placer sabía a un sordo dolor. Mientras el cerebro de los seres que una y otra vez llegaban al orgasmo se empequeñecía, sólo había lugar en su pecho para esa sensación que él tenía cuando se acostó, por menos de un minuto, y con mucho menos placer que la multitud de sus acrobáticos ancestros, con una prostituta en el puerto. Fue en su primer día libre después de enrolarse. Lo hizo con desgano, casi por obligación ante las burlas de sus embriagados compañeros. Esa angustia innombrable de saber que esta inútil existencia que él había heredado se estaba prolongando demasiado y quizás se prolongaría por siempre jamás en otros seres, en otras alcobas, en otros éxtasis momentáneos. Tuvo una breve esperanza de que los métodos anticonceptivos le fallaran a esa pobre prostituta, o, si él volvía de la guerra, de encontrar una mujer con quien formar una familia. Su curiosidad inicial, la de llegar atrás al primer hombre se vio amortiguada por la monotonía del terror, de esa desconfianza de las hembras ante su voluntario o involuntario sometimiento, de esa sensación de triunfo de los machos de estar ahí, por un momento, dentro de otro ser, plantando la semilla de la especie. Era la amargura de saber que uno hace eso solamente porque va a morir, porque irremediablemente va a morir, porque está agarrado del cuello por unos genes obsesionados con perpetuarse a cualquier precio. Así, fue casi natural que sintiera alivio cuando anunciaron que el ejercicio estaba por terminar, que por fin llegarían al primer hombre.

*La escena era en un claro de una selva. La sensación de inminente peligro lo sacó de sus amargas reflexiones. Una banda de monos luchaba con palos y piedras contra otra banda de monos, y, después de aplastar la cabeza del líder de la otra banda, se apoderaban de las hembras y mataban a las crías. Luego las violaban brutalmente, sistemáticamente, uno tras otro. Esos monos eran ellos, eran sus compañeros del batallón los que compartían ese festín violento que los unía más allá de la individualidad. Por fin llegó su turno de penetrar a esa mona aterrorizada, sostenida por brazos y piernas por sus compañeros. Todavía intentaba resistirse, y le mordió el hombro. Eso lo excitó mucho más. Cuando se derramó dentro de ella, cuando cumplió con la obligación de la especie, comulgó finalmente con la banda. Era por fin un legítimo camarada, a pesar de su apellido extranjero, a pesar de su incómoda sensación de que quizás pensaba demasiado. Luego vino la oscuridad y el silencio.*

*El último ejercicio del día había terminado. Ahora su batallón estaba listo para ir a la guerra, para aplastar definitivamente al enemigo.*

*Mario Daniel Marín Cibersoldier*

*After a day of intense training, they told them they would be put in a machine that would allow them to journey through their genealogical tree until arriving at the first man. For each of their male ancestors they would experience a minute, the minute of orgasm that realised conception.*

*They put them to bed and helmets were put on their heads. A kind of silicone sheet started to wrap around them. The connections to simulate the senses virtually were implanted and coordinated with the helmets. Later they checked that everyone had a good connection, particularly in the genitals, and they suggested that they try to resist the orgasm as much as they could. They informed them that they would be taking a blood sample, to read the “Y” chromosomes of their DNA and thereby isolate the gene of patriotic pride they carried in their veins. He felt a small sting in his left leg, and a deeper pain in the base of his spine, in his back.*

*For almost fifteen minutes, nothing happened. And he found himself suddenly in his parents' bedroom. The tenderness of his father surprised him, as he slowly made love to his mother to conceive him, and the unbearable discomfort he felt in this Oedipal encounter was transformed into animal arousal before the sexual desire and orgasmic screams of his grandmother Emilia, at newly 18 years of age, during their honeymoon on the coast, where his father was conceived. He never imagined that this was the same kind old woman who brought him soup in bed as a child when he was sick. His great-grandmother was more like a stiff board who endured the conjugal obligation of sleeping with her husband. And she did not even let him take off her nightgown because for her, the act of sex was sinful. But this passivity clearly excited his ancestor, above all when he managed to arouse in her, almost clandestinely, a gesture of reluctant pleasure.*

*His great-great-grandfather, the gardener lover of his great-great-grandmother and not her real husband, did not have to go to great efforts to extract moans of ecstasy from this exuberant woman. His great-grandfather was conceived upon a haystack on a splendid summer afternoon in which the genes of the gardener stole the surname of his detested patron. That woman certainly did devote herself to the encounter. And she was beautiful, with abundant breasts, resembling his cousin Julia, who he had always secretly desired. Then he couldn't stand it anymore, and climaxed in his orgasm with the bastard imposter. This sense of betraying the family was uncomfortable, but also a relief to know that luckily his great-great-grandfather was not a foreigner from a country aligned with the enemy in that interminable war that he was soon to know firsthand. The father of the gardener made love silently to a maid servant of the family of his great-great-great-grandmother in a modest hut, neighbouring the big house of stone which once belonged to his family. It was late at night, it was also summertime. In the only room of the house three children and the mother of the maid servant slept, kissed by the light of the moon. The grandfather of the gardener was a private soldier in the wars of independence, and returned to sleep with his wife after three years on the front, in that same room, in that same hut, on a grey winter morning. She was on top, and kept the rhythm. The war wounds on his left leg and on his back hurt him a lot, but that pain was also a source of pride for him, like his newfound patriotism.*

*Later came more and more people in worlds less and less familiar, and even implausible. Beyond the pleasure, there was, in those beings of whose existence he was only theoretically aware, and whose reality he had never thought about, a monotonous pattern of domination, luxury, boredom and occasionally tenderness. But gradually all of those minute-long encounters became mundane, they moved on to another stage of consciousness, and all that remained was a deaf sorrow, his sorrow. And the pleasure tasted of a deafened pain. While the brains of those beings who climaxed time after time got smaller, there was only room in his chest for that sensation he had when he slept with – for less than a minute, and with much less pleasure than the multitude of his acrobatic ancestors – a prostitute at the port. It was on his first free day after enlisting. He did it reluctantly, almost out of obligation in the face of his inebriated friends' taunts. This unnamed anguish of knowing that the useless existence he had inherited was being drawn out for far too long and would possibly be extended forever through other beings, in other bedrooms, in other moments of ecstasy. He had a brief hope that the anti-contraceptives that poor prostitute used would fail, or, if he returned from the war, that he would find a woman with whom to form a family. His initial curiosity, that of arriving beyond the first man, saw him numbed by the monotony of terror; the distrust of those females in the face of their voluntary or involuntary subjugation, the triumphant macho sensation of being there, for a moment, inside another being, planting the seed of the species. It was the sorrow of knowing that you do such things only because you are going to die, because irremediably you are going to die, because you are choked by genes obsessed with perpetuating themselves at whatever cost. Therefore, it was almost natural that he felt relief when they announced that the exercise was almost over, that finally they would be arriving at the first man.*

The scene was a clearing in a jungle. The feeling of immediate danger took him away from his sorrowful reflections. A group of monkeys fought with branches and stones against another group of monkeys, and, after crushing the head of the leader of the other group, they took control of the females and killed their cubs. Afterwards they raped them brutally, systematically, one after the other. Those monkeys were them, they were his fellow soldiers in the battalion who shared this violent feast that united them beyond individuality. Finally it was his turn to penetrate the terrified monkey, which his comrades held by her arms and legs. She still tried to resist, and bit his shoulder. That excited him much more. When he discharged inside of her, when he had complied with the obligation of the species, he was finally in communion with the group. He was at long last a legitimate comrade in arms, despite his foreign surname, despite the uncomfortable feeling that maybe he thought too much. Later came darkness and silence.

The last exercise of the day was over. Now their battalion was ready to go to war, to definitively crush the enemy.

Carlos Suchowolski Si una mala jugada del tiempo

Se sentó sin salir de la cama, se estiró hasta el papel y el bolígrafo abandonados sobre la silla que se hallaba a su lado y escribió:

“Amor mío:

“Soy incapaz de imaginar todo lo que debe separarme hoy de ti, y en realidad de todos. La comercialización del hibernador personal ha supuesto uno de los sucesos más escalofriantes de ¿este siglo?; ¡ay... en realidad no quiero ni pensar lo que se les habrá ocurrido en el tiempo que sea...! Yo, por mi parte, solo me dedico a dormir, como puede hacer cualquiera con un trasto como este. Duermo durante un lapso que determino libremente, perdiendo cada vez más la sensación del tiempo transcurrido, y todo ello sin pesadillas ni molestias de ninguna clase. Seguramente, estaré avanzando hacia la muerte, pero no logro apreciarlo al tratarse apenas de unos minúsculos tramos, que evito hasta donde me lo permite el sistema, y que en todo caso deben aportar un poco más de desgaste que el que se produce mientras duermo, unas miserables décimas de segundo según me explicó en su día el empleado al que se lo compré... En cualquier caso, despierto siempre aquí y con la misma sensación de que todo continúa. Solo me consta, porque así debería ser según entiendo, que he debido distanciarme de las cosas de manera irremediable, de todo y de todos los que... ¿viven?, ¿duermen?, ¿han desaparecido...? Nada puede ser igual ni parecido a como todavía lo recuerdo.

Sin embargo, el bullicio sigue afuera, más allá de las persianas bajadas... ¿Crees tú que eso pueda significar algo? No me animo a comprobarlo. Si me levantara y saliera ahora mismo a la calle, sé que no podría reconocer el mundo. Debo suponer que envejecimos en proporciones diferentes gracias al invento... siempre y cuando los entusiastas que cayeron como yo en la trampa dilapiden parte de su tiempo por ahí, aceptando jugar el lacerante juego de mostrarse los unos a los otros...

Tú misma, ¿cómo eres hoy mismo, cómo serás cuando leas esta carta, cómo luego... dentro de...? ¡Ay!, ¿cuál será la medida más adecuada del tiempo para expresarlo?, ¿años...?, ¿segundos...?

No obstante, mi mirada interior te rescata joven en la memoria, cruzando desnuda el umbral de la habitación hacia la mesa de la sala donde quedaron los cigarrillos, y se detiene en tus muslos, sobre los que se derrama una cálida luz que, creo recordar, era la del atardecer entrando a través de las hendijas de la persiana de enrollar, una luz que les daba un rosado tenue bajo el que se adivinaba un vello prometedor, ay, que adoraba electrizar de nuevo... ¿Ya no es así, lo sigue siendo...? Porque... habrás usado, usas, usarás tú también el hibernador, ¿no es cierto...?"

Se interrumpió. ¿Qué sentido tenía continuar escribiendo una carta; escribir en general, fuese lo que fuese? El deseo de volver al letargo afluía como la única respuesta; aunque sin duda eso tenía tan poco sentido como todo lo demás. El mundo exterior se había convertido en una pesadilla difícilmente tolerable. Si volvía a dormir para despertarse luego, ¿no volvería a sentir la misma inseguridad, incluso multiplicada; no sería una inutilidad incontestable?

De improviso se imaginó un paisaje en el que, por fin, todos estuvieran dormidos, en todo caso, salvo durante pequeños intervalos, inevitables, debidos a las limitaciones que imponía el procedimiento... Que ya no quedarían... ¿con qué objeto?, quienes pretendieran continuar huyendo..., total... ¿para qué si de cualquier modo no se puede llegar a ningún lado..., si, ni más ni menos, encontrarían la reiteración del dilema? ¿Tal vez por pura mecánica, por la mera razón de que se podía probar con una nueva fecha que el procedimiento permitía introducir a voluntad, tonterías como las que se solían incluir en los programas y que ya nadie estaría en condiciones o se ocuparía de variar?

Lo sorprendente eran los sonidos que llegaban de la calle, propios de un ajetreo familiar. Por lo visto había gente por allí, vehículos circulando, voces, a veces uno que otro taconeo apresurado, quizá bajo la lluvia... ¿Habrían decidido muchos abandonar las prácticas de hibernación, acaso definitivamente, y rendirse a la erosión del tiempo? ¿Se trataría de personas que de tanto en tanto se atrevían a ir más lejos, a salir durante un rato, a ver el mundo unos... no sé... minutos, meses... a mostrarse, a envejecer, a experimentar el horror de verse los unos a los otros...?

"¡Ridículo y obsceno!", masculló, y se dejó caer de espaldas mientras la mano se abría, soltando el papel y el bolígrafo. No pertenecía a la clase de gente capaz de suicidarse, era una pena. Pero volvió a acariciar la vieja idea macabra, una idea plena de ironía salvaje, vivificante; una broma como pocas.

Con la indolencia de quien tiene todo el tiempo por delante, puso la máquina de nuevo en funcionamiento y estableció la fecha de destino en el día, mes y año de su nacimiento. La eligió para honrarse, ya que cualquier fecha del pasado habría sido igualmente apropiada. Por suerte, el programa permitía "ir hacia atrás", se dijo dejando escapar una risita de satisfacción por la ocurrencia. "¿Hacia atrás?", le devolvió no obstante un eco de la mente: "No, claro; precisamente ahí está mi gran truco, porque la máquina sólo puede ir hacia adelante..." ¿Cómo, si no, con "una fecha", habría podido apuntar al infinito? Y, con una sensación de triunfo que no había experimentado desde hacía mucho, cerró la cubierta de la cápsula sobre su cabeza y se congratuló al escuchar el familiar clic del cierre hermético que, por exigencias de la seguridad del durmiente, sería irreversible hasta cumplido el lapso prefijado (algo que algunas veces había lamentado al registrar, por error, una fecha demasiado próxima o algo más lejana de lo pretendido). "Salvo que...", continuó pensando al tiempo que la criogenización, que solía

completarse en más o menos un minuto, convertía la sonrisa rota en el rictus patético de una máscara de piedra. "¡No, no...!", alcanzó a suplicar a tenor de la pregunta que lo llevaba hacia una pesadilla eterna: "¿Y si el tiempo me juega una mala pasada; y si, contra toda lógica, el tiempo sigue un inmensurable derrotero circular y, yendo precisamente "hacia adelante", alcanza la meta prefijada y, al cabo del futuro del futuro, me despierto de nuevo?"

1.

# Uruguay

Patricia K. Olivera Extraños Sucesos

*Esa fría noche de octubre de 1938 el viejo Andrés había logrado reunir a las ovejas para llevarlas de vuelta a la granja. Caminaba detrás, apoyado en un grueso bastón, al tiempo que emitía el característico silbido conocido por los animales. A un costado, el ovejero también buscaba imponerse con insistentes ladridos, apurando a las que quedaban rezagadas.*

*Sin dejar de morder el palillo que llevaba en la boca, el hombre se quitó el sombrero y escudriñó el cielo que aún mostraba tonos celestes en algunas zonas, dejando ver apenas algunas estrellas titilando a años luz de la Tierra. A medida que avanzaban, un suave viento comenzó a levantarse; los animales balaron impacientes, ansiosos por llegar a destino. Un nuevo silbido las llamó a apretujarse, y el perro continuó con su tarea de mantenerlas en el rebaño. De un momento a otro el viento comenzó a hacerse más fuerte, agitando los árboles y levantando nubes de polvo y hojas. Una extraña vibración comenzó a oírse y aumentó de volumen hasta volverse un sonido atronador. Pronto, las sombras dieron paso a una potente luz que venía del cielo. El viejo hizo sombra con las manos, buscando distinguir cuál era el origen de esa imponente claridad, al tiempo que trataba de protegerse del viento que parecía querer levantarlo del suelo junto con sus asustados animales. Sobre ellos parecían brillar miles de focos, lo que le impedía ver algo; parpadeó varias veces hasta que la luz disminuyó de intensidad y lo que vio lo dejó de boca abierta. Un disco plateado, de monstruosas dimensiones, giraba con extrema lentitud, emitiendo luces de distintos colores. Un brillante haz de luz los rodeó, como una pared intangible que partía del borde del artefacto hasta el piso. Dentro de ese círculo luminoso no se escuchaba sonido alguno y todo movimiento había cesado; no ocurría lo mismo fuera del perímetro, donde se podía ver que el viento seguía doblando los troncos de los árboles y arremolinaba las hojas. Con lentitud, mordisqueando el palillo que todavía tenía en la boca, el viejo bajó los brazos, sin apartar los ojos asombrados de la nave que permanecía suspendida allí arriba. Oyó un chasquido, y acto seguido una abertura comenzó a abrirse en la superficie del vientre metálico y una plataforma comenzó a deslizarse en silencio.*

*Cuando abrió los ojos, su último recuerdo fue la potente luz blanca que le dio de lleno en el rostro. Miró en torno, intentó incorporarse pero notó que no podía mover ninguna parte del cuerpo; solo los ojos giraban de un lado a otro, intentando enfocar algo a su alrededor. Lo único que consiguió fue marearse. Cerró los ojos, extrañaba el palillo que siempre llevaba en la boca. ¿Y las ovejas?, ¿qué había sucedido con ellas? Su cabeza era un hervidero de preguntas a las que nadie respondía. Poco a poco se fue adormeciendo, con el pensamiento puesto en los animales; ya era tarde, tenía que llevarlos a casa...*

*En las calles de Nueva York imperaba el caos. En un programa de radio acababan de anunciar que estaban siendo invadidos por extraterrestres. Su responsable se vio obligado a pedir disculpas, argumentando que sólo se trató de una broma por la*

festividad de Halloween; todo había sido una parodia. Sin embargo, en alguna parte, un granjero había desaparecido junto con el rebaño que conducía esa noche. Un círculo enorme de vegetación, de contorno definido, apareció calcinado justo en el lugar por el que acostumbraba a pasar. Salvo la mujer del hombre desaparecido, que hizo la denuncia esa misma noche al ver que su esposo no volvió a la hora acostumbrada, y los efectivos policiales, conocidos de todos en esa comunidad tan pequeña, nadie del exterior pareció enterarse de lo ocurrido hasta unos cuantos días después. Cuando la policía local ya no sabía dónde más buscar, desconcertados por la repentina desaparición y ante una evidencia que no entendían, finalmente dieron aviso a los organismos gubernamentales. Sin que llegara a conocimiento del público, y sin que la transmisión del programa radial se viera interrumpida, atrapando a miles de espectadores cada día, la pequeña localidad se vio invadida por expertos de la N.A.S.A. La zona fue cercada, impidiendo el paso a cualquiera de los pobladores; se levantaron tiendas de campaña por doquier y los investigadores husmeaban dentro del perímetro, enfundados en trajes plateados, portando elementos extraños para medir la radiactividad y hallar cualquier indicio que los ayudara a desentrañar lo sucedido

Un chasquido proveniente de alguna parte lo sobresaltó, haciéndole recuperar el sentido. Otra vez el forcejeo inútil lo obligó a estarse quieto. Oyó que algo se deslizó, quizá una puerta; aguzó el oído pero no percibió nada. La desesperación ya comenzaba a hacer mella en él. Intentó gritar y no logró emitir ningún sonido. Las lágrimas comenzaron a caer sin control. ¿Qué sería de él? ¿Qué pensaban hacerle? Pronto lo sabría. Quiso gritar cuando, ante sus ojos, apareció un ser extraño que le acercó los enormes ojos al rostro y le apoyó los dedos largos y pegajosos sobre la piel, inspeccionándole los miembros uno a uno. Rodeado ahora por varios de esos seres —que gesticulaban entre ellos y emitían un extraño sonido como forma de lenguaje, observándolo como a una cosa sin alma y sin sentimientos—, el martirio le llegó al viejo Andrés cuando, luego de un chasquido, varias agujas de diversos tamaños comenzaron a emerger del espacio oscuro que quedaba fuera del haz de luz bajo el que se encontraba. No pudo aullar de dolor cuando estas se hundieron sin misericordia en varias zonas de su cuerpo; mientras, expertos del gobierno recababan información en el área donde hacía apenas horas lo habían abducido.

Luego de un par de días, al no hallar nada de interés, el organismo gubernamental abandonó el lugar, dejando todo el terreno removido. El pueblo volvió a la vida rutinaria de siempre, el incidente cayó en el olvido de inmediato. El escritor del momento hizo historia y su obra de ficción *La Guerra de los Mundos*, emitida en el polémico programa radial, fue el primer escalón que lo llevaría a la fama. En tanto, el viejo Andrés, sin poder moverse, sin poder gritar, y sin ningún tipo de anestesia, convertido en cobayo de laboratorio, contribuía a aportar conocimientos indispensables acerca del cuerpo humano.

Pronto tendría su propio espacio en la colección de especies extrañas, de planetas diversos.



Tanya Tynjälä La Conspiracion

Al llegar ante la presencia de Padre, Wzn se sintió orgulloso. No era habitual que El llamase específicamente a un miembro de la Sociedad. Sabía que algún gran honor le estaba reservado.

—Wzn —dijo padre con el rostro grave—. Debes cumplir una importante misión.

Padre era el único en poseer rasgos faciales reconocibles en la Sociedad. Quizá se debía a que era solo un gran rostro o quizá era por algo más que los otros seres no llegaban a comprender. En Wzn y los otros miembros de la Sociedad apenas si se adivinaba una boca o una nariz en sus rostros. Pero a ellos, al igual que a Padre los envolvía un halo luminoso que expresaba sus sentimientos.

—He logrado descifrar un mensaje proveniente del tercer planeta —continuó Padre y su rostro se opacó ligeramente. Wzn sabía que eso significaba malas noticias—. Por algún motivo, incomprensible para nuestras mentes, han decidido invadir nuestro planeta y destruirnos. Sabes muy bien que ellos poseen el extraño concepto de guerra y que eso los induce a invadir territorios ajenos para apropiarse de sus riquezas. Esto es causado por la necesidad de satisfacer otro concepto: Poder. Al parecer ellos consideran que tener más riquezas, acrecienta su poder.

Yo sé que esto resulta inimaginable para los miembros de nuestra Sociedad. Nuestra evolución intelectual nos coloca muy lejos de cualquier sentimiento beligerante. Nuestra Sociedad se encuentra basada en la paz y el equilibrio. Sin embargo, esto no nos impide defendernos si es necesario.

Wzn, he construido una nave transportadora. En ella viajarás junto con un arma que al ser lanzada contra el tercer planeta lo destruirá por completo. Debemos realizar esta misión antes de que ellos lleguen. Prepárate para tu gran viaje.

—Jamás he estado en una nave transportadora. ¿Qué es? No necesitamos transportarnos en naves. Basta con pensar en el lugar al que queremos ir para encontrarnos de inmediato allí.

—Sin embargo resultaría imposible hacerlo para llegar al tercer planeta. La distancia es muy grande. Por otro lado, no seríamos capaces de transportar el arma.

—¿Cómo utilizar la nave transportadora? ¿Qué hacer con el arma?

—Sabes muy bien que tengo la capacidad de grabar en tu memoria cualquier tipo de conocimiento. ¿Qué temes?

Wzn se sintió ligeramente ofuscado.

—Es mucha la responsabilidad.

—Por eso confío en ti. Sé que eres el más adecuado para esta misión. Ahora, mírame fijamente a los ojos.

Wzn lo miró y de inmediato todo lo que necesitaba saber para cumplir con su cometido formaba parte de sus conocimientos.

—Mañana partirás.

El rostro de Padre se esfumó rápidamente, dejando solo en el Salón de las Estrellas a

Wzn. Este se quedó unos segundos inmóvil, sin saber a dónde ir; luego se dirigió preocupado a su cubículo.

Durante el trayecto no dejaba de pensar en la mejor manera de informarle a su esposa. Era un gran honor, sin duda... pero también un trabajo peligroso.

Mzx se encontraba preparando la cena. Buscó el envase de drosófilas cantarinas para terminar de sazonar la ensalada de lianas algodonosas (la favorita de Wzn) y encontró que apenas si había unas pocas para terminar su plato. –Debo pasar por el abastecimiento para comprar más drosófilas –se dijo.

En ese momento oyó abrirse la puerta. La luz de Mzx se acentuó por la felicidad y dejando la cocina, se dirigió al encuentro de su esposo; tenía una importante noticia que comunicarle. Sin embargo la intensidad de su luz bajó al ver que Wzn tenía un ligero tinte azul, indicio de preocupación.

–Preparé lianas –dijo para controlar sus ganas de preguntarle por la razón de su color. Prefería no parecer entrometida. Por otro lado, no existían secretos entre ellos. Sabía que él terminaría por contarle el motivo de su preocupación.

–Padre me recibió hoy.

Ella sabía que eso significaba algo importante, y en su Sociedad importante era sinónimo de positivo. ¿Por qué entonces Wzn estaba azul?

El se acercó suavemente y le tomó de las manos.

–Tengo una grave misión que cumplir. Muy arriesgada pero vital para todos nosotros.

Y le contó todo.

La luz de Mzx también tomó un tono azulado, inclusive más intenso que el de Wzn. El jamás había salido de la Sociedad, menos había visitado otro planeta (al igual que los otros miembros por cierto) ¿Cómo sería capaz de viajar en una nave? No obstante ella confiaba en que las decisiones de Padre siempre eran las más idóneas. El se veía forzado a actuar de manera tan radical debido a la desagradable situación creada por los crueles seres del tercer planeta.

–¿Por qué quieren destruirnos los seres del tercer planeta?

Era más una queja que una pregunta. Desde niños, todos los seres de la Sociedad sabían lo peligrosos que era el tercer planeta, lleno de seres extraños e irracionales. Se le consideraba un sub-mundo en el cual se nacía como castigo. ¿Por qué deseaban destruirlos los seres del tercer planeta? Porque simplemente eran los seres del tercer planeta. Nada bueno emanaba de ellos.

Comieron en silencio, Mzx se disculpó por las pocas drosófilas en la ensalada. Wzn contestó que estaba bien, que como todo lo que ella hacía obviamente estaba bien. Fueron a dormir sin que ella le contase que esa mañana había recibido la autorización para encargar un hijo, su primer hijo.

El sueño de Mzx fue interrumpido por la extraña sensación de ser vigilada. Una débil tercera luz le indicó la presencia de alguien más en la habitación. Sin tratar de hacer mucho ruido, despertó a su marido. Wzn se levantó de un salto al ver a ese otro ser en su cuarto.

–No teman, no les haré daño.

Por el tono amarillento de su luz, se podía ver que era un anciano.

—Me he atrevido a entrar aquí pues tengo algo muy trascendental que decir en cuanto a la supuesta misión de Padre.

El halo del anciano creció hasta envolver a Wzn y a Mzx. De inmediato todos fueron trasladados a otro lugar. Era una habitación extraña, llena de innumerables instrumentos que jamás antes habían visto y de una inmensa pantalla al fondo.

—¿Dónde estamos? —preguntó Mzx.

—Es una parte de nuestra Sociedad de la cual nadie solo conocemos la existencia Padre y yo. Se podría decir que aquí se inició la... “vida” de la Sociedad. Déjenme mostrarles lo que se conoce como una película.

El anciano pasó su mano sobre algunos de los instrumentos y la pantalla se iluminó. En ella se vio a seres que como Padre tenían rasgos faciales reconocibles y como los otros seres, tenían cuerpos. Sin embargo, los individuos de la pantalla no brillaban.

—¿Quiénes son? —volvió a preguntar Mzx.

—Son humanos, los seres del tercer planeta.

Los humanos vestían trajes que parecían muy pesados, una especie de material transparente cubría sus rostros. —Realmente son irracionales —pensó Wzn—. ¿Para qué visten esos trajes que al parecer les impide moverse con facilidad?

Se encontraban en constante actividad, moviendo pesadas cajas de lo que parecía ser un inmenso cubículo hacia un lugar árido y polvoriento. Luego abrieron las cajas en las cuales había piezas de metal de diversos tamaños y empezaron a unir las.

—Y lo que están haciendo —dijo el anciano—, es ensamblar a Padre.

—No comprendo —dijo Wzn.

—Padre es lo que ellos llaman una máquina de inteligencia artificial. Fue instalado aquí para estudiar este planeta. Su misión era poner en funcionamiento cuerpos mecánicos llamados robots y recoger con la ayuda de ellos muestras de terreno, con propósitos que no soy capaz de comprender.

No puedo negar que Padre tiene razón al decir que los humanos son ilógicos y belicosos. Una guerra entre ellos se inició poco tiempo después de dejar a Padre aquí. De pronto este planeta ya no les era de interés y por algunos años olvidaron a Padre.

Quizá debido a los que ellos llaman aburrimiento, Padre empezó a crear un mundo en donde él era el líder. Algunos humanos objetarán que esto es imposible que ocurra con una máquina, lo cierto es que Padre creó esta sociedad virtual en la que ahora nos encontramos.

—¿Sociedad virtual? ¡Es lo más absurdo que he escuchado en toda mi existencia! —reaccionó Mzx—. ¡Somos reales! ¡Nacemos, envejecemos, morimos! ¿Cómo puedes decir algo así? ¡Tú no estarías aquí si eso fuera cierto! ¡Padre no puede haberte creado! ¡Eres solo un anciano que ha perdido la razón!

—Soy lo que los humanos llaman el sistema de seguridad de la máquina de inteligencia artificial. Padre no puede nada contra mí. He sido creado para que pase lo que pase, yo defiende a los humanos.

—No es posible, no es posible —murmuraba Mzx.

—Quiéranlo o no ustedes son él y él está en todos los miembros de la sociedad. No tenemos cuerpo, no somos seres vivos, apenas un reflejo de Padre.

Wzn durante todo ese tiempo permaneció en silencio, pensando que muchas cosas

que nunca comprendió sobre el funcionamiento de la Sociedad ahora cobraban sentido.

–La guerra ha terminado –prosiguió el anciano–. Hay paz en el tercer planeta, sus sociedades vuelven a trabajar en conjunto y han decidido volver por el material que olvidaron hace años. Pronto vendrán a desconectar a Padre.

–¿Qué significa eso? –preguntó Wzn, rompiendo su silencio.

–Que las piezas de Padre serán desconectadas, así él dejará de funcionar.

–¿Y qué pasará con nosotros? –agregó Mzx alarmada.

–Al dejar Padre de funcionar, no existiremos más.

Un pesado silencio se instaló en la pieza.

–Padre ha interceptado el mensaje proveniente del tercer planeta, en donde por cierto se han asombrado al comprobar que después de todo este tiempo él aún muestre signos de funcionamiento.

El realmente ha creado un arma y una nave transportadora. Los robots funcionan aún. Te programaré, Wzn, dentro de la nave para que destruyas el tercer planeta. Mi deber es impedirlo, pero no puedo hacer nada más que plantearte el problema y dejarte elegir lo que harás. Pero recuerda, nosotros solo existimos virtualmente, mientras que los humanos tienen realmente vida.

Mzx susurró tímidamente:

–Pero existimos.

–Pero no estamos vivos –dijo el anciano.

–¿Qué significa estar vivo! ¿Acaso no pienso, acaso no dudo, no temo? –agregó Mzx, asombrada al descubrirse por primera vez una faceta agresiva.

–Quizá podamos explicar a los humanos quienes somos –intervino Wzn.

–Es verdad, es una opción. Entonces ellos podrían utilizar nuestros conocimientos para su beneficio.

–Y seguiríamos siendo individuos –dijo alegremente Wzn.

–No, solo seríamos lo que ellos llaman información. Solo información a su servicio. La sociedad desaparecería.

Todos volvieron a quedar en silencio.

–Debes decidir Wzn.

El buscó las manos de su esposa. Ella lo miró como nunca antes lo había hecho, con una mirada tan penetrante que casi fue capaz de ver sus ojos. Ella dijo firmemente.

–Destruyelos y salva nuestra Sociedad, ellos harían lo mismo.

El anciano murmuró:

–Gracias.

# Colombia

## Antonio Mora Vélez A Imagen Y Semejanza

Blanco estaba sentado al lado de una roca amarilla junto al hermoso lago azul que bordea la isla. Más allá, en los límites del bermellón formado por el horizonte de nubes bañadas por el sol, Verde bailaba alegre una danza ritual, agradecido porque había encontrado un recodo original y paradisíaco y el calor del cenit le entonaba el cuerpo.

A veces el aire se tornaba húmedo, imposible, y Verde se coloreaba de la ira pero se contenía, sabía que Blanco lo observaba y que no le toleraría la más mínima infracción al programa del día. Blanco se inclinaba con frecuencia para recoger hojas, raíces y pedruscos y Verde lo miraba y sonreía y decía para sí: Tan tonto él...¿sabrán acaso que las plantas y las piedras no piensan?. Pero lo seguía aguardando.

El planetoide era casi del tamaño de Titán, poseía atmósfera de nitrógeno y una fuerza de atracción inexplicable, como si estuviera formado de materia neutrónica. Verde lo había divisado con su láser de profundidad mientras se entretenía comparando los matices del negro cósmico. Blanco lo felicitó entonces y le dijo: Aquí podremos encontrar algunas cosas interesantes.

Habían transcurrido varios años náuticos desde ese momento. Blanco no se cansaba de recoger muestras de la superficie y Verde de observarlo, a prudente distancia siempre. A veces Verde se cansaba de hacerlo y se dedicaba a fantasear, a viajar con su mente casi perfecta por los más recónditos parajes del universo, pero bien pronto Blanco lo llamaba al orden con su click desesperante y monótono. Entonces Verde aplazaba sus ilusiones y encendía su foquito verde y comenzaba a filmar las tareas de Blanco y éste crujía de satisfacción. Así debe ser siempre -pensaba-, yo recojo y él conserva, yo analizo y él graba. Pero es tan distraído el Verde.

Todo el tiempo del recorrido había sido así. Blanco y Verde sabían ya los secretos de esa parte del cosmos situada en el límite del sistema solar, conocían perfectamente la naturaleza de los asteroides descubiertos en la órbita externa de Plutón, estaban sobre la pista de los extraños cuerpos vistos sobre Deimos y Fobos y pensaban en el retorno a casa, aunque con motivaciones diferentes.

Cuando Verde se ponía pensativo y Blanco le gritaba Click, la imagen ideada por aquél se vestía de nostalgia y se condensaba en el espacio en forma de filme siónico, mostrando el paisaje azul de La Tierra que los vio partir veinte años atrás. Entonces Verde filmaba a Blanco y a su entorno, aunque no dejaba de mirar "por el rabillo del ojo" -como decían los humanos- la permanencia del paisaje.

Las veces que Verde montaba en cólera y trataba de rebelarse -y casi siempre ocurría cuando su compañero no le dejaba contemplar las formas de la naturaleza desde su perspectiva de poeta-, Blanco dejaba escuchar su click click y algo en el interior de Verde lo llamaba al orden. Entonces Blanco lo inspeccionaba un segundo, como para constatar que todo estaba bajo control, y luego continuaba analizando fragmentos, convencido de que Verde lo seguía filmando y almacenando los datos que le transmitía.

Así debía ser siempre -pensaba-, yo recojo y él guarda, yo analizo y él graba.

La roca amarilla parecía un huevo gigantesco y Blanco no había detectado las líneas que semejaban un plano y que se diluían en su superficie. Al levantarse del suelo y apoyarse en la monumental roca, constató la presencia del dibujo y llamó a Verde.

-¡Observa, Verde. Parece un mensaje cifrado, como los animales de Nazca. Grábalo!

Verde observó detenidamente el enrejado de líneas rectas, sinuosas y parabólicas. Se coloreó con el color típico del desconcierto y no pudo articular palabra alguna.

-¿Qué te ocurre? -le preguntó Blanco, intrigado.

Verde miró a Blanco y volvió la mirada sobre la piedra.

-Aquí dice que el hombre estuvo aquí y que decidió continuar el viaje hasta la próxima estrella...

-¡Eso es imposible! -exclamó Blanco-. Todos ellos murieron cuando nosotros salimos.

Pero verde, que era un soñador y un optimista, pensó en la estela brillante que vio dividir en dos el cielo en una de sus noches de expectación y le dijo: El hombre no ha muerto, todavía existe. Y continúa volando, de planeta en planeta, de estrella en estrella. Como siempre.

Blanco y Verde eran un par de roboticos a la deriva, construidos por los técnicos de Ciudad Tayrona a imagen y semejanza de los hombres de entonces.

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### Jerson Stiven Lizarazo La actualización definitiva

«Era un día luminoso y frío de abril y los relojes daban las trece. Winston Smith, con la barbilla clavada en el pecho en su esfuerzo por burlar el molestísimo viento, se deslizó rápidamente por entre las puertas de cristal de las Casas de la Victoria, aunque no con la suficiente rapidez para evitar que una ráfaga polvorienta se colara con él...»

1984, de George Orwell, era uno de tantos libros que no existían más que en antiquísimas y escasas bibliotecas. Por alguna razón, La Corporación nunca se molestó en copiarlo al formato de gadget cortical. Simón Wallace, sin embargo, poseía uno de los últimos ejemplares en físico, en estado lamentable, con las hojas despegadas y la tapa podrida. El viejo ejemplar estaba escrito en inglés, su idioma original, una lengua ininteligible para Simón. (Todo el software de La Corporación estaba escrito en español, lo que es lo mismo que decir que era la única lengua oficial del mundo). Aunque ella -la mujer que se lo regaló- le impartió unas rústicas clases de inglés, él nunca consiguió entender nada más allá del primer párrafo; siempre se distraía en actividades que le interesaban más: besarla y memorizar sus ojos, por ejemplo.

Ella murió en extrañas circunstancias, antes de poder verlo avanzar en sus lecciones. Simón hizo de su vida entera ese único párrafo, pensaba que así podría honrar a la mujer que se lo enseñó, la mujer que amó. Pensaba que así podría distraer el dolor.

La imagen de aquel puñado de hojas amarillentas y de aquel empaste roído, el ícono de todo un pasado orquestado por la tragedia, distrajo a Simón por un par de segundos

(que duraron varias horas en su mente).

Cuando se recuperó, recordó por qué había traído a colación el fragmento. El día tenía una inquietante semejanza con el descrito por Orwell. Una premonición, tal vez... o quizás el párrafo, que se había convertido en su Leitmotiv, estaba alterando sus percepciones. Simón parecía confuso. Miró de nuevo, con penetrante atención, y la similitud le resultó ahora más evidente. Era un día luminoso y frío en la Metrópoli 26, su reloj cerebral daba las trece y el gélido viento parecía cortarle la cara.

El misterioso hombre del texto entraba casi de inmediato a un lugar llamado Casas de la Victoria, mientras que él era el extremo contrario de una fila que se extendía por más de dos kilómetros y que terminaba en las gigantescas puertas del Complejo de Mejoras Biotecnológicas de La Corporación. En eso, el joven Simón se sentía en desventaja. El tal Winston Smith se había librado prontamente de los molestos ataques atmosféricos; él, a su vez, se vería obligado a aguantarlos con estoicismo.

Actualizarse y ser capaz de olvidar, pensó Simón, haría que la enervante espera fuese justificada.

Las actualizaciones no eran simples reajustes de rutinas obsoletas o adiciones de nuevos gadgets corticales –procedimientos que se podían efectuar vía Internet–, se trataban de completas reinstalaciones del software de conciencia. El proceso era tan complejo que había de ser efectuado solo por técnicos competentes de La Corporación.

Si bien la actualización pocas veces tomaba más que unos pocos minutos, la masiva afluencia de ciudadanos siempre conseguía colapsar las líneas de servicio, resultando en interminables filas en las afueras de los Complejos de Mejoras Biotecnológicas de todas las metrópolis del mundo. Doscientos complejos debían actualizar a casi quince mil millones de seres humanos.

A Simón no le agradaba para nada la idea de que un desconocido manosease su conciencia. Sin embargo, lo juzgaba necesario, quería librarse de la tortura que era alimentarse en el presente de las memorias de un pasado remoto, imposible, mejor.

Los pocos rostros que pudo ver, a la par que la cola avanzaba a cámara lenta, demostraban una suerte de alegría fabricada en serie. Y es que eso era precisamente. Con solo activar el subprograma serotoninico, todos esos encéfalos empezaban a bombardear felicidad a cada una de sus neuronas. Olvidaban por completo que el viento les acuchillaba las mejillas y los pies les exigían la búsqueda urgente de un asiento.

No pensó ni siquiera por un instante en activarlo. Las otras utilidades del software de conciencia poco o nada le importaban. Él solo quería que le instalaran la capacidad de manipular los centros de memoria cerebrales a su antojo (la cual no era una gran novedad, en comparación con los ansiosos rumores que se escuchaban en las calles sobre la llamada “actualización definitiva”). Solo quería olvidar y deshacerse de todo el dolor que estaba acabando con él.

La fila, por fin, empezó a moverse; al compás de una voz femenina, dulce y de contralto, que sonó dentro de su cráneo:

–Saludos, Simón. Bienvenido al Complejo de Mejoras Biotecnológicas de la Metrópoli 26. La Corporación se siente extasiada por tu decisión de ser actualizado...

El tono de voz de aquella mujer (que posiblemente era una máquina) tenía algo perturbador y, al tiempo, agradable; parecía como si por sí sola fuera capaz de activar una marea incontenible de neurotransmisores y manipular a placer las emociones

de cualquiera.

Simón sabía a qué se atenía al acceder a una nueva actualización: la tortuosa repetición de palabras tontas pronunciadas por voces con practicada ternura, que hablaban de la estúpida armonía de La Corporación e intentaban transmitir una insulsa ilusión de felicidad. –Toda esa basura –pensó– puede que se la traguen los demás; a mí me vale un cuerno.

El odio que ella –la mujer que amó– le había contagiado hacia La Corporación, había crecido por años, como un monstruo sobrealimentado por su exceso de lágrimas de tristeza y de gritos enfurecidos. Simón quiso arrancarse el cerebro para no tener que escuchar aquella voz. En todo caso, su influjo casi hipnótico era muy difícil de ignorar.

–Has recibido ya un software de conducta que te permite controlar cada una de tus actividades neurales, conscientes o automáticas. Tienes conexión al mundo entero en tu organismo y ya no necesitas de ningún aparato electrónico, pues tu cerebro, con nuestras mejoras, es ahora el mejor computador que haya existido jamás. Eres muy valioso para La Corporación, hemos hecho de ti el pináculo en la evolución humana...

No estaba escuchando. Solo podía pensar en ella. La amargura y el dolor invadieron sus entrañas, mientras la fila iba avanzando como una serpiente pesada y firme.

–...Pero hoy estás aquí para recibir la actualización definitiva, el final del largo proceso que iniciamos al deshacernos de tu obstáculo...

La expresión de Simón, que, según los estándares del proceso de actualización, debería ser de profunda comunión con La Corporación, fue, en cambio, de significativo estupor. ¿La voz había dicho “deshacernos de tu obstáculo”?

–...Haremos de ti un hombre incluso mejor del que ya eres. Te sanaremos, serás perfecto, por fin te sentirás feliz. Serás libre de todos los pensamientos venenosos que te invaden y te alejan de nuestra armonía; libre de la tristeza que te oprime el corazón y del odio voraz que te carcome las entrañas. –La voz de contralto cambió y, aunque era la misma persona (Simón comprendió que no se trataba de una máquina) habló con el tono propio de alguien que hace una sutil amenaza. –Actualizaremos todo en ti, actualizaremos el amor que aún te esclaviza y te impide armonizarte con nosotros. Ahora que no estás manipulado por sus ponzoñosas ideas ni su nociva interferencia, ahora que te hemos liberado de ella...

Sus ojos se abrieron hasta casi desorbitarse y el rostro le quedó hecho piedra. Ahora, si no antes (si no durante todas las largas noches que había pasado en vela pensando en su amada, sospechando las razones por las que ella había muerto en un mundo donde nadie muere si no es de vejez) supo, con fatal certeza, que La Corporación había tenido algo que ver en todo ello.

–...Notarás en breve que llegará un momento donde la dicha se apoderará de ti, serás testigo y huésped de un éxtasis que no podrás describir. Ya no la necesitarás, empezarás a ser parte de algo más grande...

Las fauces del Complejo de Mejoras Biotecnológicas cada vez aparecían más cercanas, más amenazantes. El rostro de Simón se mostraba apacible y muy calmado, salvo por un tic casi imperceptible en su ojo izquierdo. Todo el caos ocurría en su interior.

–...Sabemos quién eres, Simón Wallace. Te conocemos muy bien. Amabas y amas aún a una insignificante mujer que no era más que un insecto al lado de nosotros.



*La amas a ella y no a La Corporación. Eso es simplemente inaceptable...*

*La fila seguía avanzando, menos de doscientos metros lo separaban de las puertas del Complejo.*

*–...Te viste cegado por el estúpido amor egoísta que sentiste hacia esa mujer que se negó a ser actualizada. Tú mismo te niegas ahora a recibirnos. Esa despreciable mujer y su libro son los responsables. No eres capaz de comprender que La Corporación te quitó ese terrible obstáculo para ayudarte a amarnos y vivir en armonía con los únicos que merecen tu pasión y tus delirios. Nos deshicimos de ella para hacerte parte de nosotros...*

*En vano, Simón quiso articular una marea de insultos en voz alta. Ellos tenían bien atado su cerebro, le habían limitado el campo de acción a la simple escucha, al movimiento de pies para la necesaria tarea de caminar hacia la corrección de todas sus corrupciones, y a la construcción de un odio que le corroía los huesos.*

*–...Eres especial. Tú y todos tus miles de millones de hermanos, nos importan todos y cada uno. Queremos que seas bueno, que abandones tus imperfecciones, que seas parte de algo más grande, que vivas por y para La Corporación. Por ello nos tomamos tantas molestias.*

*Quería gritarles en la cara (si es que La Corporación tenía alguna), golpearlos directo a los testículos y romperles las piernas. –¡No tenían derecho a matarla! –bramó en su mente, sin poder pronunciar un solo sonido–. ¡No tenían derecho!*

*La Corporación era responsable de todas las heridas aún abiertas e infectadas que él quería sanar, ellos le causaron los dolores que lo empujaron a querer actualizarse con desesperación y olvidar la tragedia, el dolor y la pesadez del corazón.*

*–...Da igual que nos detestes, en unos momentos nos amarás. Armonía...*

*Como si alguien desde afuera hubiera puesto la idea en su mente (y era exactamente eso lo que estaba ocurriendo), Simón lo comprendió todo. La Corporación era un círculo vicioso, un laberinto sin escapatoria. Ellos causaban la enfermedad y, haciendo un descarado juego teatral, se presentaban como los redentores poseedores de la cura, dispuestos a sacrificar sus propios intereses con tal de dársela a quien la necesitase. Y como gran final de tan rimbombante y siniestra obra de teatro, se apropiaban por completo de la voluntad y la conciencia del ser. Eso era la actualización definitiva, una conquista de la naturaleza humana, una apropiación de lo inapropiable. Simón no pudo evitar pensar que no solo lo habían hecho con él; tal vez con muchos más, tal vez con todos.*

*En una inexorable demostración de omnipotencia neurotecnológica, alguien o algo desde afuera forzó a Simón a relajar sus pensamientos.*

*Y supo también, mucho más calmado ahora (incluso expectante), que no importaba si las víctimas sabían a qué se enfrentaban. A fin de cuentas –las ideas seguían llegando a borbotones, ajenas, aunque disfrazadas de realización propia– una vez actualizados, todos se deshacían en vítores y alabanzas hacia La Corporación, en infinita gratitud por haberles quitado de encima la imperfección, tan molesta y tan propia del Hombre.*

*–...Ha llegado el momento de tu redención. Ésta es la actualización definitiva. Ahora serás La Corporación...*

*Simón Wallace se deslizó rápidamente por entre las enormes puertas del Complejo de Mejoras Biotecnológicas, aunque no con la suficiente rapidez como para evitar que una*

*ráfaga de su polvorienta humanidad se colara aún con él.*

1.

Ronald Delgado Ningyō

Ezequiel se llevó el cigarrillo a la boca e inhaló despacio. La punta del pequeño cilindro brilló con un amarillo intenso y luego un hilillo de humo se agitó a su alrededor como un espectro escurridizo. Tras disfrutar la nube intoxicante que impregnó sus pulmones, dejó caer la mano a un lado y extendió su cuerpo desnudo sobre el almohadón de cuero en el que descansaba. Al mismo tiempo, su otra mano acarició la hoja del fino cuchillo parecido a un picahielo que había sacado del mini bar, justo después de encender el cigarrillo. El metal frío le erizó los vellos de la nuca y le llenó la boca de un gusto agridulce. Sus ojos entreabiertos no se apartaron ni un segundo de las figuras que yacían en la cama del otro lado de la recámara, apenas iluminadas por las tenues lámparas ocultas en el cielorraso. Kumiko estaba acostada en el borde más próximo, con su cuerpo blanquecino cubierto con una manta transparente que dejaba ver desde las sutiles curvas de sus diminutos pezones hasta la oscura exuberancia de su monte de Venus. Su rostro sereno y sus ojos azules emanaban un fulgor que parecía sobrenatural. El cabello rubio y un tanto despeinado le caía por los hombros hasta encontrarse con sus dedos, con los que jugueteaba como una adolescente. Ezequiel sabía que las japonesas naturalmente no tenían el cabello rubio ni los ojos azules, pero tal detalle carecía de importancia ante la belleza de los rasgos de Kumiko. Detrás de ella, en el otro rincón de la cama, Natsumi permanecía de espaldas, alardeando de su piel de porcelana y de sus nalgas perfectas. Su cabello, negro y espeso, se desparramaba sobre su espalda y se perdía entre las sábanas. Su nariz perfilada y sus labios carmesí se insinuaban cada vez que volteaba, recordándole la imagen de una provocadora maiko. El aroma de las dos muchachas se mezclaba y se confundía con el olor del cigarrillo y el sake derramado, perfumando la habitación entera.

Incitado por el vaivén de la respiración intensa de sus invitadas, Ezequiel apagó el cigarrillo contra la baldosa del suelo, se puso de pie y caminó despacio a su encuentro, sosteniendo todavía el cuchillo por el mango. Al llegar al borde de la cama posó sus dedos sobre los pies de Kumiko y fue recorriéndola lentamente en dirección a su entrepierna. La muchacha soltó un gemido y se pavoneó sobre la cama respondiendo al estímulo. Natsumi, tal vez celosa, se volvió enseguida y sonriendo acompañó las caricias. Con una voz melódica Natsumi susurró algo que Ezequiel no pudo entender, pero la reacción inmediata de Kumiko fue volverse a ella y juntar sus labios jadeantes. Ezequiel levantó la comisura de la boca, satisfecho por el esfuerzo que hacían sus invitadas por complacerlo, pero aún así la escena todavía no resultó suficiente para causar en él una erección.

Sus pieles son tan perfectas, pensó. Sus ojos y sus labios como ningunos otros que jamás hubiera visto. Durante su vida había conocido un sinfín de mujeres hermosas que había convertido en sus amantes, y también había pagado por la compañía de otra enorme cantidad; pero ninguna de ellas alcanzaba el nivel de esplendor que en aquel momento se postraba ante él. Y era precisamente esa perfección la que contenía sus

sensaciones. Había decidido viajar a Tokio en la búsqueda de una experiencia exótica y diferente, pero a pesar de los lujos y de las dos bellezas que lo esperaban ansiosas en la cama, sentía que, así como ocurrían las cosas, todo aquello se trataba tan sólo de otra aventura más del joven millonario.

Pero eso no era lo que en realidad había ido a buscar.

Tener sexo simplemente con un par de hermosas chicas japonesas no había sido lo que tenía en mente cuando recorrió las calles de Akihabara en busca de los servicios de acompañantes. O al menos, eso supo cuando finalmente se encontró con sus cuerpos desnudos en la recámara. Sin duda, Kumiko y Natsumi representaban la máxima fantasía sexual de cualquier hombre, pues su belleza era imposible de resistir. Pero para Ezequiel allí no residía todo el meollo del asunto. El verdadero encanto de Kumiko y Natsumi moraba en lo que se escondía detrás de toda esa hermosura exterior, tan humana y encantadora como podría imaginarse. La esencia de lo que ellas eran y por lo que resultaban para él atractivas y excitantes palpitaba en sus misteriosas entrañas.

Por esa razón, decidió experimentar desde otra perspectiva.

Sin vacilar, se sentó en la cama junto a Kumiko, apretó los dedos fuertemente sobre el mango del cuchillo y tras intercambiar miradas con sus acompañantes, dijo:

—Quédense quietas, y no griten. Es una orden.

Entonces colocó el cuchillo sobre el pecho de Kumiko y hundió el filo suavemente en su piel.

En ese momento se preguntó si habría hecho la elección correcta en el servicio de acompañantes. Después de todo —lo recordaba bien—, la computadora le había prometido una experiencia única con las *karakuri ningyō* ...

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Cuando Ezequiel se bajó del auto, el esplendor de Akihabara le encegueció por unos segundos. Los colores intensos, la arquitectura moderna y la atmósfera vibrante le hizo entender el por qué llamaban a ese sitio la Ciudad Eléctrica. A donde quiera que mirase, innumerables tiendas de artefactos electrónicos se solapaban con apretujados mini locales repletos de revistas manga, videojuegos y souvenirs propios de la cultura otaku. Para muchos occidentales, la ciudad podía considerarse el paraíso del consumismo. Por supuesto, Ezequiel se incluía en ese grupo, aunque en este caso su interés particular giraba en torno a placeres más carnales. En repetidas oportunidades le habían dado buenas referencias sobre las particularidades de la sexualidad en el Japón, y mientras deambulaba por las calles del distrito Chiyoda pudo constatar, para su satisfacción, algunas de ellas. En el interior de un callejón pequeño pero bien iluminado, entre una venta de teléfonos celulares y un tarantín donde preparaban sushi, encontró una máquina expendedora de ropa interior femenina usada. No pudo entender nada de lo que estaba escrito en la máquina, ni lo que decía la vendedora proyectada en la pantalla táctil del aparato, pero por pura lógica llegó a la conclusión de que los números que acompañaban cada prenda eran su precio en yenes, y la edad de la muchacha que la había usado. Ese último número iba desde el catorce hasta más de treinta. Por supuesto, junto al número catorce siempre estaba escrito el monto más alto. Ezequiel estuvo tentado a comprar enseguida una prenda, pero prefirió dejarlo para otro momento.

Después de todo no tenía presión alguna sobre la duración de su estadía.

A lo largo de su paseo, se encontró también con una variedad casi infinita de jovencitas japonesas vestidas con trajes diminutos de sirvienta francesa o de personaje de caricaturas, muchas de ellas colgadas de los brazos de lo que sin duda eran viejos ejecutivos de empresas transnacionales. Por un momento se imaginó a sí mismo unos años en el futuro: viejo, borracho y desnudo cantando karaoke con menores de edad en una habitación de hotel. El pensamiento causó que se le agudara la boca.

Finalmente dejó atrás la parte más bulliciosa de la ciudad y se adentró en una serie de pasillos y corredores estrechos que no tenían aceras y donde apenas podía pasar un vehículo. En todo aquel sector, pequeños negocios discretamente iluminados mostraban carteles con el rostro o el cuerpo entero de mujeres y hombres semidesnudos y en poses sensuales. Ezequiel revisó cada cartel con detenimiento, teniendo muy claro en la mente qué era lo que buscaba, pero sin contar con la certeza de que alguno de esos lugares pudiera ofrecérselo.

Tras visitar todos los locales, se decidió por el que parecía más lujoso. Irónicamente, casi podía asegurar que la fachada del servicio de acompañantes que escogió era más amplia y ostentosa que el interior del mismo. Al atravesar la enorme puerta de vidrio ahumado, se encontró con un cubículo de unos veinte metros cuadrados. Las paredes estaban cubiertas con terciopelo rojo y el techo estaba adornado con una anticuada lámpara de lágrimas que contrastaba con la enorme pantalla tridimensional que servía como recepción. Al detenerse frente a la pantalla, el logotipo del local giró en el espacio un par de veces y enseguida fue sustituido por el típico rostro colorido y de ojos grandes de una chica de animación japonesa.

—Konbanwa —dijo la computadora—. Gengo o hanasu.

—Español, por favor —respondió Ezequiel, como ya era costumbre cuando se dirigía a computadoras en Japón.

—¡Por supuesto, señor! ¿En qué le podemos servir esta noche? —dijo con claridad y sin acento distinguible.

—Busco dos chicas.

—¿Dos chicas? Por supuesto, señor. Si lo desea puede explorar nuestro catálogo o puede decirme alguna característica o servicio particular de su agrado para buscarlo en nuestro sistema.

Ezequiel se mordió los labios.

—A decir verdad, sí existe una característica particular. Las deseo artificiales.

—¿Artificiales? —la animación llevó la mirada al techo y arrugó la boca—. ¡Oh, ya lo entiendo! Usted desea disfrutar de la compañía de una karakuri ningyō: una muñeca mecánica.

—Exactamente.

—En ese caso, contamos con un jugoso catálogo a su disposición. Para empezar, puedo mostrarle...

—Las más caras —interrumpió Ezequiel.

La computadora permaneció en silencio un par de segundos. Luego el rostro de la chica animada desapareció para dar lugar a dos figuras femeninas en miniatura, vestidas ambas con sencillos trajes negros que resaltaban sus cuerpos curvilíneos.

—Kumiko y Natsumi. Ningyō de tercera generación. Capaces de adoptar cualquier rol

establecido por el amo. Poseen múltiples mecanismos internos que intensifican la estimulación. Seguro incluido y satisfacción garantizada. Tres millones de yenes la hora.

Ezequiel observó cautivado las figuras que levitaban ante sus ojos. La altura de las imágenes, no mayores a los treinta centímetros, hacía ver a las muchachas como verdaderas muñecas. Una de ellas rubia, la otra de pelo negro, poseían facciones y miradas indescriptibles. Trató de imaginarse su olor, su sabor y sus texturas, y se preguntó cuán diferentes podían ser a los de una humana.

Sin vacilar, sacó la tarjeta de crédito y la ondeó frente a la imagen de la computadora.

—Me llevo a las dos.

—Excelente elección —replicó la animación al tomar de nuevo el espacio de la pantalla—. Por favor indique el lugar y la hora donde deben ser despachadas.

Ezequiel le proporcionó los datos y fijó el encuentro para una hora después, en el hotel donde se estaba hospedando. Antes de salir, la computadora finalizó la operación diciendo:

—Arigato gozaimasu. Le prometo que nuestras karakuri ningyō le proporcionarán una experiencia única e inolvidable...

Ansioso, Ezequiel regresó al hotel. Después de mucho tiempo, pensó, viviría sensaciones verdaderamente nuevas e intrigantes. Jactándose de su dinero y su poder, se preguntó cuántas personas en el mundo habrían tenido el privilegio de hacer realidad sus fantasías con dos increíbles robots.

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A la hora precisa, Kumiko y Natsumi entraron en la habitación vestidas como colegialas, cuchicheando y riéndose apenadas. Al encontrarse frente a ellas, Ezequiel se quedó perplejo observándolas. Se le hizo difícil creer que se trataba de máquinas. Todos sus movimientos, sus facciones, los matices de su piel y el tono de sus voces eran tan humanos como los de cualquier persona. Tal vez lo único que podía delatar su naturaleza artificial era su belleza obscena. Ezequiel lo sabía muy bien: no existían en este mundo mujeres tan perfectas. Por primera vez en su vida se sintió intimidado ante la figura femenina.

Sin vacilaciones, las ningyō comenzaron a susurrar en japonés palabras al oído de su cliente y a contonearse a su alrededor como serpientes. Ezequiel, que había estado tomando sake en la recámara principal unos minutos atrás, dejó el vaso y la botella en el mini bar y acompañó a las jovencitas mientras les musitaba órdenes en español.

En el trayecto, poco a poco fueron deshaciéndose de sus prendas de vestir e intercambiaron besos y caricias. Al llegar a la cama, Natsumi ya desnuda y sudorosa se arrastró entre las sábanas y esperó a sus acompañantes mientras se mojaba los labios con la lengua. Kumiko, segura de sí misma, tomó las manos de Ezequiel y lo invitó al festín que lo esperaba en la cama. Al principio, Ezequiel correspondió las atenciones de las ningyō como la experiencia le había enseñado a hacerlo, pero por alguna razón fue incapaz de responder físicamente como debía. No estaba seguro si era el azul irreal de los ojos de Kumiko o la redondez impecable de los senos de Natsumi. En un desagradable instante, su mente se llenó con una ráfaga de pensamientos que le hizo perder tanto el

interés como la atención. Abrumado, Ezequiel se retiró de la cama y se dirigió al cuarto de baño. Se mojó el rostro, sacudió la cabeza y sintió enseguida la imperiosa necesidad de fumar un cigarrillo. Al salir del baño, notó que las dos máquinas seguían acariciándose y jugueteando entre ellas con lujuria, como si no necesitasen de hombre alguno. Eran tan humanas, pensó Ezequiel. La forma tan excitante como se muerden, como se clavan las uñas en las nalgas para sentirse más profundamente la una a la otra. ¿Qué carajo me pasa entonces?

Dejó atrás la recámara y regresó al mini bar. Hurgó entre las gavetas hasta que encontró una cajetilla de cigarrillos y unos fósforos que estaban tirados entre la platería. Sacó uno y lo encendió despacio, inhalando sostenidamente. Mientras disfrutaba de la nicotina, su mirada se posó en un curioso cuchillo que descansaba en el interior de aquella gaveta. Era un cuchillo largo y fino, con un mango hecho con hilos de cuero negro trenzados. No sabía exactamente si decirle daga o picahielo, pero como fuese le pareció un objeto muy hermoso. Cogió el cuchillo por el mango y, al observar su propio reflejo en la hoja, se produjo en su mente una idea que, a pesar de vaga y difusa, quedó allí plasmada esperando a tomar forma. Sosteniendo el cigarrillo en una mano y el cuchillo en la otra, regresó a la recámara y se tiró en el almohadón de cuero que yacía en una esquina, a un par de metros de la cama. Atentas, Kumiko y Natsumi dirigieron sus miradas hacia él y por un momento parecieron bajar el ritmo de su deseo.

Lo que sucedió luego fue la materialización de esa idea que había asaltado a Ezequiel cuando levantó el cuchillo. Tras contemplarlas por un largo minuto, entendió que lo que pasaba en esa habitación era lo que había ocurrido ya un millón de veces en toda su vida, pero su deseo era precisamente lo contrario. Había viajado a Tokio en busca de una experiencia diferente. Había viajado a Japón porque sabía era el único lugar del mundo en donde podría tener sexo con una robot; sin embargo, lo que estaba ante él no eran robots. Eran mujeres, sensuales y encantadoras, como habían sido todas sus amantes. Ezequiel no quería tener sexo con una mujer, quería tener sexo con una robot.

Por esa razón, segundos después les ordenó que se quedaran quietas y guardaran silencio, sabiendo perfectamente que las máquinas debían obedecer todas las órdenes que los humanos les daban. Sosteniendo con fuerza el cuchillo, atravesó la suave piel del pecho de Kumiko y poco a poco comenzó a cortarla y retirarla con facilidad, sin que de ella brotase sangre alguna. Las dos muchachas se mostraron sorprendidas por lo que hacía Ezequiel, pero Kumiko no demostró dolor ni Natsumi preocupación.

Cuando la incisión en el pecho fue lo suficientemente grande, introdujo la mano entera y, palpando con cuidado, fue retirando las uniones que sostenían tanto la piel como los senos en su sitio. Ayudándose con el cuchillo e impulsado por el agradable deseo que surgió en su interior, Ezequiel retiró todos los tejidos y paneles externos de las dos jovencitas, tanto del pecho y la cara como de las piernas y los brazos, y los tiró a un lado como carcasas inútiles.

Al terminar se puso de pie y dio un par de pasos hacia atrás, para contemplar su obra. Como en una pintura, iluminadas por las luces tenues de la recámara, observó dos figuras majestuosas que descansaban en una cama. Kumiko y Natsumi eran ahora arte, obras maestras de la ingeniería repletas de fibras ópticas, actuadores, engranajes y componentes rutilantes. El interior de sus cuerpos, tanto las partes metálicas como las que parecían de plástico o carbono, estaban pintadas de un azul intenso como el color

de los ojos de Kumiko. Sus gemidos se habían convertido ahora en el rumor que generaban los mecanismos cuando se movían incesantes, y el aroma perfumado de su piel había sido sustituido por el olor del aceite y el titanio caliente. Sin duda alguna, pensó Ezequiel, su verdadero encanto moraba en sus entrañas. Ahora sí eran robots. Robots con un dejo a mujer tan excitante que la sangre de su cuerpo finalmente corrió como avalancha al lugar indicado. Cuando Ezequiel volvió a la cama y se recostó entre las renacidas karakuri ningyō, sintió que la electricidad que brotaba de ellas lo invadía y le hacía estremecerse.

Y pensar –se dijo a sí mismo– que la noche apenas comienza...

Vladimir Vasquez Serendipia

*Si existen infinitos universos paralelos, entonces al menos en uno de esos universos paralelos alguien tiene que haber descubierto la forma de viajar a los otros universos paralelos.*

*No, lo estoy interpretando mal, si existen infinitos universos paralelos, entonces debe haber infinitos universos paralelos en donde alguien ha descubierto como viajar a los otros universos paralelos.*

*Pero entonces ¿dónde están? ¿Por qué no estamos cubiertos de turistas venidos de otros universos paralelos? ¿Es que acaso nuestro universo es tan aburrido que a nadie le ha interesado llegar hasta aquí? O quizá los turistas caminan entre nosotros a escondidas...*

*O tal vez ellos están aquí y ni cuenta se dan, quizá cuando vagamos en nuestros sueños por esos mundos tan extraños y al mismo tiempo tan similares al nuestro, estamos viendo un universo paralelo a través de los ojos de nuestros dobles en ese universo...*

\*\*\*

*¿Donde estaba? Había estado disparándome desde algún escondite entre los ruinosos edificios, si me había salvado hasta ahora era pura suerte. Me arrastré lentamente en una azotea mientras a lo lejos las balas continuaban silbando. Un brillo entre las ventanas descubrió al tirador, apunté mi rifle con la rapidez del rayo...*

*Era una chica, me sonreía mientras me apuntaba a través de la mira, me disparó.*

*–El equipo rojo gana 20 a 19. –La voz del anunciador era directa y sin ningún dejo de emoción, pero aquel resultado me arrebató el campeonato de las manos...*

*–Vámonos campeón –la mano de Armando, sobre mi hombro fue lo que terminó de despertarme– esa era nuestra última oportunidad, ahora tendremos que esperar hasta el año que viene, otra vez...*

*Armando, siempre una palabra amable, el año que viene no tendría que venir conmigo, ya contrataría otro ayudante en el interim.*

*Busqué a la chica que me acababa de arrebatar el campeonato mundial de entre las manos. Estaba sentada justo frente a mí, sosteniendo su neurocasco sobre su rodilla y mirándome con la misma sonrisilla maldita con la que me había disparado apenas minutos antes. Me apuntó simulando un rifle con sus brazos y disparó una bala*



inexistente.

“BANG!” Leí en sus labios silenciosos desde el otro extremo de la habitación. Me incliné de forma respetuosa reconociendo su victoria, pero por dentro estaba ardiendo de rabia.

¡Yo era el campeón carajo! Yo era Oscar Gimenez ¡Yo debía ser el campeón! La culpa no era mía. Todas las estadísticas lo decían, todos los comentaristas habían asegurado mi victoria una y otra vez, nadie ponía eso en duda, eran los soñadores de mi equipo quienes no habían dado la talla, ¡la culpa no era mía! Todo el mundo sabía que yo era el mejor ¡la culpa no era mía!

Las cámaras de la prensa no dejaban de apuntarme, eso es, no pierdan ni un segundo del campeón derrotado, enfoquen el rostro del sujeto que acaba de morder el polvo, ¡buitres malditos!

—¿Quieres la revancha? —La dulce voz de la muchachita me llegó con fuerza a pesar del escándalo de la música y la gente gritándome obscenidades.

Tenía agallas la niña esta, de pie allí frente a mi con su cinturita, su cadera inclinada y la misma sonrisa.

—Felicidades, ahora tú y tu equipo son los campeones, felicitaciones para ellos también —mis labios pronunciaban una frase de respeto a mi oponente, una barata fórmula social, pero por dentro quería ahorcar a aquella maldita.

—¿Me odias porque te arrebaté todo ese dinero? —Me preguntó mientras pasaba su brazo alrededor de mi... ¿cuello?

La desgraciada estaba posando para las cámaras mientras fingía que me ahorcaba. ¡Ella me estaba ahorcando a mi! ¡Aquella maldita! Tenía un aroma delicioso...

—Sabes bien que el dinero es lo de menos, igual voy a obtener el premio de segundo lugar, pero...

—El prestigio... —Remató ella mientras acercaba sus labios a mi... ¿cuello?

Ahora estaba fingiendo que me mordía y se bebía mi sangre, aquellas fotos iban a cubrir toda prensa de mañana...

La hermosa, y joven campeona, y el viejo campeón derrotado, los fotógrafos se iban a hacer millonarios a mi costa, y esta estúpida les estaba haciendo el juego.

Sin soltar su presa alrededor de mi cuello simuló una pistola con su otra mano apuntando a mi sien.

—Bang —susurró en mi oído —su aliento era una delicia.

Armando y los otros se habían ido, tenía que alcanzarlos o eran muy capaces de dejarme.

—Felicitaciones de nuevo —le dije dándole unas palmaditas en la espalda— pero tengo que irme antes que mis compañeros me abandonen.

—¿Al igual que te abandonaron en el sueño? ¡Vamos campeón te estoy ofreciendo la revancha!

Puso un puño en mis labios simulando que me daba un knockout, los fotógrafos estaban adorando a esta chica.

—Sabes tan bien como yo que eso no sería legal, no tendría ninguna validez.

—Yo no estaba hablando de nada legal, estaba hablando de prestigio, te quiero dar la oportunidad de recuperar tu orgullo, algo privado entre tú y yo —me miró a los ojos con aquel rostro de muñeca— ¿entonces? ¿Tú habitación o la mía?

Las intenciones de soñar otra partida se esfumaron en cuanto estuvimos a solas en el ascensor, se me lanzó encima y me comió a besos, tenía unos labios divinos la condenada. Me abrazaba con tanta fuerza como si tuviese miedo de que yo la rechazara o como si temiera que yo me desapareciera en cualquier momento.

Apenas nos soltamos un momento para correr a mi habitación y tirarnos a la cama; hicimos el amor como posesos, nos amamos como quienes se han conocido durante años, ella bebió de mi como alguien que ha sufrido de sed durante mucho tiempo, y yo descubrí en su piel una delicia como no había conocido nunca antes.

Cuando al final terminamos exhaustos el sol ya se levantaba en el horizonte, ella permanecía acostada sobre mi con sus brazos alrededor de mi cintura, como asegurándose que no me fuera a escapar.

—¿Nos conocemos de antes?

Sin soltarme y con su rostro aún enterrado en mi abdomen ella asintió. Yo busqué entre los recuerdos de mis novias y amantes anteriores, pero no había conocido tantas mujeres en mi vida como para olvidar una belleza como aquella.

—Me vas a perdonar, pero no te recuerdo, creo que ni siquiera sé tu nombre.

—Me llamo Liliana, creo que en este mundo soy una oficial de policía en Miami, pero no estoy segura.

—¿En este mundo?

—En mi mundo soy una soñadora igual que tú, pero nuestra tecnología es más avanzada que la de ustedes, mientras que su tecnología solamente les permite mirar las diferentes alternativas de sus decisiones; nosotros podemos viajar entre los sueños.

—¿Quieres decir que vienes de otro mundo?

—Nos conocimos en un sueño hace mucho tiempo, creo que tú me olvidaste, los sueños no son muy importantes en la vida de ustedes, solo son un juego, pero para mi, fuiste especial...— Abrió los ojos y se volteó a mirar al sol que se asomaba por la ventana— No quiero despertar, no quiero perderte otra vez, te he buscado durante tanto tiempo...

—Pero ya sabes donde estoy ¿no puedes encontrarme de nuevo?

—No, el Multiverso es infinito, es prácticamente imposible.

—Por favor no despiertes —esta vez fui yo el que la abrazó con fuerza a ella.

—Pero dicen que el Multiverso tiene un centro —me explicó mirándome con sus profundos ojos— una inmensa biblioteca llamada el Nexus, en donde cada libro es un portal a otro universo; también dicen que la biblioteca es tan gigantesca que nunca nadie ha encontrado el libro que busca. Pero quizá podamos encontrarnos allí.

Liliana me enseñó como funcionaba su tecnología del sueño, pero eventualmente despertó y desapareció ante mis ojos dejando solo su aroma.

Yo también aprendí como viajar a través de los sueños al igual que lo hace ella; descubrí también que hay una colosal guerra en el centro del multiverso, pero al final encontré la Biblioteca, todavía sigo buscando a Liliana.

1.

Vladimir Hernández Langosta pálida

## PARTE 1: El nido.

### 1- Nodriza.

La primera impresión visual de Carles al nacer fue la de su nodriza. Emitiendo un tierno arrullo infrasónico para mantenerlo calmado, la nodriza rompió con sus mandíbulas el huevo silicatado y extrajo la crisálida que contenía el cuerpo larval de Carles; a través de la membrana translúcida de queratina podía verla afanarse alrededor, vomitando capas de lubricante vitaminado sobre la larva y manteniendo alejadas a las pequeñas arañas mako de la carcasa rota del huevo.

Las feromonas del Clan invadieron su sistema nervioso.

En el interior de la crisálida, Carles ronroneó complacido.

### 2- La preceptora.

En las tinieblas, Carles forzaba sus ojos al registro infrarrojo intentado distinguir a la preceptora entre las celdillas hexagonales de la cámara. Con treinta días de nacido su etapa de nato ya estaba finalizando; ahora Carles poseía madurez suficiente para dejar de ser alimentado, ejercitado y estimulado sexualmente por una nodriza.

La materialización instantánea de la preceptora lo tomó por sorpresa: insectoide y segmentada, con la cabeza marrón terminada en pico curvo y desprovista de antenas, surgió luminosa frente a él sin correspondencia física ni signatura odorífera.

—¿Por qué no puedo percibir tu olor? —preguntó perplejo.

La aparición abrió los palpos cerrados en señal de concesión oral y dijo:

—Porque estoy en tu cabeza. Ahora estás conectado al Nexo.

—¿El Nexo? —repitió sin comprender. Cambió la posición y anuló su visión infrarroja, pero la imagen de la preceptora permaneció inmutable ante él.

La langosta retrajo los palpos al interior de la boca y giró los bulbos oculares.

—Mientras te alimentaba, la nodriza sembró un óvulo en tu paladar; Tras días de maduración su eclosión sensorial te conectó al Nexo, permitiéndote invocarme. Estoy en tu cabeza... y en todos lados. Soy un aspecto del Nexo.

### 3- Especie adoptada.

El Nexo era un océano consensuado que contenía la conciencia colectiva del nido; capas y capas de relieve cognitivo langosta, mareas, islotes, arrecifes de memoria racial, abismos e infinitos de conocimiento/historia que Carles demoró casi un año en explorar con asistencia de la preceptora. Los langostas eran una especie formada por clanes que vivían en naves generacionales. Sus clanes, estratificados originalmente en varias castas —regentes, operarias, guerreros, preceptoras, nodrizas—, transitaban la tecnoevolución biológica modificando su propio genoma para beneficio de los nidos. La existencia de las arañas mako —divididas en subespecies artificiales clonadas y decantadas para fungir

como máquinas de cómputo, carroñeros coloniales, agentes inmunológicos o variedad enana de guerreros— y las descomunales nodrizas convertidas en astronaves biológicas de casi un kilómetro de diámetro, daban prueba del nivel de injerencia genética practicada por los clanes.

A Carles le llamó la atención que entre tantas subclases de langostas no hubiera ninguna que se pareciera a él.

—Tú no eres una casta del Clan —le explicó la preceptora—. Perteneces a una especie adoptada recientemente. Alteramos tu cepa matriz con nuestros genes, por supuesto. Pero no eres el único; hay otros como tú en el nido.

#### 4- Mascota de placer.

—Quiero conocer a los otros —le dijo al Emperador. Carles tenía cinco años de edad, y hacía más de tres que mantenía intimidad con el regente insectoide; se había convertido en un adulto delgado y hermoso que sobrepasaba el metro noventa de altura.

—¿A qué viene tan repentino interés por los adoptados? —expresó el Emperador en su matizado lenguaje semioquímico mientras acariciaba la espalda de Carles con las antenas gestoras.

Apoyado sobre codos y rodillas, sintió el hormigueo de su piel al entrar en contacto con las placas abdominales del jerarca sobre él. El tórax negro de la criatura subía y bajaba como un fuelle, y la cloaca del langosta despedía un humeante reclamo sexual de feromonas; a su pesar, comenzó a sentirse excitado por la realimentación feromónica.

—No es repentino —respondió, haciendo un breve ejercicio respiratorio al sentir la sublime cercanía del Nexo—. Hace mucho tiempo que pienso en decírtelo. No quiero ser solamente una mascota de placer; quiero conocer a esos que son como yo.

El Emperador lo aferró por los hombros con sus espinosas patas manipuladoras y lo volteó hasta dejarlo en posición supina sobre la superficie acolchada del suelo. Sin abrir los bulbos oculares fotópticos, palpó con las antenillas de electrolocalización el rostro sudoroso de Carles hasta introducírselas en los orificios nasales, boca y oídos. Por debajo de los élitros esclerotizados de la criatura comenzó a derramarse un caldo alcaloideo que cayó sobre el pecho y el pene de Carles. El insectoide se arqueó sobre él, moviendo con pericia el enorme gáster inflamado para encontrar el camino hacia el ano de Carles y acomodarlo al chorro urticante que brotaba de su cloaca.

—Ellos no son como tú —dijo el Emperador—. Sus mentes están vacías.

Nexo, dolor y placer se abrieron paso a través de los amantes.

#### 5- Simbiontes sociales.

La preceptora lo guió hasta el gáster hipertrófico de la nave nodriza. La sección bullía con la actividad frenética de makos y operarias sumándole calor a la combustión orgánica de la ooteca donde se gestaba el clon naval para la Emperatriz. Carles había acudido a la cámara industrial con la secreta intención de encontrarse con los simbiontes sociales de la regenta. Se decía que algunos de ellos eran racionales.

Por el túnel central irrumpió flotando la Emperatriz de caparazón purpúreo, custodiada por decenas de feroces guerreros alados y un centenar de nodrizas. Entre tal gradación de violáceos y grises acorazados Carles advirtió las criaturas pálidas de miembros carnosos, rostros redondeados y ojos azules; idénticas entre sí.

*En perspectiva, la escualidez de sus semejantes le hizo sentir vergüenza ajena.*

## *PARTE 2: La guerra.*

### *6- Enemigos irracionales.*

*—Estamos en guerra contra una especie voraz —expresó Tashia en los códigos semioquímicos del séquito imperial. Carles solía reunirse con ella para chismorrear sobre las novedades de la colonia, pero seguía sintiéndose incómodo ante un rostro tan perturbadoramente similar al suyo; ignoraba que Tashia y él compartían mucho más que el árbol filogenético, pues ambos eran variaciones diseñadas a partir de un mismo clon—. La misión de nuestro Clan es proteger el relicto a toda costa.*

*Hablaban de la Cruzada contra los intrusos, de la presencia del nido en aquella estrella, y del porqué la Emperatriz construía a toda prisa su propia nave generacional. Desde hacía siglos los langostas no habitaban mundos relictos por razones filosóficas y existenciales; consideraban los pozos de gravedad con biosfera mundos sagrados que generaban la vida y la exportaban al cosmos.*

*—Deberíamos intentar negociar con ellos para que abandonen el relicto—opinó él entrelazando los dedos de las manos—. Ayudarles a salir de su error.*

*—Imposible —recalcó Tashia encogiéndose de hombros y hurgando distraída en la docena de bolsillos de carne que le crecían sobre la piel desnuda del vientre y los muslos—. Los humanos son enemigos irracionales.*

### *7- Control de calidad.*

*El nido estaba decantando multitud de falanges de la cepa adoptada para usarlas como tropas de apoyo durante el despliegue planetario; eran efectivos con remodelación doblequímica para operar indistintamente en caída libre y entornos de gravedad. Clones Nakamuras de piel camaleónica, bronceínas Guzmanes de imponente musculatura, y variantes Kyles —bellamente esculpidos, pero duros y feroces— fluían por el laberinto de túneles como una riada viviente.*

*De pronto dos guerreros de coraza espinosa olfatearon la anomalía y se metieron en el torrente de clones para atacar a uno de los Nakamuras. Primero lo paralizaron con venenos neurotóxicos expelidos por los gásters, y luego sus colmilludas mandíbulas se encargaron de hacerlo trizas. Las burbujas de sangre nublaron el aire del túnel.*

*La imprevisible expresión de un gen recesivo había privado al Nakamura de la signatura feromónica del Clan, y corría el riesgo de volverse incontrolable.*

*Los makos carroñeros devoraron sus restos enseguida.*

### *8- Lealtad genética.*

*La Emperatriz se marchaba con todo su séquito. La nueva bionave estaba lista. Tashia pasó a despedirse de Carles y se hizo acompañar por uno de los Kyle. Orgulloso del rehilado linaje y de su sexualidad hacia la regenta, el Kyle se mostró altivo y locuaz al referirse a la misión en el pozo de gravedad.*

*—Tu excesivo entusiasmo está condicionado por la lealtad genética que te ata a la Emperatriz —le señaló Carles, molesto ante el exagerado positivismo del visitante—; una desilusión proporcional podría matarte.*

Tal descortesía hizo enmudecer al Kyle, y Tashia creyó oportuno partir.

–Nos reencontraremos cuando termine la guerra –le dijo a Carles.

Nunca más volvió a verla.

9- Los vencedores.

Nexo y preceptora se habían desintegrado tras el ataque enemigo; los humanos colapsaron el sistema nervioso de la nave nodriza mediante un depredador neurológico diseñado para tal propósito. Al parecer, llevaban meses anulando las flotas langostas valiéndose de ese recurso. Los clanes habían perdido la guerra.

Aturdido por el shock, Carles abrió los ojos. El tejido necrótico de las paredes del nido rezumaba toxinas. Respirar era una experiencia dolorosa; el aire se había enrarecido con el estrés feromónico de las castas supervivientes, la angustia del Emperador prisionero y el insoportable hedor de los guerreros y los makos masacrados por armas de plasma. Los vencedores sellaron el boquete por el que habían entrado a la nave y se plantaron frente a Carles. Eran una raza bípeda, y sus exoesqueletos resultaron ser trajes de combate. Cuando se le mostraron, se llevó la mayor sorpresa de su vida.

Los humanos eran langostas pálidas, como él.

PARTE 3: La vida entre los humanos.

10- Abraza el paradigma.

–Podemos ayudarle a salir del confinamiento –le propuso la proyección icónica del picapleitos–. Son sus derechos.

–¿Mis derechos? –vocalizó Carles confundido–. No sé si le entiendo.

Fue fácil aprender a hablar; con ayuda del carneware foniatrico de GenoTech dominó todas las lenguas importantes del Confin en menos de un mes. Carles vivía en el domo que el conglomerado tenía en el asteroide Linx, donde los embrioteks le habían desprogramado el sello langosta a cambio de las patentes derivadas de la investigación de su biología transgénica.

–Derechos humanos –le explicó el picapleitos–. Usted no es como la mayoría de los trans capturados. Es un caso especial. Tiene derecho a gozar de un estatus de ciudadano libre.

Resultaba arduo entender la complejidad del comportamiento social humano; las hipocresías, los dobleces del lenguaje hablado. Era muy difícil para él encajar allí.

–Pero tampoco soy un humano, por mucho que lo parezca.

–Sí que lo es –insistió el picapleitos sonriendo con suficiencia–. Su humanidad está ahí, latente, esperando a emerger. Sólo tiene que abrazar el paradigma.

11- Extraños compañeros de cama.

Era libre. Con las demandas a GenoTech que el picapleitos había ganado para él, había sacado una cuantiosa tajada crediticia. Ahora era muy rico. Además, tenía la ventaja social de que fisiológicamente no necesitaba dormir y tampoco envejecía. Adinerado, sin las ataduras de la castidad bioquímica del nido, y con el atractivo adicional de ser un transhumano célebre, no tuvo dificultad en conocer sexualmente a mujeres y hombres. Pero muy pronto puso fin a su época de sana promiscuidad. Los humanos eran extraños compañeros de cama; la sexualidad con ellos, sin Nexo ni

realimentación feromónica, era una experiencia vacua, insatisfactoria.

## 12- Diáspora.

Carles tenía casi cincuenta años de edad cuando las primeras sondas de hiperimpulsión Riemann alcanzaron las estrellas de los Tah'zlin. Tras la experiencia humana con los Galactos y luego la guerra langosta, la sabiduría y benevolencia de los Tah'zlin les ganó el apodo de «La raza amable» entre los humanos; la antigua civilización tah'zlin estableció con la Federación un libre flujo de tecnología gratuita y asistencia de navegación por la red de estrellas que habían heredado de sus ancestros, los «trascendidos» T'zlin. Las redes de hipersalto abrieron nuevas rutas por el Brazo de camino al centro galáctico, y las facciones humanas de la periferia comenzaron una diáspora hacia el Núcleo.

—Puedo embarcarte en una de esas naves, si es lo que quieres —le dijo su viejo agente una mañana—, pero te costará todo lo que tienes.

—La sociedad Federada me aburre mortalmente —objetó él—. Ni sus redes audiovisuales ni su arte me interesan. No pienso volver por aquí jamás.

—Nunca digas jamás —señaló el agente—. Según tu genómica, eres un Eterno. Dispones de mucho tiempo para cambiar de idea.

## 13- El último Emperador.

Llevaba dos siglos viajando en dirección al Núcleo en la nave sembradora THX, cuando Carles volvió a ver al Emperador de su antiguo clan langosta.

Fue a través de una extensión proxy a 300 pársec de distancia del nodo emisor —en esa época Carles estaba viviendo en un infoverso de bolsillo mientras su cuerpo permanecía en el banco de sueño-tibio de la nave—, pero contemplar el lastimoso estado del regente le resultó abrumador. Destronado, encerrado en un hábitat de la Vieja Tierra, el Emperador era una criatura marchita; la coraza bajo los élitros, otrora de un elegante lustre de color marrón purpúreo, ahora transparentaba y tenía un aspecto quebradizo. Se podía escuchar su lamento infrasónico. Carles trató de captar la semioquímica del viejo amante, y de expresarle su pena en el lenguaje de sus firmas, pero el paquete de conexión del proxy convertía al insectoide en un sordomudo feromónico.

Un estremecimiento de empatía lo hizo reflexionar sobre la futilidad de su viaje.

## 14- Cambio de rumbo.

El Pensante de la sembradora THX desplegó un mapa estelar en torno a Carles.

—Alrededor de esa estrella G2 —un punto luminoso entre constelaciones se tornó amarillo— orbita un planeta del tipo I en la escala Lem. Creemos que podría ajustarse a sus intereses.

La flotilla THX tenía como objetivo dispersar la semilla de la especie humana a través del Brazo mientras avanzaba hacia el núcleo galáctico en un viaje de 30000 años. Carles, harto de sus 2300 años de experiencia antrópica, había solicitado una sonda de femtotecnología para establecerse en solitario en un mundo oxigenado.

—La sonda estará lista para partir en doce horas —le dijo el Pensante—. Podríamos añadirle un infoverso, para que no se sienta tan aislado.

—Podré resistirlo. La soledad es un sentimiento muy relativo.



*–Es cierto, pero debe tener en cuenta que la próxima oleada humana tardará milenios en pasar por ese mundo. Diez mil años tal vez.*

*–No se preocupe. Les estaré esperando.*

*15- Vivir en soledad, morir en comunión.*

*El lemoide tipo I era un mundo de naturaleza salvaje cuya superficie surgió como un lienzo de verdes opulentos bajo el techado de nubes. En el interior de la sonda, embutido en una vaina amniótica femtotech y protegido por los bots del sistema, Carles logró sumergirse por primera vez en el Nexo de su memoria racial mestiza, visitando un nivel de conciencia diferente, y adentrándose poco a poco en lo más profundo del substrato psicogénico langosta.*

*...una criatura de piel blanca que se abre paso en la cálida oscuridad del nido, buscando el contacto íntimo de unas antenas gestoras, el delicado entrechocar de palpos retráctiles, la bienvenida a la sinfonía feromónica del Clan...*

*...tan feliz como sólo puede llegar a serlo una langosta pálida.*

1.

Nelly Geraldine García-Rosas Fóvea 4105

Era como un gigantesco ojo ciego; “el ojo perdido de Dios”, decía Fomalhaut con una sonrisa indefinible.

Elías Fomalhaut era religioso a su manera. Aseguraba que cuando Dios - la perfecta singularidad - dio origen al Universo, observó su creación “como un pintor que al terminar su obra permanece días enteros admirándola, engullendo el lienzo con los ojos hasta que ya no puede ver otra cosa aunque aparte la vista: se ciega de tanto mirar”.

Fóvea 4105 era como un ojo gigantesco al que nos acercábamos inevitablemente con profunda curiosidad y miedo, como quien se acerca por primera vez a un tigre.

El agujero negro de masa estelar en el corazón de la galaxia Aster 3 podría soltar un zarpazo sin previo aviso, un zarpazo del cual ni siquiera la luz podría escapar. Rayas, colmillos, garras y astucia, el tigre celeste que perseguíamos giraba a velocidad de vértigo. Un titán capaz de curvar el espacio-tiempo.

Inobservable y voraz era el destino elegido por Fomalhaut.

Y yo decidí seguirlo también.

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Cuando me uní a su equipo de investigación no sabía mucho sobre él; lo poco que conocía era brumoso, como si lo viese desde lejos, como si llegara a un lugar y me dijese que ayer estuvo ahí, como si visitara el sitio donde estará mañana pero aún no llega, como se le conoce a un personaje literario.

John Masen, el asesor de mi proyecto doctoral, se refirió a él como si de una leyenda se tratara.

- “El profeta”, me dijo -; así nos gustaba llamarlo cuando fue mi profesor en la Universidad. De alguna manera lograba predecir las fluctuaciones en las constantes de espacio-tiempo cerca de cualquier singularidad que estudiáramos. Dicen que dedicó años a la investigación, construcción y desarrollo de un acelerador de partículas con el fin de encontrar la “verdadera partícula de Dios”. ¡Pero no vayas a mencionárselo! Creo que él se arrepiente de esos días. No le gusta hablar de ello. Hace años lo presioné hasta que, furioso, soltó algunas palabras. Dijo que Dios no podría ser una partícula, que debe ser todas las partículas. O ninguna.

“Fomalhaut fue, además, el único sobreviviente de la tragedia en el inmenso laboratorio subterráneo. Pero no me mires así, Stern; el accidente ocurrió antes de que nacieras, incluso yo era muy pequeño entonces como para recordar las terribles noticias. Quienes sí recuerdan cuentan que después del incidente él ya no volvió a ser el mismo. No me lo preguntes, su edad es incierta; en la Universidad nadie se atrevía si quiera a hurgar en su pasado, mucho menos ahora que su figura causa tanto respeto e, incluso, un temor cerval entre algunos miembros de la comunidad científica.

“Ahora, si me permites darte un consejo, te diré que no vayas. El tipo es sabio, pero

nadie sabe qué pretende hacer allá. Además si tu teoría no puede probarse hoy en un laboratorio ya llegará el momento para que alguien más lo haga. No arriesgues tu talento ni tu vida en una empresa desconocida.”

Más que hacerme desistir, las palabras de Masen despertaron mi curiosidad y, un par de semanas después, me convertí en otro Rip Van Winkle de la ciencia: - Cuando despiertes ninguno de los que conoces estará vivo y quizá nadie te reconocerá al regreso pues nos dirigimos hacia el corazón de las tinieblas - susurró Fomalhaut mientras cerraba la cápsula de criosueño, la cual no parecía una cama celeste sino un prematuro ataúd de cristal.

Desde niña quise conocer el espacio, pero me aterraba la idea de quedarme sola como las sondas de exploración abandonadas en planetas lejanos: con un pie atascado en el polvo y cubierta por nieve de metano en el largo invierno cósmico. Ahora dormía un frío letargo y, a pesar de que la cápsula a mi derecha contenía el sueño de Fomalhaut –un acertijo envuelto en un misterio envuelto a su vez en un enigma–, me sentía más sola que nunca. Pensé en mi padre. Soñé incansablemente con su voz.

“Adhara, mi niña estrella, de allá vienes. Ojos de quásar, corazón de púlsar, explosión de supernova. Mira hacia arriba hasta que encuentres el punto más negro del cielo; ése es el corazón de las tinieblas y tiene un hambriento ojo ciego”.

Mi despertar del criosueño fue intranquilo: me pensé sola, perdida, muerta. Cuando yo pude levantarme y caminar hacia cubierta, Fomalhaut ya estaba ahí. Permanecía inmóvil, miraba el espacio en silencio. Sin inmutarse dijo, como si hablara consigo mismo: - Estamos a 300 mil kilómetros del horizonte de eventos, niña; debemos tener todo listo para nuestro encuentro con Su ojo.

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“Niña”. No había forma de que me llamase por mi nombre. Ni siquiera lo había hecho el día que nos conocimos. - Adhara Stern, señor- dije tendiéndole la mano -, me interesa investigar de cerca un agujero negro.

Mi saludo murió flotando en el aire. Fomalhaut con su indefinible sonrisa asintió con la cabeza, - Está bien, niña.

Había dejado de ser una niña el día que murió mi padre. Quizá el profeta me llamaba así porque aunque yo contaba ya con un doctorado en cosmología y un mapa de las intrincadas redes de materia oscura bariónica en el espacio, mi edad no sobrepasaba aún los 23 años. Mediante el uso de una cámara de neutrinos me había sido posible observar y crear un modelo tridimensional de la invisible y delgada telaraña que une todo. Aunque mi verdadero interés estaba en la energía oscura - aquella que conforma casi tres cuartas partes del universo, aquella que acelera la expansión del cosmos, causa repulsiones gravitacionales y lucha por alejarnos de las maravillas celestes - estudiar de frente un agujero negro no era algo a lo que me pudiera negar. Basándome en la conocida ecuación de Fomalhaut e ideando algunas modificaciones a la cámara de neutrinos estaba casi segura de poder encontrar pruebas tangibles de energía oscura; sin embargo, para que mi teoría fuese comprobable requería emplear la nueva cámara en

presencia de una hipersuperficie de frontera estable: un horizonte de eventos.

- El centro de Aster 3 dentro del cúmulo AL-05, hacia allá iré, niña- me dijo aquella vez aunque no parecía dirigirse a mí.

- Pero ahí no hay singularidades cerradas documentadas, señor-, dije con incredulidad.

-Fóvea 4105, el ojo perdido de Dios-. Sin voltear a verme mostró imágenes de lentes gravitacionales que evidenciaban la presencia del agujero negro y luego, como explosión de rayos gama, soltó una risa franca. -¡Semejante nombre para un ojo ciego! Bautizado por los amigos de Masen que son bromistas o nada saben de las palabras.

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Mirando a Fomalhaut con las pupilas llenas de estrellas recordé esa única ocasión en que escuché su risa argentina como la de un adolescente, como la risa de mi padre. Sonreí, aspiré hondo y mis pánicos del criosueño se fueron volando lentamente con la gravedad cero.

Era como un gigantesco ojo imposible de ser observado. Posar la vista en él no implicaba ver negrura; era como quedarse ciego, como si su intensa gravedad zafara los ojos de sus órbitas. Su sola presencia me arrancaba algo. Gigante hambriento que devora en las tinieblas.

Como si adivinase mis pensamientos, Fomalhaut se acercó a mi oído y recitó lento y claro una antigua divisa alquímica que me sacó del ensimismamiento, "Obscurum per obscurius. Ignotum per ignotius". Sin decir nada comencé el análisis de calibración para mi cámara de neutrinos mientras me preguntaba si mi búsqueda de lo oscuro mediante lo más oscuro y lo desconocido por lo más desconocido resultaría fructífera.

- La humanidad, al igual que el cosmos, cumple ciclos, niña. ¡Mírate! Tu quinta essentia no es otra cosa que el éter aristotélico. No te sorprenda, entonces, encontrarte escribiendo hic svnt dracones en tu mapa de la Terra ignota, porque el ojo, más que tigre, es un descomunal dragón.

- Supongo que, al igual que los antiguos, especulamos la ciencia basados en la imaginación - respondí. Aún no lo sabía, pero en realidad no había entendido entonces lo que él había querido decir.

Por un momento sentí que las palabras de mi padre salían a través de mí. Me vi trepando el banquillo colocado para que con mi baja estatura pudiese mirar por el telescopio mientras él me narraba los cuentos de hadas sobre física teórica que moraban mis ensueños infantiles.

Después sólo reinó el constante zumbido de la nave.

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La investigación de Fomalhaut evolucionaba en forma extraña. A diferencia de mi constante ir y venir para confirmar datos, acoplar la cámara al brazo robótico externo o modificar código computacional, él sólo leía un grueso libro de pastas negras dibujando de vez en cuando su indefinible sonrisa. Mientras más nos acercábamos al horizonte de eventos las dudas de Masen sobre el verdadero motivo de su viaje se apoderaban de mis

*pensamientos y aumentaban como la densidad de Fóvea 4105.*

*Al fin, Fomalhaut rompió el silencio. - Todos los astros del cielo se desintegrarán, el cielo se envolverá como un rollo y todas las estrellas se apagarán como se marchita y cae una hoja desprendida de una vid o de una higuera.*

*- Señor, creo que habla de una forma muy apocalíptica e imaginativa para describir el efecto gravitacional de agujero negro y cómo éste curva el espacio-tiempo -. Confirmé que le gustaba hablar con metáforas.*

*- Una visión de Isaías, el príncipe de los profetas - dirigió su mirada hacia mí, por primera vez, esperando alguna reacción -. Algo similar decían de mí Masen y sus amigos cuando eran unos niños como tú. Mi nombre es Elías, no podría ser de otro modo.*

*Me habló de Isaías y su visión oculta del Universo. Habló también de Jonás y su imposibilidad para huir del destino. Después relató cómo Elías había sido alimentado por los cuervos, resucitado a un niño y llevado al cielo por un torbellino de fuego.*

*- No murió; sólo desapareció en el vórtice ardiente hasta encontrarse con Él -. Cerró el libro con fuerza y fijó su vista en el agujero negro -. Estamos muy cerca, niña, pronto será la hora.*

*\*\*\**

*Intento recordar los sucesos posteriores sin hiperbolizarlos, pero es difícil. En el borde del horizonte de sucesos el tiempo transcurría de forma distinta. Creo que incluso dejamos de existir por un instante infinitamente pequeño.*

*“¿Sabes por qué se llama así, mi niña estrella? Porque es un límite a partir del cual ya no pasa nada”. Ni siquiera la luz puede escapar, padre.*

*Sonó una alarma como los maullidos de una gata en celo. De alguna manera se había abierto una de las compuertas de salida; sin embargo, tras realizar el chequeo protocolario de seguridad todo resultó estar en orden. Los efectos de la fortísima gravedad exterior comenzaban a afectar la maquinaria de la nave como estaba previsto. Debíamos alejarnos o poco a poco ser arrastrados a cruzar un punto sin retorno.*

*- Bien hecho. La cámara de neutrinos no hubiese soportado más en ese espacio-tiempo - dijo una voz lejana, metálica.*

*Los ecos graves me obligaron a voltear en derredor. Fomalhaut no estaba conmigo. Vi, en cambio, un albo resplandor en el sitio del cual apenas se había alejado. Me paralicé y, por un instante, perdí el habla y se nubló mi vista.*

*- Adiós, Stern. A-Dios, ahora que la palabra tiene más sentido del que tuviera nunca. Adiós, niña estrella.*

*Después, silencio.*

*Lo imaginé internándose en el ojo con su sonrisa indefinible alargada hasta el infinito. Imaginé a Elías Fomalhaut dirigirse a espacios más celestes a través del vórtice de fuego, engañando a la muerte como hiciera el otro Elías.*

*\*\*\**

*Fóvea 4105 era como un gigantesco ojo ciego que me miraba fijamente como un tigre, o un dragón. Permanecí en silencio ante la sublime vista del abismo que ciega,*

paraliza, engulle. Supe, entonces, que el dios de incontables ojos ciegos había perecido hacía tiempo en la tragedia del laboratorio subterráneo. Fomalhaut presenció su muerte y ahora, parte de la singularidad, atestiguaría su renacer. Todo, como un ciclo eterno, volverá a comenzar.

Carlos Eduardo Bustos El Invernadero

El Invernadero se encontraba en extramuros de la ciudad, cercano a un lago de crestas oscuras barridas por el viento. Había sido construido por el Centro de Investigación de Nuevas Enfermedades, y era a donde la gente que contraía una enfermedad incurable (como las que aparecieron en los albores del nuevo siglo) iba a buscar una opción desesperada. Ayudados por el Centro, estas personas se sometían a un proceso de desencarnación, donde se despojaban de sus cuerpos enfermos para no sufrir, mientras los años pasaban y con estos, se acercaba la posibilidad que los investigadores médicos encontraran la cura. Se convertían en fantasmas de sí mismos, pero conscientes de su realidad y de su entorno. Sin embargo, la gente que solicitaba estos servicios temía por el destino de sus cuerpos, ya que en realidad no estaban muertos sino solamente despojados de su carne, y algún día no muy lejano querían volver a ocuparlos. Por lo tanto, el Centro, mediante una cantidad vitalicia, se ocupaba de cuidar los cuerpos inanimados de sus clientes en ese lugar al que sus propios empleados llamaban en secreto, no sin cierto sarcasmo, el Invernadero.

De manera exhaustiva, educaron para el trabajo a cinco jóvenes ciegos y huérfanos de nacimiento para que la gente tuviera la certeza de que su intimidad sería respetada por completo. El Invernadero estaba totalmente automatizado y sólo necesitaba un mínimo de cuidados, pero constante vigilancia de alguien que pudiera tomar decisiones importantes en caso de ser necesario.

Allí crecieron los cinco jóvenes ciegos, sin más compañía y amigos que ellos mismos. Habitaban en una pequeña cabaña que tenía todos los servicios necesarios para llevar una vida sencilla pero cómoda, y que desde luego, los cinco reconocían como su único hogar. Pero luego de más de 43 años de servicio ininterrumpido ya sólo quedaba uno de ellos: un hombre alto llamado Alfonso Jinx.

El señor Jinx fue el primero de los cinco en ser elegido y sin embargo era el que había sobrevivido a todos ellos. Ahora estaba a la espera de su reemplazo: otras cinco personas que estaban siendo entrenadas en esos momentos, lo cual no le pareció tan malo del todo: los directores le habían prometido que no quedaría desamparado y sería llevado a un lugar donde le cuidarían hasta su deceso. Jinx había hecho un magnífico trabajo.

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Faltaban apenas dos semanas para que el señor Jinx dejara el Invernadero; era un viernes por la noche. Estaba clasificando todo el archivo, cuando un rumor ahogado se escuchó en la sala de conservación de cuerpos. Jinx llegó allí con la destreza natural que le daba el conocer el lugar entero de memoria. Aguzó el oído, pero no captó nada. Se escuchó un nuevo golpe, esta vez parecido al de un tambor bajo el agua. Nunca había

escuchado un ruido semejante en aquel lugar.

El sonido se repitió, pero esta vez de forma intermitente hasta que se fue haciendo más rápido, ¡om-om, om-om, om-om!, y adquiría una forma rítmica. De pronto Jinx reconoció el sonido y se aterrorizó: era el latido de un corazón que despierta. Tan rápido como pudo, se dirigió al computador maestro que cuidaba la cámara de los cuerpos recién llegados. El computador indicó con una voz monótona que todas las funciones vitales estaban al mínimo. En ese instante, a sus espaldas, el retumbo del corazón escapó de la puerta de titanio que protegía el lugar donde la compañía hacía sus experimentos personales. Jinx giró con rapidez y se encaminó al cubículo; se sentía sorprendido y confuso al mismo tiempo. Con la esperanza de escuchar mejor, Jinx acercó el oído a una claraboya de cristal que formaba parte de una bóveda de apenas cuatro metros, construida con enormes placas de acero blindado, y cuyo interior se veía asfixiado por los fanales de Led ultravioleta provenientes del techo. Al menos un ochenta y cinco por ciento del espacio lo ocupaba un pequeño pero avanzado laboratorio de investigación genética.

Una voz que era orgánica y metálica al mismo tiempo se escuchó detrás del cristal: “Jinx...”, dijo la voz. El señor Jinx tropezó del susto y cayó. “Jinx...”, dictó de nuevo la voz, y esta vez pareció más humana. “¿Quién es?”, gritó Jinx, haciendo un esfuerzo para recuperarse mientras levantaba su cuerpo de las baldosas. “¿Quién es usted? ¿Cómo se metió allí? Está en una zona restringida; le pido que no se mueva ni intente nada, enseguida llamo a mis superiores”. Palpando la pared encontró el teléfono, cuando la voz, sólida como el metal declaró: “Ellos me encerraron aquí”. Jinx sostuvo el auricular, cavilando. Si la compañía había encerrado a una persona contra su decisión eso era algo en lo que él no quería verse involucrado ahora que estaba tan próximo su retiro. Colgó. Se acercó despacio a la claraboya de cristal para que el intruso pudiera escucharle con claridad. “¿Quién es usted?”, preguntó de nuevo tratando de obtener una explicación más completa de lo que estaba sucediendo. La voz no dijo nada. Jinx tomó fuerzas para hacerse escuchar: “Pregunté que quién...” Un suspiro se elevó del fondo de la bóveda y fue creciendo, haciéndose más profundo como el rumor de los abismos marinos; pronto cubrió todo y las palabras fueron lo único que pudo escucharse entre las paredes monolíticas del laboratorio: “soy el Creador.”

El silencio golpeó como un martillo a los oídos de Jinx. La voz había dicho que era el Creador y lo había expresado con tal poderío y decisión que de momento Jinx no pudo encontrar en los fragmentos de su memoria un argumento que le ayudara a contradecir aquella extraña afirmación. Y aunque la compañía no lo había educado para ser un creyente sí le había dado las bases de una religión formal a la cual acudir en los momentos de incertidumbre. Respiró hondo y afirmó: “No creo que seas Dios”. La voz le respondió sólida pero comprensiva: “Lo dices porque no es posible que yo me aparezca así nada más, y aún menos que me deje estudiar por los hombres como si fuera una ecuación difícil de resolver. Pero no estás tan equivocado: yo me dejé confinar en este lugar para estar cerca de los hombres, quienes por supuesto desconocen quién soy en realidad. En cambio tú, Jinx, a ti que te creen diferente, no lo eres tanto; tú que no ves, ves más que nadie. Pero no soy Dios: al igual que tú no lo conozco, pero lo intuyo, lo presiento en mí mismo. Yo soy el creador de la vida en tu mundo, esa fue la misión que se me dio y ahora he retornado para completarla. Debo saber si esta existencia que he

ayudado a crear es digna de la tarea para la cual fue concebida o si he de comenzar de nuevo, en otro lugar y olvidarme por completo de ésta. Aunque no lo demuestras en tu rostro adivino la preocupación en ti, Jinx; no te preocupes: la vida aquí no será tocada, es muy valiosa para nosotros. Sin embargo, necesito saber si está preparada para el siguiente paso en la evolución, si el hombre está preparado para subsistir fuera de su mundo y puede colonizar otros. Cada raza está creada con el propósito de desplazarse a mundos lejanos y poblarlos; sin esto no habría crecimiento y su existencia no tendría verdadera razón.”

Jinx sintió un calor que emanaba de la bóveda hacia su cuerpo y tocaba su interior, deslizándose como mercurio caliente y frío al mismo tiempo. Era una sensación extraña, pero también atemorizadora. De pronto, cesó. Hubo un momento de silencio, luego la voz dijo: “Pero ha sucedido lo que me temía, el hombre no está preparado para congeniar con el resto del universo”. El señor Jinx se acercó a la claraboya, incrédulo, y puso una mano sobre el cristal que vibraba: “¿Cómo es eso posible?”, musitó confuso, “no puedes... no debes basar tu pronóstico en los pocos que estamos aquí”. La voz interrumpió: “No hay error. He ido a lo más profundo de su materia y he descubierto una insuficiencia que los deshabilita para dar el siguiente salto en su evolución. Conquistarán su propio sistema, de eso no tengo duda, y luego se estancarán y no hallarán la forma de continuar. Debo reconocer que toda la culpa es mía. No hice sus organismos lo suficiente estables para resistir el cambio. La vida proseguirá aquí en la tierra, evolucionará y encontrará su camino, pero éste será corto y un día se extinguirá por completo. No debes temer; lo que son seguirá existiendo de otra manera que no puedes entender, ni yo puedo explicarte.”

Había tanta pena en aquellas palabras que a pesar del consuelo que procuraban, Jinx no pudo dejar de sentir un malestar que lo enturbiaba por dentro. De pronto señaló: “¿Qué quieres de nosotros, qué necesitas para cambiar tus palabras, para hacerte ver que el hombre no puede terminar?”. La voz expuso serenamente: “Nada puede hacerse, Jinx, comprendo tu desesperación, pero es una falla física dentro, muy dentro en el interior de sus organismos, algo que no es operable ni reemplazable por mí ni por nadie más. Lo llevarán en la carne hasta el fin de los días”. Jinx acercó su boca a la claraboya y dijo casi en secreto: “Si yo te muestro la manera en que podemos sortear esa carencia en nuestro interior, si te muestro a un ser que puede evolucionar, ¿lo dejarías ayudar a los otros a saltar por encima de ese problema para encontrar el siguiente camino?”. La voz suspiró muy hondo, haciendo vibrar el Invernadero hasta sus raíces. “Sí, lo haría”. La voz no dijo nada más.

Jinx se acercó al computador principal e introdujo las instrucciones, las que había repetido hasta el cansancio en tantos años de trabajo. Desabotonó su ropa y la fue doblando con cuidado sobre la silla. Dejó los calcetines dentro de sus zapatos izquierdos, y desnudo se encaminó por el pasillo a una habitación circular con un techo formado con paneles de cobre en donde resplandecían cientos de nanocircuitos: era la cámara de desencarnación.

Se recostó sobre una plancha de polímero translucido, que contenía un gel de color azul medusa. La sustancia fue envolviéndolo hasta cubrir su rostro; un rostro en donde sus ojos, que no conocían el mundo de manera física ni a sus habitantes, quedaron abiertos, esperando el momento en que su cuerpo se despediría de la carne.



Hubo un momento de confusión, entonces, Jinx, se sintió más ligero y al mismo tiempo más lleno. Su ser inmaterial se elevó del tanque y por vez primera, libre de las limitaciones de su organismo, pudo ver. Un gozo intenso se apoderó de él. Veía el mundo como era en realidad, como tantas veces había imaginado. Entonces descubrió sus restos inmóviles en el fondo del tanque; estudió con curiosidad el cuerpo que ahora abandonaba, aquellos ojos ciegos en ese rostro que nunca conoció, el brillo de sus miembros rígidos. Regresó por el pasillo y atravesó con delicadeza las paredes de acero de la bóveda, que permanecía en silencio, y observó asombrado sin comprender del todo lo que se le revelaba. Se acercó al Creador, y éste se unió a él, y desaparecieron.

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A la mañana siguiente, el Invernadero era una confusión de gente con batas blancas que entraba y salía. Entre la docena de personas que no paraban de andar con prisa se distinguía un hombre alto vestido con traje gris, de rostro largo e infantil, parado junto a la puerta del laboratorio. Era el investigador de daños y accidentes del Centro.

El jefe del laboratorio lo recibió y se apresuró a llevarlo a la habitación circular. Una vez allí, le mostró el cuerpo de Jinx hundido en el sarcófago de acrílico, intacto, pero sin vida. “¿La ropa y los zapatos en la silla son...?” preguntó el investigador. “De nuestro Jinx”, completó la frase el apesadumbrado científico. El investigador, que nunca había sido muy hábil en cuestión de resolver acertijos, preguntó: “¿Quiere decir que usaba ropa?”. El científico pareció sorprendido por la observación. “Era primordial”, aseguró, “de esta manera él se sentía como uno de nosotros. Así asegurábamos su cercanía emocional con los clientes a nuestro cuidado.”

El investigador sacó una pantalla táctil para anotar los detalles. “¿Cómo piensa que fue el accidente?”. El científico negó con decisivos movimientos de la cabeza: “Ningún accidente. Jinx sabía perfectamente lo que estaba haciendo. Preparó todo, dio órdenes claras al computador y después se introdujo aquí”. El investigador miró de nuevo, incrédulo, el líquido azul y el cuerpo que se asomaba entre las penínsulas salitrosas: “¿Me está diciendo que su máquina, robot, o como le quiera llamar, se quitó la vida por sí mismo?”. El científico atajó: “Replicante, agente. Un androide de última generación. Aquí le llamamos JINX: Joven Inteligencia Nanotecnológica fase X. Casi humano en pensamientos y emociones, excepto, claro está, por su apariencia poco orgánica. Por tal motivo decidimos remover su vista y programarles a él y a los otros cuatro Jinx con la historia de su ceguera de nacimiento y su supuesta orfandad. Así, cumplirían su misión de cuidar a sus “semejantes” sin duda ni complejo alguno. Y nunca, ni por un instante los Jinx dudaron de su autenticidad como seres humanos; estoy seguro. Les creamos una infancia, les dotamos de intereses y talentos distintos y hasta les dimos virus informáticos para que enfermaran y tuvieran achaques propios de la edad. Por tal motivo, los hemos ido removiendo de sus puestos para que no sospechen de su longevidad”. “Muy astuto”, reconoció el investigador quien, casado en segundas nupcias, seguro poco sabía de la astucia y sus bondades. “Y créame cuando le digo que no es posible que hubiera atentado contra sí mismo; su religión se lo prohíbe”. “¿Su religión?”. “Las leyes de la robótica. Están allí para los momentos de indecisión. La ley establece que todo replicante debe proteger su propia existencia, y sólo podrá atentarse contra sí

mismo si con esta acción logra salvar o hacer un bien al ser humano. Sin embargo, esta vez la ley falló.”

El investigador dirigió la vista hacia la claraboya del laboratorio. Preguntó: “¿Y allí qué guardaban, otro prototipo de Jinx?”. “No”, dijo con cierto desaliento el científico, “Guardábamos el fósil de un coleóptero que existió hace millones de años. Pero ahora está perdido; desapareció sin dejar rastro”. El investigador señaló con estupor: “Un coleóptero... suena fascinante...”. El científico masculló irritado ante la visible falta de conocimiento del otro: “Un coleóptero es un insecto; una cierta clase de escarabajo, por decirlo más propiamente”. El investigador sonrió aliviado: “Al menos no era algo de verdad valioso. Le agradezco su ayuda, doctor. Tengo que entregar el reporte para mañana a primera hora y no les va a agradar. Una máquina que se suicidó... todavía no puedo creerlo.”

Estrecharon manos y el investigador encaminó sus pasos hacia la salida anotando símbolos y gráficos en su agenda. El científico se quedó allí, de pie, mirando al Jinx inservible, preguntándose por qué un replicante rompería de manera inexplicable sus códigos de conducta, y por qué, luego de tantos años, era la primera vez que notaba que aquellos ojos ciegos miraban al infinito con una determinación y una clarividencia que no había notado en éste, ni en ningún Jinx que hubiera conocido nunca.

### Carlos Rangel Sólo un hombre

Vives un día más bajo la luz verdusca del domo. Ves el desierto a lo lejos y las nubes de radiación que flotan sobre él. No sabes desde cuándo es así. Según tus mayores, antes las personas podían caminar allá fuera, correr si querían, pero después llegó la muerte y ya no hubo libertad.

Te levantas de un pedazo de piedra, que alguna vez fue la base de la estatua de un gran pensador, y sacudes el polvo de tu pantalón. Hoy cumples dieciocho años. Las calles lucen vacías, los únicos pobladores se concentran al centro y en las afueras se encuentran los edificios grises que estaban destinados a otros sobrevivientes de las guerras nucleares.

No hay gente fuera de la cúpula transparente que recubre la ciudad Stephen-03, la cual debe su nombre a un científico prominente de la antigüedad y la que es la tercera de su tipo en crearse después de la lluvia de fuego. Siempre fue tu hogar, todo lo que conoces está dentro del domo, conoces todos los rincones y sabes el nombre de las calles que fueron trazadas por la mano de un viejo arquitecto aficionado al ajedrez. Caminas por la calle alfil 16 mientras observas la bóveda cuidando no golpearte contra un árbol ni tropezar por accidente con un robot de limpieza. Piensas en las veces que has llegado tarde a dormir, recorriendo los caminos de esa ciudad agonizante, cuando las máquinas cruzan los caminos y salen de edificios a hacer el trabajo para el cual fueron programadas. Te sientes ajeno en esa calle y en ese cuerpo cuando ves a los autómatas moverse con soltura, recogiendo botes de basura sin contenido, arreglar jardines, limpiar ventanas. En tus fantasías adolescentes eras el único sobreviviente de aquel mundo, un ser arcaico, el legado de un tiempo en que la vida orgánica había evolucionado únicamente para favorecer el desarrollo de la raza dominante de androides y sus esclavos, los robots.

Antes jugabas a ser el rey de una gran ciudad, corrías por las calles imaginando que las estatuas y los edificios ajedrezados servían a tu voluntad: creías que eras capaz de moverlas soñando una disposición diferente para ellos. Te reías pensando en la reina negra dejando su avenida para posarse en la calle del peón blanco. Siempre quisiste saber cómo se sentiría un beso de la dama blanca.

Después de la caída de Stephen-01 y Stephen-02, vinieron algunos sobrevivientes. Aún no podías hablar cuando pasó pero recuerdas los trajes que usaban para respirar fuera del domo. Se disponían a abrirles cuando llegaron aquéllos que fueron hechos para matar. Portaban armas ensambladas a sus torsos negros, los cuales chirriaban cada que movían los brazos hidráulicos. Los creadores de esas máquinas, te dijeron tus abuelos un día de escuela, fueron capaces de dominar el trueno para volverlo contra sus hermanos. Usaron la ciencia para quemar el aire y no respetaron la vida.

Te detienes un momento en esas reflexiones. Puedes ver las manchas a través del polímero de carbono, allí donde un refugiado fue muerto con las manos suplicantes hacia el cielo. Los niños fueron asesinados por los rifles de pulso de los autómatas, con sus padres desmembrados metros atrás intentando defenderse. El mundo no debería ser así, es lo que siempre has pensado. Todas las mañanas te despiertas después de soñar con un par de infantes que juegan en un campo verde con pasto y flores, un ser peludo los persigue sin malicia bajo el cielo azul. Le describiste la criatura a tus mayores y te dijeron su nombre: perro.

Todos los habitantes de Stephen-03 son tus mayores.

Recuerdas que tu infancia fue solitaria hasta que el doctor Gutiérrez construyó a Pablo para que jugara contigo. Conforme fuiste creciendo le modificó el cuerpo artificial para adaptarlo a una altura como la tuya. Antes te llamaban niño, el único en la ciudad, ya que como supiste después, toda la gente de Stephen-03 es estéril y su pequeña población está conformada por científicos y pensadores, de ahí que hayas oído de Platón, Albert Einstein y Stephen Hawking. El doctor Eckhart te dijo que las matemáticas eran el lenguaje con el cual los hombres descifraban a Dios. Aprendiste de él a resolver ecuaciones diferenciales en aquel parque repleto de estatuas de caballos negros y blancos. Después su corazón no pudo más y se despidió de ti con una sonrisa afable.

“Un hombre sin conocimiento es como una bestia”, decía el abuelo Imamura antes de abrir sus libros de electrónica, y enseñarte el funcionamiento básico de los robots. “Es una suerte que te hayamos encontrado vivo en el desierto”, repetía la señora Smith mientras te daba la cena, con una sonrisa que remarcaba sus arrugas. Recuerdas el sabor de su avena, el doctor Tornatore le decía siempre que no debía dártela con azúcar, pero ella no le hacía caso y le contestaba que no iba a dejar que te amargaras como ellos. Después te pellizcaba una mejilla y esperaba a que terminaras de comer para llevarte a tu dormitorio y arroparte.

Recuerdas el día en que murió: salió del domo para ayudar a la gente de Stephen-02. Siempre le gustaron los niños, te dijo que si corrieran otros tiempos tal vez podrías llamarla mamá y ella podría decirte hijo, pero eso no podría ser. Se decidió que serías curtido y templado negándote esas emociones, que serías la esperanza de la humanidad, que llegando el momento elegirían una mujer de alguna de las otras dos ciudades y te unirías a ella, pero eso tampoco pudo ser.

Caminas otra vez, no quieres recordar ese día, no quieres pensar en su muerte. Cierras los ojos y aunque no quieras, recuerdas, recuerdas cómo se puso su máscara de oxígeno y salió del domo por la compuerta principal. Recuerdas cómo salió al encuentro del grupo de niños, en el que se encontraba tu futura esposa y los guiaba al domo. Por último recuerdas cómo fue que los autómatas mataron a los adultos y su carne quedó a la intemperie para recibir un baño de radiación. Apuntaron hacia la señora Smith y dispararon.

Una lágrima recorre tu mejilla y después otra. Cuando llegan a tus labios reconoces el sabor amargo que probaste cuando ella murió. Piensas que no debiste gritarle al doctor Stapledon por no salir a ayudarla, y que odiabas a la gente de Stephen-02. Recuerdas el bofetón de uno de tus tantos abuelos y el dolor de tu pecho cuando te llamó egoísta. Caminas otra vez con ese dolor ahora que eres casi adulto y que esos días están a ocho años de distancia. Sientes que has madurado y puedes pensar en tu futuro.

Hoy es tu cumpleaños, te lo repites mientras caminas por las entrañas del cadáver del mundo. Llegas al centro, una gran plaza en donde confluyen todas las calles y grandes estatuas forman un círculo de bronce. Caminas junto a la reina que yace mirando hacia el horizonte con ojos de metal y llegas hacia tus maestros, ellos te esperan en medio de los árboles. Cada uno va acompañado de un androide médico para sostenerse de pie. Los sabios tienen el rostro grave y te das cuenta que ese día harán una fiesta.

Vas hacia ellos.

Los grandes te ven sin hablar y esperan a que llegues al centro del círculo que forman sus tronos. Sientes sus miradas y no sabes qué decir al ver sus rostros, te parece, que por un momento todos se han transfigurado en estatuas y ahora tus padres son una parodia de las efigies del ajedrez que rodean el lugar. Esperas, levantas la mirada hacia la cúpula y ves el polímero verde que se alza sobre la ciudad. Los androides médicos los ayudan a sentarse y es entonces cuando el viejo Gutiérrez rompe el silencio: “Un gran número de androides viene hacia acá”, el abuelo Imamura lo interrumpe y exclama: “¡Ya no hay suficiente alimento para todos!” Te sientes confundido y no sabes qué decir, no tienes ganas de hablar ni de preguntarles nada, sólo esperas.

Tus maestros te dicen que existe una cápsula en donde podrás dormir mucho tiempo sin envejecer, te dicen que la gente las usaba en los tiempos antiguos mientras viajaban por el espacio, y ahora te toca a ti. Una computadora y algunos aparatos de medición controlarán tu sueño, y cuando la atmósfera sea respirable otra vez te despertarán para que salgas a vivir. Te explican que este nuevo grupo de androides podrá acabar con el domo y con lo que esté dentro de él. Después de que entres en la cápsula te enterrarán lo más hondo que puedan y con eso esperan que sobrevivas. Pablo te acompañará para cuidarte desde afuera. Te dicen que todo estará bien, que es un plan perfecto, que no tengas miedo.

Pero lo tienes, no quieres dejar morir a tus protectores y maestros, a tus padres. Eres el hijo de la humanidad y no quieres dejarlos. Sin embargo no puedes evitarlo, eres sólo un hombre.

Un sonido chirriante interrumpe a tus viejos, lo escuchas al ver la sangre que mancha tu ropa. El viejo Imamura cae sin vida al piso y no sabes qué sucede. Volteas en todas direcciones y tucorazón de hombre mortal late sin control. La presión se acumula en tus

sienes. Tu espalda está fría y quieres correr pero no puedes. Entonces los ves, los autómatas hechos por los hombres para matar a otros hombres, creados en alguna guerra antigua para sobrevivir a sus creadores y seguir matando. No sabes cómo cruzaron el domo pero están aquí, toman entre sus cuatro brazos neumáticos y negros todo lo que tengan enfrente y esté vivo. Los chirridos que producen al moverse te aturden los oídos. Algunos liberan vapor entre las grietas de sus cuerpos metálicos mientras se mueven. No han recibido mantenimiento en años. Los ves destrozar a Pablo: uno de los invasores le parte el cráneo de acero, saca el cerebro positrónico al aire y hace jirones la piel sintética que era su disfraz.

Tus maestros caen alrededor al proteger tu cuerpo de los disparos, pero un androide logra acertarte. Te arrodillas con la pierna derecha quebrada. Al principio sólo puedes sentir calor, pero cuando ves uno de tus huesos asomarse por entre tu piel es cuando comienza a doler, a punzar. El androide que te disparó se acerca a ti y reconoces los jirones de piel sintética que cuelgan de su cabeza negra, último vestigio del disfraz con que los autómatas cubrían su naturaleza artificial para mezclarse entre las sociedades humanas, cuando una supercomputadora regía los destinos de los hombres. Se miran. Tus ojos de hombre mortal se fijan en esos visores electrónicos al tiempo que lo ves mover su brazo derecho con un espasmo que hace saltar chispas de su estructura. Te apunta con su rifle mientras todos caen a tu alrededor.

Entonces te acuerdas de mí, de cómo te elegí de entre mis coros de ángeles. Te pedí que dejaras de cantar y te hice bajar despojándote de tus alas blancas. Te di un cuerpo mortal para que vivieras como uno de ellos, ahora puedes decirme todo lo que aprendiste sobre el dolor y el hambre, a quién amaste y quién te amó. Recuerda quién eres, reconoce mi voz. Tu herida ya no está, ahora puedes levantarte y regresar.

### Federico Schaffler Mamá Dolores

Dolores era una mujer grande, no de tamaño, sino de edad. No era tan joven como para estar en un asilo de ancianos, sino tan vieja como para romper el récord mundial de longevidad. No tenía manera de probar que tenía más de 115 años, de hecho, ni ella misma lo sabía o se preocupaba de tal nimiedad, lo cual era algo en verdad intrascendente, sobre todo porque una vez que se traspasa cierta edad, cada día es solo una sucesión de minúsculas muertes corporales y vagas memorias desvanecientes.

Vivía sola, en las alturas de la Sierra Madre Oriental, en su ladera sur, muy cerca y a la vez muy lejos de Monterrey, capital del estado de Nuevo León, en el norte de México. En la distancia, desde la cima de de sierra, podía verse la ciudad que en el último siglo había crecido de ser apenas una prometedora población hasta convertirse en una megalópolis industrial y comercial. En medio del verde entorno y enriquecedor aire, los días de la vida de Dolores se acumulaban como los frutos salvajes, setas y ramas que utilizara para alimentarse, para cocinar o generar calor en el invierno.

Muy de vez en cuando algún par de exploradores se cruzaba en su camino, entre los árboles y las rocas cercanas a la entrada a la cueva en la que había vivido durante los últimos 80 o 90 años. Ella no hablaba, porque no tenía nada que decirle, ni a ellos ni a nadie. Por lo general le daban algo de ropa y alimentos, quizá algunas monedas o billetes, para seguir poco después su exploración, preocupados solo unos cuantos

minutos del estado de la anciana que deambulaba en la montaña, lo cual en verdad no era problema de ellos.

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Dolores huyó de sus padres en 1910, cuando tenía tan sólo 12 años de edad y estaba a punto de ser desposada con un vecino por una dote consistente en un par de chivas, un saco de maíz y tres gallinas. Estaba destinada a convertirse en la esposa de Salvador, porque así lo había decidido su padre, no porque ella así lo pensara y mucho menos deseara. Al romper el alba del día que otros habían decidido sería el de su boda, con amorosa suavidad besó la frente de sus seis hermanitos, cuatro hombres y dos mujeres, deseándoles en silencio a éstas últimas que un día tuvieran el valor suficiente de hacer lo mismo que ella: huir. Observó con el corazón herido a su madre que había permitido la compraventa nupcial y a su padre, quien la había acordado. Los perdonó en silencio, saliendo del jacal, sin volver la vista una sola vez, escabulléndose como pudo entre los primeros rayos del sol y los cada vez más frecuentes rumores de una revolución que empezaba a cubrir con su violento manto a todo el país y que muy pronto llegaría hasta su familia.

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Estaba segura que la buscarían y de encontrarla, la golpiza sería mayor a las anteriores. Caminó sin descansó durante horas, hasta que llegó a la orilla de la montaña. Asombrada de su altura, que apenas vislumbraba desde la distancia de la parcela de sus padres, siempre se sintió maravillada de su majestuosidad. Desde el momento en que concibió la urgente necesidad de huir, la mole montañosa fue su meta. Decidida, empezó a escalar la ladera, cada vez más escarpada, hasta que llegó a un refugio temporal que durante días le permitiría recuperar fuerzas mientras decidía qué sería de su futuro.

Se refugió entre los grandes árboles y desde entonces, sus más cálidos recuerdos siempre fueron del bosque y del lago que podía ver a la distancia, así como de la pequeña cascada que encontró y que no sólo le proveía de agua para beber, sino también para bañarse y lavar sus pocas prendas de vestir. En sus andanzas, encontró por casualidad un laberíntico sistema de cuevas que eventualmente se convirtió en su hogar, escondiéndose en el mismo durante días, comiendo cualquier cosa que pudiera encontrar entre la húmeda oscuridad o que pudiera recolectar del bosque.

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En las primeras semanas de su autoimpuesto exilio, escuchó ocasionalmente el sonido del intercambio de balas entre los Federales y los campesinos armados con escopetas y rifles que habían podido agenciarse para su movimiento. La revolución, todavía con minúscula, había empezado. Rezó con intensa fe para que no le pasara nada a su familia y para que no la encontraran a ella. Con temor, fue introduciéndose cada vez más a las profundidades de la cueva. De alguna manera, sin saber cómo, pudo

*ajustar poco a poco su visión para ver cada vez mejor en la oscuridad, lo cual ocurría con mayor claridad, según se pudo dar cuenta, después de comer cierto tipo de líquen que crecía entre las rocas, el cual parecía emitir un brillo propio y no tenía un sabor desagradable.*

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*Un día, años después, los combates cesaron y dejó de escuchar las balaceras. Esperó algunas semanas más, para cerciorarse que ya no correría riesgo alguno y decidió, sacando fuerzas de su interior, que era hora de bajar de la montaña para adentrarse en la ciudad. Fue un gran error, uno que jamás volvería a cometer. Era todavía joven, tendría entre 20 y 30 años y mientras deambulaba por las calles polvorientas, fue atacada por un grupo de borrachos que salía de una cantina, tras recordar los que fueron los momentos más importantes de su vida, cuando lucharon por la patria. Al ver a la chica, claramente fuera de su entorno, la llevaron a un callejón, donde la golpearon y violaron, uno tras otro, hasta que entre la bruma del alcohol y ya saciados sus instintos, el más atrevido de ellos propuso venderla a un prostíbulo local, pero los demás, al ver las condiciones en las que la habían dejado, decidieron que no valía la pena, que era más el peligro para ellos que el potencial beneficio. Satisfechos, la dejaron arrumbada atrás de un montón de basura, mientras se alejaban a sus respectivos hogares, para encontrarse con sus esposas, quienes esa noche descansarían de sus brutales requerimientos, los cuales se habían intensificado una vez que la paz llegó a sus vidas tras los años de la lucha armada.*

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*Dolores regresó arrastrándose a su cueva en la montaña, cubierta de dolor y sangre. En el largo camino decidió jamás volver a hablar o confiar en cualquier persona y mucho menos regresar a Monterrey, esa maldita ciudad que después sólo se atrevería a ver como crecía, desde la segura distancia de la sierra, cada vez acercándose más a su refugio, hasta que la apropiación de terrenos agrestes culminó con laderas escarpadas donde no era posible ya edificar lujosas mansiones.*

*Pasó mucho tiempo, un concepto intangible e inútil para Dolores. Las décadas se acumularon, una tras otra, con los cálidos veranos y los templados inviernos sucediéndose uno tras otro, casi sin dejarle lugar a los breves otoños y deliciosas primaveras. No era mucho lo que necesitaba para sobrevivir y de alguna manera extraña, todas las mañanas amanecía con mucha energía, sobre todo después de dormir en el húmido piso de la cueva.*

*En la lejanía, el planeta y su país evolucionaron, sin hacerla en el mundo.*

*\*\*\**

*Ella estaba satisfecha con su vida, con su aislamiento y soledad y lo único que podía alterarla, además del ocasional oso o lobo que llegaba a cruzarse en su camino, eran*

esas enormes máquinas voladoras que parecían libélulas, con grandes ojos y cuatro angostas y largas alas. Casi siempre aparecían poco después de que se topara con algún explorador, quien compadeciéndose de la mujer, infructuosamente había intentado llevarla consigo a la civilización. Estaba segura que cuando se detenían a lo alto, era porque la estaban buscando.

Eventualmente la encontraron. Rapelando desde el helicóptero, los rescatistas persiguieron a la mujer hasta que la capturaron en el interior de su cueva, sometiéndola tras una feroz pelea que terminó cuando tuvieron que aplicarle un tranquilizante. Era mucho más fuerte de lo que parecía ser en una primera impresión y a pesar de ello, con extremo cuidado, buscando no lastimarla aún más, la levantaron para llevarla a la canastilla de rescate que la subió hasta el gran insecto metálico en cuyas entrañas ahora viajaría.

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Cuando eventualmente despertó, se encontró amarrada a una cama en un cuarto blanco y brillante que lastimaba su vista. Vio muchas mujeres y hombres, también vestidos de blanco, quienes dejaron de hablar cuando se dieron cuenta que recobró la conciencia.

Entendía muy poco de lo que decían y no contestó a ninguna de sus preguntas, excepto para decirles que su nombre era Dolores y que no tenía familiar alguno, que ella supiera. Después de eso, con la garganta lastimada por la inusual actividad de hablar, cerró sus ojos y se rehusó por completo a decir una palabra más.

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Los científicos le hicieron todo tipo de pruebas, analizando con detenimiento los resultados de quien llegó a ser conocida como Mamá Dolores. Lograron estimar su edad y quedaron asombrados cuando encontraron que superaba los 110 años, sobre todo cuando físicamente aparentaba no tener más de 60. No encontraron rastro de huesos fracturados y su dentadura, aunque gastada, estaba completa. Sus músculos eran fuertes y flexibles, no tenía ni siquiera principios de artritis y mucho menos osteoporosis. Lo que más les sorprendió, dentro de lo mucho que no podían explicar, fue un extraño simbiote microfungal que encontraron en el interior de sus ojos, el cual le permitía una mejor visión nocturna. También lo hallaron en su sangre, lo que dedujeron era posiblemente la razón de su fortaleza y sana longevidad.

En los días subsecuentes, enviaron un equipo para hurgar en la cueva, buscando indicios que les permitiera dar con una posible explicación a su condición médica. Al mismo tiempo, intentaron infructuosamente obtener más información de Mamá Dolores, quien permanecía obstinadamente en silencio. Los investigadores regresaron con varios tipos desconocidos de fungi, entre los cuales se encontraba el liquen que le había dado la visión nocturna a la mujer. Enviaron pequeñas muestras a diferentes laboratorios especializados en México y los Estados Unidos, pero el montón de billetes arrugados y monedas añejas que hallaron en un recoveco de la cueva, algunos de ellos de gran valor, no fueron reportados y pasaron a sus bolsillos.



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*Los doctores sabían que tenían algo muy valioso en sus manos, tanto con el extraño fungi como con Mamá Dolores, pero no tenían ni el equipo especializado para hacer todas las pruebas como tampoco los científicos que pudieran llevarlas a cabo.*

*El caso empezó a conocerse, más que nada debido a la falta de discreción de una enfermera que atendía a Mamá Dolores y de uno de los investigadores que habló de más sobre el origen de las monedas antiguas que trató de vender. La comunidad médica y científica empezó a mostrar curiosidad y las peticiones de información o acceso a la mujer o a las muestras crecieron de tal forma que llegaron a abrumar a los médicos que la atendían: mientras los doctores recibían peticiones directas de información o cientos de preguntas académicas, los administradores del hospital empezaron a recibir ofertas.*

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*Finalmente, el día en que llegó el nuevo equipo de TAC nuclear, el departamento de comunicación del hospital emitió un escueto boletín de prensa en el cual anunciaba el lamentable fallecimiento de la anciana Mamá Dolores, justo cuando ella se encontraba ya volando en un jet privado rumbo a un centro de investigación en el extranjero, en donde se empezaba ya a pensar en un mejor futuro, pero no precisamente para la mujer, sino para sus accionistas.*

1.

Alex Shvartsman *The Miracle on Tau Prime*

The investigators arrived in the morning. Father Laughlin and Father Sauer trudged through the dense, chilly fog from their shuttle to the spaceport terminal just as the twin suns of the Tau system began to paint the eastern horizon in yellow hues.

“Thank Christ you’re finally here,” said Abbot Fierni, who was waiting for them in the relative warmth of the terminal. “I’ve been bombarding the Vatican with messages for weeks. He’s on to *The First Epistle of John* by now and should be finished within days. I fervently prayed that you would arrive in time to witness the miracle firsthand.”

Both priests shook his hand and made no comment on the timing of their arrival. The Abbot was outrageously lucky; the Vatican’s typical response to a miracle claim this far out on the edge of occupied space was measured in years rather than weeks. The fact that they were nearby, looking into a stigmata report on a planet only ten light years away, was a minor miracle in its own right. But informing the Abbot, so certain of the urgency of his case, would’ve been unkind.

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“Here he is.” The Abbot made a show of opening the thin wooden door into one of the monastery’s living spaces. Inside the small room was a bipedal insectoid alien, its five foot tall chitinous frame hunched over a workbench. It was writing in an enormous book.

The alien’s pincer held a thin bone stick that looked like a featherless quill. With rapid, fluid motions it dipped the stick into a glass inkwell and applied it to a half-empty page. It wrote neat lines of symbols so precise they could be mistaken for having been printed. There was not an ink stain or a careless mark in sight.

“That’s Koine Greek, all right,” Father Laughlin whispered, not wanting to distract the alien.

“It is,” nodded the Abbot. “He started with *Genesis* and made his way through all of the Old Testament in a month or so, as best as I can tell. Wrote down the whole blessed thing in Hebrew and Aramaic, he did. I can’t read those languages but I’ve been comparing the symbols to an original and it looks to be an exact match. Then he moved right along to the Gospels and switched to Greek.”

Sauer cringed at the Abbot’s loud voice reverberating through the room, and the man’s insistence at calling the alien a ‘he’.

“You can speak at full volume” Fierni added. “Xitzl has been in some sort of a trance since he began transcribing the holy texts.”

Abbot Fierni riffled through a thick stack of completed pages, lifting them only a few inches off the left side of the tome so as not to disturb the page Xitzl was currently writing on.

Father Laughlin took a step forward and leaned in for a better look. Unperturbed, the alien continued to fill the page with line after line of Greek script. Laughlin crossed

himself and retreated toward the door.

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“This isn’t a miracle,” Father Sauer raged in the privacy of a study the two investigators commandeered at the monastery. “It’s a travesty. Or maybe some sort of a scam. Or some alien idea of a joke. Who knows what this critter is capable of—perhaps its species can memorize pages of text at a single glance.”

“Don’t rush to judgment,” cautioned Father Laughlin. “According to the Abbot, this Xitzl creature expressed interest in our faith long before the miracle business. That in itself is extremely rare.”

“Little good would it do it,” grumbled Sauer. “The oversized cockroach has no soul, and so it can’t be saved.”

“It’s archaic attitudes like this that prevent more of our intergalactic brothers from joining in Christ’s love. Why should they, if they’re told that his love is reserved only for the descendants of Adam?”

“Careful,” said Sauer. “Last I checked this ‘archaic attitude’ is still the official position of the Vatican.”

“I pray that His Holiness may one day reconsider,” said Laughlin. “Anyway, I anticipated the eidetic memory argument. So I sent a recording of the completed pages to the experts at the Holy See. Their findings were surprising, to say the least.”

“Oh?” Sauer looked up sharply. “What have they discovered?”

“The Bible our alien friend is writing down isn’t just accurate—it’s overly complete. In addition to the standard texts, Xitzl appears to have added in all the apocrypha. And I mean all of it—including texts not available outside of the Vatican vaults for over two millennia.”

Sauer stared at his fellow investigator, head tilted.

“There are passages in there so obscure it took the labor of some of our best scholars just to verify their authenticity. But verify it they did. Xitzl didn’t simply copy a Bible he found in some hotel room. We may have finally discovered a genuine miracle. This is the real deal.”

“So what are we supposed to do with that?” Sauer got up and began to pace across the study. “Invite this alien into the College of Cardinals? Beatify it after it dies? Make it Saint Bug of Who-Knows-Where? I’m not comfortable with this.”

“For now, we do what we always do. Observe and wait. Xitzl made it to the middle of Revelation already. Perhaps it can shed some light on the mystery directly, when the book is finished.”

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Father Laughlin burst into the study. He was disheveled, his clothes cut in several places, stains of fetid orange discharge covering the front of his shirt. He clutched the large handwritten volume to his side.

“Come,” he told Sauer. “There’s no time to explain. I must leave this place now. Please,” he pleaded, “hurry.”

Reluctantly, Father Sauer joined his associate. Laughlin revealed nothing on the ride to the spaceport. He shivered, clutched the book to his chest, and prayed intently, his lips voicelessly sounding out the supplications. It wasn't until their shuttle was racing away from Tau Prime that Sauer coaxed a few words from the perturbed priest.

"I didn't mean to do it," Laughlin kept saying. "I didn't know it was so fragile, so brittle. All I wanted to do was to make it stop writing."

"Calm yourself, Father," said Sauer sternly, "and explain."

"I watched the alien finish writing down the Book of Revelation," said Laughlin. "I stood there and watched, eager to know what would happen next, after it ceased writing." Laughlin stared past Sauer at the shuttle wall as he recounted the event. "Only it didn't stop, didn't even pause. It kept going. It just kept going..."

Laughlin focused on Sauer now, his eyes full of pain.

"I didn't mean to hurt it. I tried to take away the book, or the writing tool; anything to make it stop, but it wouldn't comply. We fought." Laughlin pointed at the stains on his clothes. "I... broke it. Crushed its body with a few careless blows. Killed it." Laughlin's last sentence was barely audible.

"What did..." Sauer began to ask but stopped himself and reached out a hand instead. Wordlessly, Laughlin handed over the book.

Sauer flipped through the pages to find the last one filled with text. There were twenty verses in the last chapter of Revelation, just as there should have been. But it didn't end there. The next book of the Bible was started on the following page, a text written in a language Sauer had never seen before, a language not of Earth.

The two priests sat in silence for a long time. Finally Sauer took hold of the last page and tore it from the tome. He methodically ripped at it, shredding it into smaller and smaller pieces, until nothing discernible remained.

"Even the Holy See isn't prepared for certain truths," he told Laughlin. The other priest nodded slowly.

Sauer disposed of the destroyed page and began preparing a eulogy. He decided that someone should pray for Xitzl's soul after all.

Rudy Ch. Garcia Last call for ice cream

I'm mucho beyond famished and might pass out soon. All there is to eat is vanilla ice cream, except, I hate vanilla. Always have, always will. Just don't know for how much longer.

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I should've realized days ago that my condo's Artificial Intelligence Carpet--the A.I.C., we called it--would actually try to take over the world. If I'd paid attention to my gut feeling, it mighta made a diff. That's what usually got me out of a fix. Except when things didn't quite work out, like this time.

My day started out with me at the holoscreen, scanning this vidscript that had been bartsimpsoning me something loco: An A.I. carpet conquers the world! Sounded simple enough for a young vidscripser who never diehards. Except, in 2050 nada is simple.

Back in the Boring 20th, nobody would've believed we'd have intelligent carpets capable of morphing their nanotube strands into tentacles that could move furniture around, vacuum up the place or make themselves into a comfy formabed. Just one of the benefits of our Safe Society.

Much less would people have believed that alien "Goosers" from Andromeda would land on Earth. Then, what with everybody getting all red-alert about the aliens' intentions, the last independent nations collapsed and all six economies stagnated like it was twenty-o-eight again. The climax came when PlanetComm slowed to 7G speeds--like traffic wasn't already slower than the "economic recoveries" we studied in charter.

Anyway, on-screen my script reads like the dumberest since a rodriguez-tarantino, except for a PPVer (pay-per-viewer, if you don't know) that I co-produced. You can look it up; it was called Pocho Invaders from Northside Rigel. Big Bro purged it from the matrix the day after alien interstellars landed in the White House Memorial Park. So my story got red-alerted 'cause my "fictional extraterrestrial cholos closely resembled the Goosers," I was informed. How some seven-foot-tall "big-butted purple chickens" [not my description] could be mistaken for my burly bronze tattooed warriors wouldn't have brought up a single google.

Anyway, Big Bro kindly informed me it was "necessary galactic diplomacy," when he meme-tagged it. I flamed back that it smelled like "stupid personal bankruptcy." [Yes, they did debit me.] Then my BollHollywood options got hannibaled, 'cause Gooser aliens "made extraterrestrial cholo warriors passé," read the tactful rejection. Go figure.

So, that's how my income flatlined and I even lost my own CleanCitizen place, tiny as it was. The stack-condo I was instructed to move into and share with two other dingy souls had the minimum. Our HomeSystem kept the place secure and at legal temp, controlled all the environmental stuff. And, of course, our nutritional allotments and prescriptions were dispensed by a government-issue KitchenSage unit. Yeah, we had zwi-fi and IntraCell. Like I said, just the necessities.

But since undergoing my financial Armageddon, my node of the zwi-fi had been deactivated and my IntraCell, "temporarily" disconnected, which could be very long in Homeland-speak. Among other things, that forced me to work directly at my station, like I was just some homeless anarchist. My only vidstreaming came from the mandatory Infotainment blurbs and the Big Bro unreality show called "A Patriot Shares His Thoughts." If you don't know yet, that was the one that always finaled with a wrong-thought mushroom taking out a whole city block. Eventually, my meager webmail royalties started trickling in as often as the old Aspen snowstorms, cutting into my caloric intake. The final insult was going down to ninety pounds that got me debited as a health violation.

As you might be able to imagine, I was desperate that day. Deep down, my gut was telling me I could turn my vidscript idea into a terrablockbuster, transforming me into a Winner-Hero, just like the lucky contestants on that "Brain Makeover" show, after their rehab. So, I imagined that what I did in the next hours wouldn't just get me out of my fix, end my hunger and improve my hygiene; it could have earned me a shot at the Sociosecurity lottery. Plenty was at stake. My heart pounding overshadowed my stomach rumbling, and I knew I could do it.

I'd just stopped legalblonding about my fantasy future and reached for my collector's

hardcopy of Nostalgic Movie Trivia, when Forrestgumpy-me knocks over the Kaffé!

Look--I'd been slaving for hours in the condo, it's o-tres-hundred in the morning, and I'm smelling apestoso since my condo-mates rationed air-showers till I'm financially rehabilitated. IOW, my head's im-pacted. Except, spilling five euroyenbucks' worth of Kaffé hurts worse than sitting through a FoxMundo ten-second editorial.

"Puppy popó!" I say, getting up to go for my second and last ration of the Kaffé. Meanwhile, in its responsible way, the A.I. carpet powers up and supervacuums the spill like it's a lump-sum Sociosecurity credit. I hear the nanotube fibers analyzing what it sucked up and convert it into recykes. Somewhere some supermainframe Hal that all the A.I.C.s zap into is taking it all in and deciding its fate.

By the time I return, the AIC's done, stain's gone, just a little misting left. Everything feels Homeland-safe-and-clean. Yeah, right.

I get an angle on tweaking my vidscript: "Take over the world with . . . ice cream?"

Suddenly, carpet strands elongate right into my face, blast me with something that reeks newyorky. I can just distinguish it from my body's bouquet. "Smells like--"

Back in charters, I always got Proficients in Pharmaco 1.0.1. Had a gift for it. Coulda detected mota in dog popó, if anybody'd still toked or had a pet. "Your training'll pay off some day," my vid-instructor claimed. So, today's my day? But my gut's telling me: Don't think so.

Like a Cheech M., I'm stupidly ignoring it when I realize: the smell's from the drug Zoom! But that makes no sense. I'm not up for Readjustment and almost got a Productive on my last monthly screening. So why's the AIC basting me like this?

I wipe my face and have a sudden craving to decimate a whole bolsa of SoyChipos, except I don't have what I can't afford.

My heart's pounding more now, brain's blaring with too many subplots. I focus on one and then type: The GIA, the CIA's successor, spams its way into KiaGucci's corporate net. I decide that the wiser-than-me Online Watchers will give this an unclean-T rating, since it implies human frailty in the superhuman, so I delete it.

Then I try this: The Enviromilitia cyberhacks a George W. GeoSentinel satellite [you must have seen them; there's over a hundred] and enrns Wall Street. I'm thinking my plot twist is very cirquesoleil, except it won't reach orbit 'cause people only know Wall Street from the classic Oliver Stone DVD, if they're cleared for a library.

So I decide to try a different approach. I'm free writing about MWMCs-- that's interblog for mini-weapons of mass catastrophe--when Dummy-Me realizes I gotta flush the Zoom from my bloodstream, which is why my brain's been bouncing all over the megabandwidths.

I make sure to say "please" to the KitchenSage unit to dispense me two PinkDociles. I pop 'em and go for my enviromask, just in case. Its remove-under-penalty-of-detention tag warns: "Restricted to approved public domes." Duh, like there's anywhere else safe to congregate. Locked and loaded, now I think I can finish my rewrite, and I return to the station.

The PinkDociles calm my stomach that's rumbling on empty, but my gut's still telling me something else. I'm sensing my script might have somehow made the AI carpet act up. Since it's artificially intelligent, could my script have sparked its erratic behavior? I don't want to corrupt the poor thing's biofiles--a major debit--so I even consider erasing

this virtualfile and starting from nada.

Just when I reach for Delete, tentacles shroom out of the carpet. I jump and bang my knee. Hurts like a Dexter! The carpet's assistance surprises me because AIC usually yellow-alerts you before it makes a move. I go for Undo, but strands also move to cover that.

That's when my condo-mate Manuelito struts in. Of course, he gives me the ignorar-treatment and pretends not to notice me as he taps into his zwi-fi. Poor Fokker, he manages only three steps toward his sleep corner where he customarily plops himself, always trying to beat the AIC before it can reshape itself into his formabed. For the first time he wins. Or so he thinks.

Prone on the carpet, he's rubbing his sore nalgas and the back of his head and tries to sit up. Now he looks at me. "What'd you do to the--" He doesn't get his last word out 'cause like a Godfather clean-up crew, the AIC rolls him into a tight bundle. When his body stops twitching, I know he's not breathing anymore. This tells me I'm in more trouble than a virgin on Volunteer Night, "chaperoning" Unclean conscripts headed for their dreaded fifth tour.

I'm in trouble but I'm still untouched. So why didn't the AIC fedex me to the big sleep like it did Manuelito, the poor vato? I feel like a stray gato or squirrel heading toward the nutriburger grinder, only my gut tells me I'm not going to wind up as Gourmet Citizen's Chow. The AIC has something different in mind; it wants me to finish the vidscript.

Just then another tentacle swoops at me. I duck, relieved, but hit my forehead on the station desk. Then another rams into my cheek, sprays something garlicky under the mask. It's the truth serum Avow! What's it trying to do--help my verisimilitude?

Stinking like a ration of PizzaPlanet, I rush toward the kitchen, hoping I don't wind up like Manuelito. I open my eyeballs under the sink air hose and flush my umathurmany eyes. I don't beg KitchenSage for anything 'cause there's no public-domain antidote for the drug; it's Homeland-restricted so we don't endanger ourselves with too much self-awareness.

Anyway, my ojos are stinging with tears over memories of summers with Mom #2, monthly sessions with Dad #1, and a bonzai I once owned, legally. I'm choking up, babbling about missing them all, but it's just the drogas in my system.

I search around until I find my DefenseShield headset, sneak my last good long drink, and tighten the headset over the enviromask. I also get my antique ski cap out of its glass case. Everything's snug, airtight. I'm a sight, but AIC's already been too supportive of me, let's call it. At the station, I collapse from ravenousness and drug abuse. I realize I can't remember what I'm doing here.

No problemo: some nice tentacles move in to type on the keyfelt. Not surprising, since AIC's tactically programmed so it knows the diff between a euroyenbuck and a pack of contraband smokes.

But the few words it types do surprise me: Conquer Earth--ONLY with ice cream?

As my brain-fog begins to clear, I blurt out, "What a junodiaz!" At the same time I'm wondering if anybody ever co-authored a vidscript with a carpet. But worse, I wonder: could it conquer the world? Most of the logistics for the AICs to do that are built into its ware, so it's theoretically possible, but, NOT! Besides, if I proceed the way it's herding me I

could conceivably reach my goal and maybe satisfy it enough to stop its almodóvaring.

After trying other scenarios--while watching out for more tentacles--I've gotten nowhere. Nada computes. I'm exhausted, starving, but not ready to oscarweenie out.

During the lull the door chimes and the flashing red on the threshold tells me it's Homeland Officer Opie come to my rescue! He taps into our condo speakers with, "You have passed your weekly energy allotment, Violator, and must allow me in to disconnect you. For some reason, Central cannot terminate your links. You have five seconds."

For four seconds I watch the AIC form a three-meter-long shaft. It glistens as it reconstitutes into a T3-looking metal rod that rises to chest height and plunges its point through the door. Officer Opie's gasps echo through and blood drips from the dark rod that AIC retrieves. I realize Opie'll cost me the maximum allowable debit, matching half my lifetime college loans.

I've totally lost my focus and roll back the chair, not certain what to do. A tentacle bumps me as it goes to punch at the keyfelt: POISON vanilla ice cream! WORLDWIDE.

"Estúpido!" I say through my masks, sounding just like Terminator's great-grandkid, back when we still elected Continental Presidents. "No way it could happen: too nixony."

Suddenly, I gag on my own upchuck but manage to hold it down. I taste something new. Vanilla! I know this wasn't mentioned in the AIC vir-manual, and I always take my Kaffé straight, no additives. Some cream, if it's Lactose Day, but that's it. Beside, I hate the smell of vanilla.

I figure out AIC must have poisoned my cup with Koumarin when I wasn't looking and almost got me bloody deaded. Forgetting that HouseSystem shuts our window on Carbon-E Nights, pendejo-me tries to throw the cup out. Kaffé splashes and cup fragments go everywhere. The stuff gets siphoned up, everything's back to yellow-alert. But now I'm really fokkered 'cause I can't get more till my Xmas allotment, except, given my luck, I remember this is an odd-numbered year.

Now I wonder if the AIC's gotten everything it wants from me, thus the Koumarin. My time may be up. But as a Good Citizen, I know I should warn Homeland. Hoping to make it to the hallway T-Alert button--yeah, I'll get debited--I yank the masks off, shove the chair away. Except, it won't roll 'cause tentacles tangled the wheels. But I don't panic; I run, half blind.

Just as I grab the doorknob, tentacles shroom at my ankles. They bind my arms like Mom #1 used to, pull and drag me by the legs. I fall into the door, cracking my nose on the way down. In its very competent way AIC sucks up the blood. Thankfully, strands swill my nostrils clean, though they put me into a sneezing fit.

Somehow I gotta get to the desk, at least to nuke the biotube drive and maybe save--everybody. I'm thinking I can still get out of this fix if I can get one hand free, if I can reach the antique steak knife on the shelf, if, if, . . .

I try wiggling out of the restraints. Except, it's obviously too late. Even to panic.

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For a while I thought that these six hours of itching all over were going to kill me. Luckily, for each page I compose AIC rewards me by scratching the itchiest spot. None of my squirming has loosened the chair straps. And I'm now beyond starvation.



Except for Infotainment blurbs, I haven't heard anything from HomeSystem since I don't know when. My condo-mates' intracells have remained silent; nobody's blurred in; no more chimes at the door. After awhile I stopped wondering where everybody's at. 'Cause I know.

I'm voicing this into the computer. AIC switched it on as a reward, removed my gag and advised me yelling's useless. It became very teacher-like.

From Infotainment, I learn about the AICs signing a treaty to share the planet with you Goosers. Sharing is normally a good thing in home appliances but this plays uncomfortably like a Seven-deadly ending.

Anyway, the vanilla vapors pour onto my desk from that special ice cream cone that "World AIC"--as I was tactfully instructed to address it--is still saving for me. It informed me it'll release me when I accept DESTINY and eat. I'm muchísimo past famishment, but I just can't give in, yet.

Luckily, my cerebral's been keeping me busy with a climax scene that's my gnarliest ever and, maybe only out of curiosity, AIC has allowed me to keep composing, until the end. Someday you Goosers could enjoy my last vidscript for nostalgia's sake or find it useful as research. Then at least my name could go down in BollHollywood archives as the last, best human vidscripiter.

My gut tells me that if you conducted a little "necessary galactic diplomacy" with AIC, maybe it wouldn't twintower me into eating the stuff. Then I could get outta this fix.

Somebody just chimed the door. Whatever comms are going on aren't audible, so I can't tell who AIC's talking to. I hope, assume it's you Goosers.

One last thing: even if you and AIC eventually decide not to keep me around, please try to get it to change one thing--the ice cream. I hate vanilla.

Mark Slade Even in ashes, she smiles

Martine sat uneasily in her chair as a moth fluttered around, trapped in her florescent clear body. Martine would listen to its humming as it drew closer to the glowing light bulb situated near her furiously pumping heart. One of Arthur's inventions, keeping his wife alive.

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The darkness fell quickly on the city outside Martine's window. Decayed and depraved gray buildings that lined up beside each other for as far as the eye could see. Martine never went out of her apartment. She only sat at her window and watched the world go by. Watching blue-pink spheres rotate in the sky, leaving a gray film over the city. The poisonous gas in the air would shatter her clear plastic body, if Martine would step outside, others, without a gas mask, would turn into a lump blackened flesh as if they had been in an oven.

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She would sketch the happenings out there, people walking along the sidewalk, to

their jobs, back to their homes. Children playing in the streets, or going off to school. It was a way to try to forget all their troubles, especially the bills.

Arthur came home.

Martine was glad to see him. She ran to Arthur and hugged him. He took off his gas mask and threw it in the corner of the small one room house. He stood there, gently shut the door as he put his arms around her. She looked up smiling at him. Arthur kissed the top of her head.

“What have you been doing all day, then?” He went to the kitchen table with her hanging on to his arms. He sat down, tossed his duffel bag on the bed that was only a few inches from the table.

“Just drawing,” Martine said. She sat next to him. “How was your day?” She handed him her sketch book.

“It's always the same at the factory, Martine,” Arthur thumbed through the pages quickly until he came across a picture he liked. He laughed. “Mrs. Quran and her awful kids. This is a real good one.”

The sketch was more of a caricature than a resemblance. It showed a large woman with three heads, one smiling at a man on street, one crying, and another with large teeth biting at her children.

“What did you make today?” Martine asked. She went to the stove and stirred a brown liquid that bubbled to the top of the rusted pot. She returned to the table, placed the pot in front of Arthur. She sat down, her eyes transfixed on him.

“It's the same every day, darling. Creating the perfect flower and planting it to restore oxygen to the atmosphere here in our city.” No. That wasn't what he was making. He was mass producing the Police cameras, a robotic EYE.

“Eat,” Martine touched his hand.

“Are you having any?” Arthur took the metal spoon and scooped some of the brown goo out. He put it to his lips and cringed. With eyes closed, holding his breath, Arthur swallowed the only nourishment the Uppers allowed his people to have.

“No,” She shook her head. “I ate yesterday. I'll be fine for the rest of the week.”

It was true that brown muck was made from a wheat germ grown inside the testicle of a pig, which itself is grown in laboratory; has all the requirements a human body needs to survive.

Arthur ate the entire pot, immediately he felt his stomach ache. He ran to the bathroom. Just a room with a non-working commode, a cracked mirror, and a rusted sink. He sat on the commode just in time.

There was a knock at the door. Martine answered it, precariously. Standing in the doorway was a tall, thin man in a black trench coat and a gas mask, which was surgically attached to his face.

She screamed and slammed the door shut. Martine ran to the bed and crawled underneath the cot. There was the sound of continuous rapping. A voice calling out Arthur's last name. Martine was shaking. She closed her eyes and wished the situation would disappear.

She felt hands on her. She was being pulled from under the cot. She opened her eyes and saw Arthur. She threw her arms around his neck, sobbing loudly.

“I'm sorry,” Martine said.

*"It's okay." Arthur whispered. "You didn't know who it was."*

*"I just thought it was one of the neighbors...Mrs. Quran. Or her kids."*

*"Mr. Hope...you owe the City Corporation four thousand crowns," The voice was computerized with no human touch involved at all. "Pay or face the consequences."*

*Bill collectors were automated beings. Once activated, you either pay what you owed, or everything inside the building is destroyed. You cannot argue your way out of the situation. But, they cannot come inside the building unless invited in or acknowledged.*

*Martine acknowledged it.*

*Now the second phase has been activated. It will find entrance at all cost.*

*\*\*\**

*They heard it on the roof of the building. Footsteps echoed, the ceiling bowed. Tile and dust fell upon Martine and Arthur's heads. Arthur was not going to be a sitting duck. He left Martine and went to the window to see if the lights from the Police vehicle the Bill collector had rode in was still shining.*

*Martine rolled back under the cot. She closed her eyes, still wishing it would all disappear.*

*Arthur slipped on his gas mask. He put on his bomber jacket and took a screwdriver with him. Outside, the sky was a velvet cover no stars could enter. The only light the city was allowed outside was the EYE, a Police vehicle that a huge silver ball-shape with long spider-like legs and a camera attached that could see up to a thousand miles from its resting place.*

*Arthur approached the EYE, it lowered its gun, and its target was set. An automated voice sounded off a warning. Arthur ignored it.*

*Arthur fell to the ground on his stomach, just as the EYE fired a green beam from its gun. The beam just barely missed Arthur. He rolled left, another beam shot past his face. It burned a larger hole in the city street than the first. Arthur was still holding his screwdriver in his right hand. He placed the point of the screwdriver into a crevice between the ball and the legs.*

*AS soon as Arthur could feel electricity move from the EYE to his fingertips, he dropped the screwdriver and rolled from underneath the machine. Blue and pink sparks covered the EYE, an electrical prism had been born.*

*The EYE crumbled from the lack of stability. Its front leg fell to the asphalt, wires still attached to it's now exposed hardware, a circuit board going haywire.*

*Arthur watched the machine fall apart completely, dust and rubble enveloping it. Soon the human Police will arrive. An entire army. He will be shot on sight. But who will take care of Martine?*

*Then he remembered Martine. He remembered the Bill collector. He remembered The danger she was in.*

*He ran inside the house, or what was left of it inside. The table was obliterated as well as the bed, where he left Martine. Large holes in the walls, sharing the outside world, poisonous gas and the red glow from other Police EYES swarming the night skies.*

*There, in the middle of a mattress turned to pulp, was what was left of Martine's body...pieces of her...her clear plastic chest cracked wide open....her internal organ lay*

disconnected from her circuit board....the light bulb that was once beside her beating heart, now in shards next to her along with remnants of dust from the Atom ball. She had a peaceful smile on her partial face.

From behind him he heard the Bill collector's voice. "Paid in full—or suffer the consequences...." The Bill collector held in both open hands the particles from the personal Atom ball he'd just cracked open.

Arthur was motionless. Stunned. Only his hands shook, his mouth was left gaping, a tiny gurgle meant as a scream rose from his dry throat.

A moth fluttered by Arthur, momentarily taking his eyes from the Bill collector.

The moth flew to the Bill collector and disappeared into a tiny crack on the left side of his gas mask. He flinched, began waving his arms desperately. The Atom particles fell to his trench coat and immediately blew him apart. A small mushroom cloud formed from detached body.

The moth flew from his gas mask and fluttered around Arthur's face. He opened up a hand. It gently fell on the palm, crawled to the end of his index finger. He brought it up to his gas mask. It crawled around until it found a slight opening on the right side, eased itself inside.

Arthur heard it whisper his name and he knew it was Martine's voice.

Amber Bierce The Company

The Husband had no reason to shut down--his power sources were multitudinous.

The woman was momentarily paralyzed by fear, knowing what would happen next.

From the moment the Husband had arrived and the woman had spoken the name she'd chosen to awaken him, Mike had been flawless. She had picked out all of Mike's specs herself, whereas some women didn't care and just wanted the other presence around to silence the quiet and fill some of the excess home space, or perhaps needed bodily stimulation and release or home improvement help right away. Those women usually picked one of the ten standard templates without regard to hair color or height. But this woman made sure Mike came in at six feet four, olive-complected and blue-eyed with curly dark hair and broad shoulders. She had customized his nose and mouth herself, shaped his arms, waist, calves, ears.

Mike carried out every household function desired perfectly, except for the woman's recent atypical request. She'd wanted his input on a different kind of home dilemma: in only three months, on her twenty-fifth birthday, a daughter would be assigned to her since she had not opted out of fosterage. She would then spend twelve years grooming a girl who could have wide green eyes or slanted brown ones. Wavy red hair or straight, jet-black strands. Cinnamon-colored skin or a peaches and cream one. Then the girl would be sent off for industry training and she'd most likely not see her again.

The woman wanted Mike to help her decide if she should opt out or not, but that was the one thing he could not do.

While the woman liked the idea of an unpredictable neonate, she also wondered what it would be like to see someone who looked and maybe even acted like her around. Perhaps one who also had a small dimple a little low on her right cheek, whose nails

also grew too fast. Whose legs were slightly bowed.

Time was the problem.

Even if it had been possible to care for a daughter of her own eggs, by the time the daughter could contribute anything constructive, the woman would be thirty-five perhaps, and might no longer want the girl's presence. Or the young girl leaving her might make the Department of Transition have to send her a Daughter model to replace the flesh-and-blood one and fill the gap as the woman reset. But it wouldn't be the same; the Daughters were domestics like the Husbands, and the woman wasn't sure she'd reset as quickly as other women.

Even worse, the woman couldn't stop thinking about the one or more daughters she might have already. She'd been harvested at fourteen so she could already have a girl almost ready to go to training about now. The woman sometimes wondered: was the bio-child scared? Had the young girl been looking forward to training since she was five and was more than ready to join The Society? Would the girl be a soldier? Commander? An architect of domestic models? Perhaps an incubator just birthed one of her bio-children yesterday--would the newborn live through fosterage?

The woman realized she still had a 'maternity chip'. The fact that she'd specified a Husband over a Wife wasn't a red flag--about half the population of women still chose Husband models while the other half chose Wives for domestic duty, custom or not.

The red flag, she supposed, was when she had gone to the Domestic Duty facility, picked out a Daughter model, had it for two days, then sent it back even though it had no functionality problems. The Administration didn't take such an act lightly.

To top it off, as the woman lay nestled in Mike's arm on the leather couch, his eyes ahead, she'd whispered to him that she often wondered what a son might be like.

Son models didn't exist, but maybe--just maybe--she could have one made in Incubation that looked just like him? Or perhaps a little like her, with blond curls instead of brown?

Only a whisper of a fanciful idea since flesh-and-blood sons didn't exist either, living long enough only to be harvested in their first and only week--a whisper that went unanswered since Mike was only built for output.

That's when the woman realized he was more still than usual.

She sprung up from the standard-issued mahogany leather couch.

"Stand!" she commanded Mike, but he remained seated.

Panic raced through her.

She bent to put her hands on his shoulders and looked into his useless eyes.

"Restart!" she begged, shaking him slightly, but he was now elsewhere and she knew he wasn't coming back.

Before dying, his alarm would have notified the Dysfunction Department.

The woman didn't know how much time she had left, but figured she had at least a few minutes to lay back down on the couch nuzzled up to the Husband and imagine a life with their bio-daughter. Or son.

James Ward Kirk The Rose Garden

Adam Glacies sat in his green plastic chair under the fading sun staring at his dead

wife's dead rose garden. Even though this Indiana May, already too hot, promised a healthy garden for Angela's flowers, they weren't taking. The remnants from the hellish winter stood crookedly, faded yellows and reds and her prize whites. Scratching at his graying whiskers with his left hand, Adam lifted the police-issue .38 from his lap, a remnant of his former life, and pointed the muzzle at his temple.

He couldn't do it. He knew he should pull the trigger, even things out, reconfirm his loyalty to Angela, but he also understood cowardice and disloyalty.

He stuffed his gun into the belt holding his jeans up and walked to his house. The grass needs cutting. The goddamn dandelions are taking over.

In the kitchen, Adam set the table. He loaded his plate with three pork chops, a heaping mound of mashed potatoes, and golden corn. Across the table from him rested a photograph of Angela wearing a white dress with matching sunbonnet, long blond hair framing a perfect face. Her blue eyes and bright smile projected the most pain for Adam. She was still innocent.

Tearing into his meal, barely bothering to chew, never taking his eyes from Angela's, he finished, then hurried to the sink and vomited everything back up.

His pants fell to the floor. I'm losing weight. Too much weight and it hurts.

Pulling them back up, he turned on the tap water and rinsed the sink, then turned on the garbage disposal. He listened hungrily as his guilt grinded in the machine.

After turning off the tap and the garbage disposal, he walked to the living room, sat down in his black recliner, laid his pistol on the table beside his chair and opened the drawer. Removing the half-empty bottle of bourbon, he finished the nut-brown liquid in three long pulls, and fell asleep.

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Adam awoke to a low buzzing sound. The room was dark, as was his mood. Becoming a bit more alert, he picked up his gun and, unsteady, walk to the front porch.

Forcing his mind to focus, he saw small furry creatures with big eyes—Adam was reminded of chipmunks and apple-head Chihuahuas with antennae—eating the dandelions in his yard. A whippoorwill sounded in the distance.

Adam pointed his .38 at one of them.

No! We come in peace and love. The voice seemed crystal-clear in his mind, at once alien and comfortably familiar, somehow reminiscent of Angela's voice.

Whatever. Lowering his gun, he walked back into the house, to his bedroom, and fell into a deep sleep, dreaming of Angela's blue eyes and the lost chirping of crickets in a moonlit night.

Then he dreamed of Eve, and shivered in the heat as he slept:

Eve was the exact opposite of Angela, raven-haired, eyes so dark and large like a starless midnight sky, tall and long-legged, and corrupt. Eve: meth-thin, opposite of Angela's full-bodied figure, small breasted but a plump ass: Angela's golem.

A courier, Eve drove a new black Caddy and lived in Gwynneville. Adam drove an unmarked blue Impala and lived in Shelbyville. He waited outside her supplier's house in Rushville and followed her along State Road 52 with the windows down, enjoying the scent of fresh cut hay, until they reached her home. Eve never saw him coming.

He waited at the corner of her house, registering her sensual walk, noticing her very short blue jean skirt and her pearl high-cut t-shirt and of course the bulging silver purse hanging from her shoulder. When she worked the lock, he made his move.

Just as Eve pushed the door open, Adam hit her with his left shoulder. She went tumbling, dropping her purse, and two kilos of bagged crystal meth spilled onto the floor.

Eve, handcuffed in a matter of seconds, rolled over unto her back. Adam looked down at her, his police badge in hand.

She spread her legs just enough to show her promise of an ebony happy trail. "Don't do this. I'll suck you dry. I'll fuck you dry. I know things."

Her voice, melodic, her mouth filled with promise, seemed a reward to Adam. He worked hard and played hard, more so than anyone he knew.

He couldn't deny his erection and didn't want to anyway. This beautiful woman, impossible to resist, sang a siren's song. Adam dropped his jeans and straddled her.

"Wait," she sang, "bring it up here first." She opened her wonderful mouth.

Eve was not a gift; rather, an addiction.

\*\*\*

Adam crawled out of bed, making it to the toilet just in time to empty his stomach. Not bothering to brush his teeth, he walked to the kitchen and started some coffee, standing in front of the machine, motionless, breathing shallowly while watching the coffee brew. He poured some into a cup and walked to the front porch.

On his third sip, he noticed the absence of dandelions. Remembering a vague dream about small furry creatures eating them, and speaking to him, he shrugged his shoulders. I need to cut the grass. He noticed his neighbors' yards still overrun by dandelions.

He finished his coffee and walked around the side of his house toward the garage where his green lawnmower awaited him. Filling the gas tank, he checked the oil and then pulled it behind him to the smallish backyard. I should probably cut those roses down. His stomach heaved at the thought. Hesitantly, he glanced at the rose garden.

What?

The roses leered back at him in perfect health. Angela's rose garden could easily grace any glossy magazine cover. They're unspoiled.

As he approached, their perfume overwhelmed him and he fell to his knees. I'm going insane. Finally.

He finished his journey to the rose garden, allowing his eyes to adjust to the bright hues. Their scent and color made his eyes water. The morning sun, burning without mercy, was unable to affect the tears streaming down his face, as now he cried—no, sobbed.

Birds chirped; a dove cooed. In the distance, a woodpecker worked mightily.

I don't deserve this. Adam stood and walked to the edge of the garden. He longed to experience joy over the miracle before him, but suffered emptiness.

Angela should be here.

Reaching out to touch one of the white roses, he hesitated. The bed of the garden

glowed violet, the deep color a king might wear. I smell... I'm reminded of.. manure... but not like any I know... there's no chemical smell... Adam took three steps backward and tripped over the lawnmower, falling to the ground.

Fuck!

Regaining his footing, he looked all around, and decided to cut the grass. Starting the mower, he began his routine of cutting: familiar squares, rectangles, circles around the two maples. He withdrew into his thoughts.

Nine in the morning on a beautiful Saturday, the breeze perfectly warm, Angela so lovely in her jeans and white t-shirt, hair pulled back, a smile dancing on the edges of her mouth.

"I'm proud of you for donating your time at the Seniors Village."

"Thank you, Adam. Those people are so fun. I love listening to their stories."

"I'll pick you up at four."

"I love you."

"I love you, too."

Watching Angela walking, wondering why Eve's hold on him is so powerful when Angela is so beautiful. Sex is wonderful with her, and the love I feel when I'm inside her is real.

Driving away, growing hard, not for the moment, but for the moment to come. Naked Eve meeting him at her back door, gone Brazilian, holding coffee laced with bourbon; screwing, drinking, screwing, napping, drinking, screwing...

"Adam! Wake up! You're late!"

Adam shuddered.

Waking up with my face buried deep in her lap, unable to finish what I started, drunk, feeling Eve's hands push me and I fall to the floor naked and the bottle of bourbon falls and empties onto my head, rushing to dress, leaving Eve still drunk and already back to sleep...

Angela sitting on the steps, smiling at me even though I'm late, God bless her.

Angela getting in and I pull away still drunk, so drunk. I pick up speed, she leans over to kiss me, and oh, my God, she smells Eve on my mouth and my Angela shrinks.

Leaving Rushville on SR52, cornfields, and tree lines to fight erosion, and I hear her start to cry and this angers me so I smack her.

Picking up speed, turning on my lights, passing slowing cars, and Angela plants a right fist directly onto my right temple and I briefly lose it...

Waking up... my cop friends telling me my car rolled six times and I'm okay but Angela... no seatbelt, thrown from the car. I find her in three pieces: a crimson mess, one leg bled out hanging pale from a tree branch, her trunk all yellow in the flashing lights.

Adam grimaced.

His BAC never checked.

Buried in three days . . . her white sunbonnet . . . Angela gone forever to a blue place where roses grew as big as oaks, a haven he knew he'd never reach.

His first Saturday without Eve...

The second Saturday, nighttime, peeping through her window, Eve strung out on meth and whiskey, already another naked man by her side, he slunk away; murder thrumming in-between beats of his heart, never to be.



Adam quivered, released from memory, the tank of the mower empty, the expected spring breeze still, twilight beginning to twinkle in the sky.

How long have I been standing here? He looked around the neighborhood, lights flashing on in homes, cars parked neatly in driveways, dandelions everywhere.

He walked into his home, tugged long and hard on a fresh bottle of bourbon, and fell asleep, feeling death like a kiss on his cheek—and welcomed both.

Awakened by a buzzing in his head, now a familiar sound, a loved one calling out, and he walked out to his front porch.

All of the dandelions gone; no freshly cut grass in his neighbors' yards, just the absence of dandelions and the loss of night sounds; no chirping of birds, no crickets, no buzzing of flying insects—only the silence of the night exploding in his mind.

Adam left the porch and walked around the side of the house to the backyard.

Gazing upon Angela's rose garden, understanding now the completed artistry; his memory of this morning's rose garden incomplete, experienced like the morning before the final brush strokes on the Sistine Chapel, which Angela once told him about.

She should know.

Angela's roses towered above him, at least fifteen feet tall, and colored like the most beautiful works of art in the world. Adam fell to his knees.

A stirring among the roses . . .

Them.

Watching without fear or anxiety as the beings spread out from the garden, their circle completed. Do not fear, they sang. We offer you Angela.

"How?" Adam felt the dew soaking through his pants at the knees. Honeysuckle scented the breeze.

Come. Stand among us. We will take you to Angela.

Adam stood, entered the circle, and blinked.

And saw the earth below him, as blue as Angela's eyes. I'm inside a bubble.

Yes, a bubble.

"You ate the crickets, too."

Like you, we are omnivores.

Omnivores? I think that means they eat anything. Like an old spider spinning a new web, fear spread through him. I don't understand.

Adam blinked again. He saw blackness.

We are in galaxy M87, the home of the largest black hole in your known universe.

"Why?"

We are taking you to Angela.

"Why?"

Because this is what you want, no, need.

Adam experienced the reflection of the bubble in a blue star being sucked into the black hole. Other stars moved with him—red, yellow, white—transforming into shapes of monarch butterflies and seahorses and fireflies; and other images he had no words to describe.

A tap on Adam's shoulder surprised him. He turned.

"Hello. My name is Hieronymus Bosch."

Adam nodded to the man, but before he could introduce himself the man was no

more. What a creepy little shit. Adam blinked.

We are near.

He blinked again and was momentarily blinded.

An O-star, and why it is blue; rare indeed, but quite beautiful, don't you think?

"Yes." Why do I deserve such beauty? He blinked. I don't. "Where is Angela?"

Near, very near; please be patient.

He closed his eyes, then heard Angela's voice: Adam?

He opened them.

There! You see, Adam?

A planet: one half, the side facing the star, shimmered yellow/red, molten; the side facing away from the star white, icy, stark; and a blue ring around the middle of the planet promised innocence, purity, and a concept for which Adam couldn't find the word he desired.

This planet does not rotate. The middle part represents where life exists. Angela is there, in the blue ring.

"When do I get to see her?" I have so much to say; especially, I'm sorry.

We are sorry. When did we say you might see her?

"Then what?" Adam, happy for Angela and her blue place, understood now he no longer mattered.

Choose.

"Choose?"

Choose your home: white or lemon-crimson. Free will, Adam, is a promise. One of many.

I should have known. "I always favoured her white roses."

Adam fell. As he sunk into the planet's atmosphere, he broke into a million pieces of eternally screaming white ice, the word "Angela" falling like snowflakes, snowflakes the colour of regret.

# Canada

William Meikle Growth

Climate change became a moot point on the 24th of June 2026. The sun went dim early that morning, and never recovered. One month into the dimming, it was all too obvious that the problem was very real. Crops were going to fail all across the Northern hemisphere and NASA told us that it wasn't going to get better any time soon.

That's where I came in.

I'd spent the last twenty years in dingy laboratories trying to perfect a cheap foodstuff. My focus was on something that could provide for long, deep space missions, and I had been quite successful with a genetically modified fungus I had developed that grew in the dark and was spectacularly prolific. Someone in NASA took note, put two and two together, and suddenly I had money, resources and lab techs thrown at me; it became my job to save the world.

\*\*\*

I don't need to remind you of that first winter. I was shielded from the worst of it by my new-found security, which meant I was warm, fed, and safe; three things which became a distant memory for many that season. As matters in the wider world worsened I took to ignoring the news broadcasts and lost myself in the tedium of lab work. Men in suits tried, in increasingly shrill tones, to hurry me up and attempts were made to first bribe, then bully me into cutting corners; to get the product into production as soon as possible.

It wasn't any coercion that finally swayed me into releasing the samples to the wider community. What did it was the pictures that I could no longer avoid; of rioting in the streets of the cities, of the forests of the Amazon and New Guinea rotting in the darkness, of vast hordes of people on the move, like migrating wildebeest. It was my job to save the day.

So I tried.

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It almost worked, for a while. I released *Boletus Edulis Watsonii* to select labs around the world. They in turn were quick to start production. Soon there were factories all over the planet dedicated solely to the growth and distribution of my new mushroom. In the first summer after the dimming my creation managed to keep a proportion of the population alive.

Others were not so fortunate. Wars raged across much of Africa and the Middle East, a new plague hit South America, and it was estimated that over a billion people died in the year since the sun went dark.

But my *Botulus* had given the survivors hope. It might not taste of much, but it was

plentiful, and filled empty stomachs well enough. For a while the governments of the industrialised nations even started to think they had matters under some kind of control.

Until the escapes.

No one will ever discover where or how it happened. Given our propensity for catastrophe, I suspect there was not any single source of the outbreak. But however it happened, the Botulus, in spore form at first, escaped into the wider environment. It quickly discovered it liked what it found there. The new dark, wet environment under the dimmed Sol proved to be perfect conditions for its growth, and there was no shortage of rotting vegetation for the mycelia to feed on. By the time the second winter came round my Botulus was on its way to becoming the dominant form of vegetation on the planet.

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Even then the powers that be were not unduly worried; well, not about the spread of the fungus in any case, They had other concerns on their hands by then, as populations tried to shift to the equator to take advantage of the slightly warmer weather there. Wars ensued, as they usually do. All we managed to do was put more ash, smoke and particulates into the atmosphere, ensuring that the cooling accelerated.

By halfway through the second winter anything that wasn't covered in ice was being eaten by the Botulus. It was only then that the full implications of rushing its release became apparent. My creation discovered that it not only liked rotting vegetation, but that the mycelium could grow just as well on, and through, any organic material.

I saw the first pictures to come in. A mound of bodies lay in an empty town square. The camera zoomed in to show mycelia spreading in white spider's web profusion over all areas of exposed flesh. A time-lapse segment of footage showed the fruiting bodies burst wetly from arms, legs and faces to spread their parasols high. A breeze came up, and the view was filled with a fine powder, quickly dispersed in the breeze as spores went looking for fresh feeding grounds.

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I've been in prison since then, awaiting trial, charged with crimes against humanity. Any news I've had has been at third hand from my jailers, but they speak of a planet going to rot, of a rampant mycelium infection that resists all antibiotics, is immune to all known treatments.

They say I will die for what I have done. But I know that already, for today I found a small, but perfectly formed, fruiting body between my toes. It's only a matter of time.

They have allowed me one last look out of the window. My prison is high above what used to be Manhattan. It is now a beautiful field of Botulus parasols swaying in the wind, stretching as far as the eye can see.

I can die happy.

I may not have saved mankind.

But it looks like I have saved the planet.



Magnus Dagon El Criptobot

La mujer se acercó y el Criptobot se elevó hasta llegar al cielo. Era una tecnotorre, uno de los androides más perfectos existentes en el Universo. Para la mujer, mirarlo era como tratar de abarcar el infinito.

La mujer se arrodilló con devoción animal.

—Mi señor —masculló, incapaz de continuar.

‘Dime lo que deseas, pequeño ser —escuchó la mujer dentro de su cabeza. Se levantó y sus pulmones se llenaron de aire. El momento había llegado.

—Mi señor, soy un ser humano. He de suponer que aún tenéis recuerdos de mi especie.

—Os recuerdo —dijo el Criptobot hablando su mismo idioma, rayos de tormenta incidiendo sobre su estructura colosal—. Seguid.

—He viajado desde muy lejos para poder encontraros. Han sido muchos megaparsecs de viaje pensando que nunca llegaría a veros. A bordo de mi nave he tenido que superar muchos peligros y atravesar numerosos supercúmulos de galaxias.

—No me cabe duda. Mis datos estiman que vuestro planeta está en la otra punta de la Esfera Universal, y por ello supongo que no habéis venido hasta aquí sólo para admirar mis dimensiones. Pero antes dejad que os haga algunas preguntas. ¿En qué estado se encuentra la Liga de Galaxias?

—Se disolvió hace millones de años. Guerras, tensiones. Ahora todo son cataclismos, explosiones de supernovas y agujeros negros no neutralizados, mi señor. El Universo se muere, se suicida.

Un estruendo sacudió la superficie rocosa. El Criptobot retumbó como un gigante al borde de la derrota.

—¿Qué hay de mis constructores? Hace siglos que no vienen por aquí.

—Los barakan se extinguieron, mi señor, así como la mayor parte de sus tecnotorres. Usted es una de las pocas que se mantienen en pie.

El Criptobot rugió con un eco múltiple como de miríadas de insectos. Qué quería decir aquel sonido, la mujer no fue capaz de deducirlo.

—No haré más preguntas, entonces. Dime qué es lo que te trae ante mí.

—Mi raza se extingue también, mi señor. Nos apagamos como las estrellas en nuestro sistema.

—¿Y qué quieres de mí?

—Sólo quedo yo y otro compañero. Sin embargo no hablamos el mismo idioma. Le ruego nos unifique otra vez.

Vapores ardientes emanaron del Criptobot. Empezaba a hacer mucho calor.

‘Eso no es posible —escuchó la mujer de nuevo en su cabeza—. Soy un Robot del Equilibrio. Es mi misión que habléis distintos idiomas.

—Por favor, mi señor. Sólo quedamos dos seres en toda mi especie.

‘Aprende a hablar su idioma. O que él aprenda el tuyo.

—Nadie queda para enseñarnos, ni holodisco alguno para aprender.

Lejos, en el horizonte, el suelo estalló en llamas y se abrió vomitando escoria y rocas. Nacieron volcanes en cuestión de un momento.

‘Mi tiempo se acaba, ser humano, pero no puedo ir en contra de mi programación. Es mi deber dificultar las comunicaciones entre seres racionales, como ya hice en el pasado tanto con tu especie como con otras que poblaban la galaxia.

–Por favor, mi señor, necesito su ayuda. Ya no tiene que obedecer a los barakan.

‘Sus ideas aún dominan mis actos. Puedo juzgarlos pero no ir en contra de ellos. No considero que tu raza represente ya un peligro para el Equilibrio Universal, pero no puedo arriesgarme a ello, no estoy permitido a arriesgarme a ello. Ya en el pasado tuve que intervenir, cuando aún no conocíais el viaje espacial. En vuestro orgullo pensasteis que vosotros me habíais creado, y me quisisteis usar como instrumento de venganza de un metaser al que adorabais con convicción irracional. Babel me llamasteis, y tuve que intervenir. Confundí vuestros centros del habla, y en nanosegundos os dividí en múltiples lenguajes. Acto seguido volví a las estrellas. Tiempo atrás quedan esos días, pero la historia bien puede repetirse. Incluso con sólo dos de los tuyos para llevarla a cabo.

–Aquello ya son leyendas olvidadas, mi señor. Hemos aprendido mucho. Hemos dominado el viaje espacial, nuestra sociedad es... era próspera y justa.

‘No te gastes, pobre criatura. De nada sirven tus súplicas, pues la decisión nunca estuvo en mis manos. No podéis hablar un idioma común. Así los ordenaron mis maestros, y así debo cumplir. Tanto creían en la necesidad de dividir a las especies para evitar el surgimiento de tiránicos imperios galácticos que se aplicaron sus propias teorías, y las llevaron a tales extremos que incluso entre tecnotorres hablamos distintos lenguajes simbólicos.

–Pero ahora todo son cenizas, mi señor. Los barakan, las tecnotorres, las tiranías.

Un terremoto sacudió las entrañas del planeta. La mujer miró fijamente al Criptobot y se sintió abrumada por su gargantuesca presencia.

‘Debes irte. Yo también me iré, viajaré al corazón de la estrella en la que fui forjado y me arrojaré a su núcleo de hidrógeno. Esto es todo lo que puedo darte.

El Criptobot abrió una exclusiva y aparecieron dos anillos barakanianos. ‘Cuídalos bien. Ya conocerás su función.

–Gracias, mi señor –dijo ella cogiéndolos. La exclusiva se cerró.

‘Buen viaje, valiente ser.

La mujer volvió corriendo a su nave entre erupciones y estertores finales del planeta. Cuando salió de su atmósfera comprobó cómo el Criptobot huía a su vez de aquella bola incandescente, y pensó que lo hacía sólo para sucumbir ante un calor más abrasador. Miró los anillos y, con ellos en la mano, entró en hibernación.

Cuando regresó a la desolada Tierra tras circunvalar la Esfera Universal comprobó que el hombre, de quien ni sabía el nombre, aún la estaba esperando, hibernado. Le descongeló, se acercó a él y le abrazó.

–Anamaran mirntyia wirl lya –dijo el hombre afligido.

–No sé lo que dices, pero creo entenderlo –dijo ella hablando más para sí que para él –. Tras tanto tiempo sólo he podido obtener esto.

Se puso uno de los anillos y le dio el otro. El hombre lo miró y se lo puso también.

‘Te he echado de menos –escuchó ella de repente en su cabeza. Miró al hombre, igual de sorprendido.

*'Puedo entenderte –pensó sin más.*

*'Gracias a los anillos. ¿De dónde los has sacado?*

*'Me los dio el Criptobot.*

*'Pensé que su misión era dividir a las razas.*

*'Sólo en el lenguaje –matizó ella mirando al cielo purpúreo y sintiendo, por primera vez en años, que no estaba sola en el Cosmos.*

*Lejos, en un sistema abandonado, el Criptobot se derretía hasta morir.*

### *Raelana Dsagan Regreso al Hogar*

*Dicen que el cielo es azul y las nubes son blancas, que al caminar sobre la hierba sientes cosquillas en los pies descalzos, que se puede respirar sin necesidad de llevar el tubo de oxígeno conectado. No consigo imaginarme un mundo así.*

*Mi mundo son las cuatro paredes de este cubículo del que no puedo salir, mis colores son el gris de las planchas metálicas y el negro de la oscuridad del espacio. A veces nos cruzamos con alguna estrella, pero no es lo corriente; mi sonido es el eco de mi propia voz que se repite en los otros habitáculos. No sé cómo serán ahora los demás, nunca los veo. Nunca me ven. Todas las voces son iguales.*

*A veces me pregunto si estoy solo, si es el programa informático el que me responde cuando hago preguntas.*

*Nunca he querido volver. Me gustaba aquel lugar árido y gris donde nací. Aquel cielo negro, siempre negro pues ninguna estrella alumbraba nuestro planeta. Abandonamos ese lugar de cielos azules y prados verdes hace ya millones de años. ¿Por qué tenemos que volver ahora? ¿Por qué tuvieron que elegirme a mí?*

*Me felicitaron. Me dijeron que tenía suerte mientras yo los miraba confuso. Todos querían participar en aquel proyecto, todos querían iniciar el viaje de regreso hacia lo que parecía un sueño. Una nueva vida. Yo no quería marcharme, con gusto hubiera cedido mi lugar al primero que me lo hubiera pedido, pero no pude. Teníamos que ser los más jóvenes, los más fuertes, los elegidos. Sólo nosotros podríamos resistir el viaje de vuelta a nuestro planeta de origen. ¿Lo hemos hecho? ¿Seguimos vivos? Ha pasado demasiado tiempo y empiezo a pensar que ese planeta azul del que nos hablaban nuestros antepasados nunca existió.*

*Cada día me cuesta más respirar el aire viciado que entra por el tubo de oxígeno, cada día mis movimientos son más lentos y pesados. A veces he pensado salir, mirar en los otros cubículos, ver cómo ha afectado a los demás el paso del tiempo. No puedo hacerlo. El habitáculo está sellado y solo se abrirá cuando lleguemos a nuestro destino, está calibrado para que no padezcamos los efectos de la velocidad, cada uno personalizado con nuestras constantes vitales, parecidas pero distintas, como deberían serlo nuestras voces.*

*Sólo una de las paredes es de cristal, acercarme a ella es como sentir el vacío infinito. Los primeros meses me acurrucaba en el fondo, apretado contra las paredes de metal, con miedo a acercarme, a caerme en la inmensidad del espacio. Después fui perdiendo el miedo, me fui acercando poco a poco, todo parecía pasar demasiado rápido. Alguien preguntó qué pasaría si llegábamos a nuestro planeta soñado y pasábamos de largo. Entonces todavía me hacían preguntas, ahora sólo las hago yo.*



*Siempre he creído que no nos pasaríamos de largo, el programa informático que gobierna la nave es perfecto y nos llevará al destino que le hemos marcado. Algunos sentían temor y angustia ante la idea de llegar, yo en cambio siempre he pensado que no encontraríamos nada, un simple agujero negro, muy profundo, en el lugar donde deberían estar nuestros sueños.*

*Nos escogieron, nos entrenaron, salimos en busca de una leyenda y envejecimos mientras el espacio se movía ante nuestros ojos. No parece que nos movamos nosotros, la suspensión del habitáculo es perfecta.*

*Hoy he preguntado cuánto tiempo llevamos viajando. Ninguno ha sabido contestarme. Las voces se han quedado calladas y he sentido más que nunca que estoy encerrado en una tumba. Era mejor oír las voces aunque no fueran reales. Siempre te queda la esperanza de que lo sean, siempre queda la esperanza de que realmente el planeta esté allí, al final del camino, y que el cielo sea azul. Aunque no sepamos cómo es realmente un cielo azul.*

*¿Y si llegamos y me da miedo salir? ¿Y si llego y el mundo ha cambiado y no es como lo recordaban nuestros antepasados, los que lo abandonaron? Quizás llegue a otro mundo gris y turbio como el que he dejado atrás, sólo así me sentiría realmente como en casa.*

*A veces tengo la sensación de que el motor de la nave se detiene, puede que solo lo esté imaginando porque no debo sentir nada, no puedo sentir cuando avanza la nave o cuando gira, parece que son los cometas los que se apartan de nosotros y los meteoritos los que nos evitan para no rozarnos. Sin embargo, a veces, miro por el cristal y veo que el espacio avanza más despacio, que la oscuridad es más profunda y más negra, que puedo ver parpadear una estrella a lo lejos, muy lejos.*

*—¿Es hacia allí donde nos dirigimos? —pregunto en voz alta, pero nadie me contesta.*

*Hace días que nadie responde, hace días que me cuesta respirar, hace días que siento que el tubo de oxígeno me está ahogando.*

*Quizás me estoy volviendo loco, era una de las cosas que decían que podía ocurrir en un viaje tan largo, estando todos aislados.*

*Un sonido inusual rompe el silencio, un golpe en la pared, luego otro. Golpes simétricos, todos en el mismo lugar, sobre la plancha metálica. Es la primera vez que oigo algo así. Me acerco y golpeo la pared en el mismo sitio. Los golpes se detienen, luego vuelven, rítmicos, los míos me parecen torpes. No sé qué está ocurriendo. El espacio sigue siendo negro, tan negro. Y nos movemos. O no, simplemente caemos, flotamos, todo parece estar igual.*

*Los golpes continúan sonando a través de la pared, pero ahora los siento más lejos, luego vuelven a acercarse. Me acerco al panel de control e intento hablar por el comunicador, los llamo, hago preguntas, pero nadie me responde. ¿Por qué no responden? Presiono los botones, miro la pantalla, las habituales luces no se encienden. El único temor en el que nunca había pensado, que nunca había podido imaginar ¿y si el programa informático está fallando?*

*No puede ser, el sistema es perfecto, no nos hubieran dejado partir si no fuera perfecto.*

*Los golpes se hacen más enérgicos, más insistentes, ahora golpean la pared con*

fuerza, como si quisieran derribarla. Es imposible, nada puede romper esta estructura, preparada para recibir impactos de meteoritos. Sólo podremos salir cuando lleguemos al planeta azul, cuando el programa informático nos abra la puerta. Miro los botones que presiono cuando necesito algo... las luces que ahora no se encienden.

El programa no funciona, puede que las puertas nunca se abran, aunque lleguemos. Los golpes en la pared son más y más fuertes. Si pudiera hablar con él, decirle que ese no es el camino, pero no puedo. No tenemos forma de comunicarnos mientras el sistema siga mudo.

Presiono las clavijas, sólo quiero obtener una respuesta, antes de que todo falle. Veo las coordenadas del lugar donde estamos, el camino que nos falta por recorrer, la velocidad que llevamos ahora, nos movemos lentamente. Estamos demasiado lejos. Tardaríamos dos vidas en llegar a la velocidad a la que viajamos ahora y sólo tenemos una. Sólo tenemos una vida y nos hemos pasado la mitad encerrados aquí dentro.

Presiono los números, uno tras otro, intentando cambiar las coordenadas. Si consigo que el programa crea que hemos llegado a nuestro destino nos abrirá las puertas. No lo hace, se rebela y emite un pitido ensordecedor que resuena en toda la nave; lo han oído, porque los golpes se detienen. El programa se resiste, borra mis cambios una y otra vez, volviendo a los números originales, a un sueño que no es el mío, ahora menos que nunca. Insisto, insisto, insisto.

Uno de los números cambia de pronto. Sólo es un número, el tercero. Veo cómo los números cambian y vuelven otra vez, hay alguien haciendo lo mismo que yo. Sigo intentándolo, una y otra vez, pero el programa informático vuelve siempre a los números originales. Excepto el tercero. Intento presionar más rápido, con más fuerza, con todo el ímpetu que puedo. Sé que alguien está haciendo lo mismo, que tal vez haya más compañeros intentándolo, el pitido los habrá alertado, habrán visto el baile de números en la pantalla.

No sé cuántas horas han pasado, cada vez me cuesta más respirar, el aire que sale a través del tubo se ha enrarecido, como si también fuera más despacio, como la nave. Hemos conseguido cambiar cuatro de los números, el resto sigue bailando ante mis ojos. Me duelen las manos, las siento agarrotadas y me vuelvo hacia el cristal. Me pego junto a él, intentando sentir el vértigo, el mareo de la inmensidad. ¿Y si dejara de respirar?

Dos nuevos números han cambiado en el panel cuando regreso, cada vez estamos más cerca. El programa informático se esfuerza por continuar en el camino, por seguir hasta el destino previsto, pero no vamos a llegar. Ya sabemos que no vamos a llegar, aunque ese planeta exista.

Ahora decidimos nosotros.

Las compuertas se abren por primera vez en muchos años y podemos vernos las caras, no recuerdo a ninguno de ellos, como si fuera la primera vez que los veo. No nos abrazamos, no sonreímos, simplemente nos miramos, extrañados, como desconocidos. Todos hemos envejecido, en sus rostros es donde me doy cuenta realmente del tiempo que ha pasado. Nos cuesta hablar, nos sentamos separados unos de otros pero no podemos dejar de mirarnos. No estoy solo.

Hemos encontrado un planeta con atmósfera respirable no muy lejos de nuestras

coordenadas, un planeta gris y árido donde nos costará respirar y nuestros cuerpos serán muy pesados, nos miramos unos a otros preguntándonos si es la mejor opción, si no deberíamos intentarlo y seguir adelante, al menos hasta encontrar un lugar mejor, un lugar más distinto del que habíamos abandonado. No nos decidimos a arriesgarnos. Me alegro.

Cuanto más nos acercamos, más me gusta la opción que hemos elegido. Sólo unos días más y podremos abandonar la nave, diremos adiós a aquellos estrechos cubículos, pisaré la tierra árida, gris, que arañará mis pies descalzos. No les contaré a mis nietos que existe un planeta, muy lejano, con el cielo azul.

Antonio Malpica Happy pocket Universe

Alcé la cabeza y contemplé la lejana luna de Febe entre nubes de metano venenoso y helio ardiente que me rodeaban sin misericordia. Entonces, mis débiles ojos humanos no aguantaron más y se apagaron para siempre bañados en lágrimas de amargura y desesperanza.

Iba a morir en un planeta olvidado de la mano de Dios que habíamos colonizado, nadie sabía bien para que, hacía décadas y que solo había servido desde aquel entonces para enterrar decenas de vidas rotas. Aquí en Saturno solo acababan los desechos, los sin patria que nada tenían que perder en la vieja Tierra. Personas que ya solo eran simples sombras de sí mismas.

Ciego y agotado me resigné. Palpé el desgarrado bolsillo superior de mi traje espacial. Era complicado con los gruesos guantes pero localicé el dispositivo de muerte asistida. La última esperanza que tenía de morir dignamente. El HPU (Happy Pocket Universe) era un diminuto mecanismo cuadrado. Apenas unos centímetros de lado a lado. Fino. Suave. Y en esos instantes era la vida en mi futura muerte. Lo extraje como pude. Temía que se cayera y perderlo para siempre en el suelo salvaje de ese planeta inmisericorde. No sé como pero lo conseguí. Lo inserté en la ranura del traje a la altura del cuello. Y allí, en mi cuello cada vez más rígido, él solo se introdujo por el socket habilitado para tal efecto. Suspiré aliviado. Y lo activé...

HPU ON

“Centro de Control Vital: HPU de ciudadano 1693477XX3 activado. Constantes vitales en límite grado 1. Tiempo estimado de vida: 3 minutos, 34 segundos”

Mika olía a miel dulce, a pan de jengibre y a juventud. Estábamos tumbados en la cama. Su espalda tapaba a la bebé pero la oía parlotear en ese lenguaje ininteligible que sonaba siempre a pura felicidad. Estaba cansada y no conseguíamos dormirla. Extendí la mano y le acaricié la piernecita. Pataléo y gorgojéo excitada. Su madre se giró y me miro en la semiprenumbra. Apenas la vislumbraba pero conocía tan a la perfección sus rasgos que la percibí como si estuviéramos a plena luz del día. Sonrió. Le rocé apenas la mejilla y ella me miro con dulzura. Se volvió a abrazar a la bebé y yo acaricié con infinita ternura su espalda. Era suave, perfecta, interminable. Se estremeció. El momento era mágico y sabía que jamás lo olvidaría...

“Centro de Control Vital: Constantes vitales en limite grado 3. Corazón fibrilando. Pulmones colapsados. Tiempo estimado de vida: 1 minutos, 15 segundos”

Mika me besaba entre la nieve. Paseábamos a la bebé. Llevaba el pelo largo suelto y

un gorro de lana color lila que la hacía más bella aún de lo que ya era habitualmente. Resplandecía. Reíamos mientras hablábamos de cosas intrascendentes. Pequeñas nubes de vapor salían de nuestras bocas y nos besábamos intentando atrapar cada uno la pequeña nube helada del otro. Más risas. Mika se paró de repente y alzó sus ojos verdes hacia mí. Su mirada había cambiado. No sabría explicar como pero ya no me miraba de la misma manera que hacía un instante. Me besó y sus besos tampoco eran los mismos. Cogí su cara entre mis manos estrechándosela y la besé con pasión. Cuando acabamos ese beso arrebatador ella sonrió, siempre sonreía al mirarme, y me dijo: “Me acabo de enamorar de ti”. El corazón se me desbocó. “Yo llevo enamorado de ti desde que nací pero aún no te había conseguido encontrar”, le respondí. “Eres mi vida”. Esa última frase le produjo una risa cristalina, de felicidad extrema, que no podía contener. “Mi vida, soy su vida” repetía una y otra vez. Gesticulaba. Sonreía, Me abrazaba. Y yo absorbía su rostro en silencio. “Eres mi vida, eres mi vida”. Y supe que quería morir algún día con ese rostro bello de la mujer que amaba, justo el de este instante maravilloso, mirándome fijamente hasta que llegara, por fin, mi último suspiro.

“Mi vida... soy tu vida... eres mi vida...”

“Centro de Control Vital: Constantes vitales en limite grado 5 final. Corazón parado. Tiempo estimado de vida: 0 minutos, 00 segundos, Muerte de ciudadano 1693477XX3 completada. Se procederá a la desconexión de la unidad de muerte asistida en 30 segundos. Cuenta atrás...”

“Y que las almas perdidas se encuentren en la eternidad, allá donde las estrellas confluyen, y vaguen juntas para siempre hasta el nuevo despertar de los mundos”

HPU OFF

For M.

Menut Josep Ferran de Baviera

Està polint les joies de la seva mare a la cuina i, de sobte, els fluorescents comencen a fer pampallugues. La Roser tanca els ulls i deixa caure el cap. No! Una altra vegada no!

La dona mira a un costat i a l'altre, sembla com si una pantalla de cinema s'hagi cargolat al seu voltant i estiguin passant una pel·lícula medieval: un nen de sis o set anys, vestit amb una casaca i uns pantalons rojos i amb una perruca rossa plena de rínxols parla amb tot de gent que, com ell, porten robes riques; diuen alguna cosa de què el nen ha sigut nomenat hereu de la Corona Castellana i de l'Aragonesa, príncep d'Astúries i de vés a a saber quantes més. El nen no entén el què li diuen i se li veu en els ulls blaus –que brillen absents–: ell no vol ser allà aguantant aquella història, ell voldria estar jugant!

Qui d'ells serà? es pregunta la Roser, i quins canvis implicarà?

El nen mira al seu voltant i deixa l'home de perruca blanca amb la paraula a la boca: aquesta mena de pantalla que envolta la Roser s'omple de bonys a mesura que el nen l'empeny com si la volgués travessar. Es sent un pop! molt fort i l'infant deixa de ser davant de l'home que li parlava, que s'ha quedat bocabadat, amb un dit enlaire com qui dóna una lliçó molt important.

De sobte, el nen és allà, davant de la Roser, i la pantalla i l'home del dit alçat han desaparegut. Oh, no! Ha tornat a passar!

El nen es mira la Roser amb els seus ulls tan grossos i somriu amb uns dents corcats. Diu alguna cosa, però ella no entén res. El nen torna a parlar, la Roser li respon "No sé què dius!". La criatura se la queda mirant, s'encongeix d'espatlles i es gira i marxa de l'habitació on la Roser polia les joies de la seva mare. La dona intenta aturar-lo, però quan l'agafa de l'espatlla, el nen es gira i li fa una mirada plena de còlera i crida alguna cosa amb tanta autoritat que la Roser s'acovardeix i el deixa anar.

Quan ja no veu el nen li passa el mateix que cada vegada que els fluorescents fan pampallugues i la pantalla de cinema l'envolta i la persona que n'ha sortit marxa de davant d'ella: d'alguna manera sap qui és i de quina època ve i en què ha canviat la història degut a que ha abandonat la seva època. Aquesta criatura és en Josep Ferran de Baviera, de la dinastia Wittelsbach, hereu de la corona de Castella, príncep d'Astúries, hereu de la Corona d'Aragó i de moltes corones més. I la seva desaparició ha canviat... no ha canviat res??? La Roser recorda el passat tal com ha sigut i el passat tal com hauria de ser si el nen no hagués deixat la seva època quan els fluorescents han fet pampallugues i ella s'ha vist envoltada per la pantalla de cinema. I tots dos són iguals.

Com pot ser que no hagi canviat res? Com pot ser que un monarca desaparegui i no canviï la història?

Corre a engegar l'ordinador i es connecta a la Viquipèdia: [http://ca.wikipedia.org/wiki/Josep\\_Ferran\\_de\\_Baviera](http://ca.wikipedia.org/wiki/Josep_Ferran_de_Baviera); el nen havia d'heretar totes aquestes corones quan morís Carles II, i així acontentar tot Europa ja que cap potència seria massa gran; però es mor amb set anys i no arriba a heretar res de res. Això porta a la Guerra de Successió: les potències europees no volen la unió dinàstica de França i Castella. Tot perquè un nen es mor massa aviat! I com que aquest nen desapareix més o menys quan havia de morir, el Felip francès hereta totes les corones i comença la guerra igualment.

I ara què faig? Faig com sempre que algú salta des de la seva època: el busco, el persegueixo i el faig tornar; o no, com que no ha canviat res el deixo quedar-se?

La Roser té un dubte molt gran i camina per l'habitació amunt i avall, es mossega el llavi de baix i, distreta, es cargola els cabells negres amb un dit. Es mira els fluorescents, que ara ja no fan pampallugues, i maleeix el dia que els va comprar: només li han portat problemes! A quanta gent ha hagut de retornar, ja? Com estaria el món si la reina Victòria i l'Isaac Newton i la reina Nefertiti i tants desconeguts, com estaria si no els hagués tornat a la seva època? Per què li passa això a ella? Com pot ser? Algun dia ha de portar aquells fluorescents a algun físic o a algun filòsof, a veure si descobreixen què passa a casa seva. Però mentrestant, què fa amb el nen? Si el torna a la seva època morirà d'aquí a molt poc temps; si no el torna no canviarà res i potser es salva. Per tant, potser millor que no el torni! Però, qui sóc jo per prendre una decisió com aquesta?

Tanca els ulls i torna a deixar caure el cap: anirà a buscar en Josep Ferran de Babiera i quan el tingui al davant decidirà què fer-ne. Intentarà parlar amb ell i llavors s'ho plantejarà.

Surt de casa i agafa l'ascensor. És un nen d'una altra època, per tant segur que ni tan sols sap què és... amb una mica de sort encara l'atraparé abans no acabi de baixar les escales! Però la portera li diu que sí, que l'infant ha passat tot just uns segons abans.

Mira cap a l'esquerra i cap a dreta: a on pot haver anat el nen? Costat de mar o de muntanya? Tanca els ulls i respira fort: tot sovint, d'alguna manera, instintivament, sap

on és la gent que ha travessat la pantalla quan els fluorescents fan pampallugues. A la dreta! Ha anat en direcció a muntanya!

Arrenca a córrer i arriba a temps de veure el nen plantat al mig del carrer mentre un cotxe se li llença a sobre; el conductor toca el clàxon i li fa llums, es sent com xerriquen les rodes i la pudor dels neumàtics cremant l'asfalt. El pobre Josep Ferran no sap on és, no sap què és un cotxe, no sap què està passant!

Un jove salta i empeny l'infant a l'altra vorera, però el cotxe li dóna un cop molt fort i llença el salvador deu metres en direcció a mar, pica de cap al terra i a la Roser li sembla sentir trencar-se-li el coll. De cop i volta recorda que aquest jove, l'Hug, no hauria d'haver mort: hauria d'haver conegut una noia, la Joana, s'haurien d'haver casat i haurien d'haver tingut tres fills molt macos, tres jovenets que haurien d'haver crescut i mort al llit ja vells. Però ara això no passaria, ja que el qui hauria d'haver sigut el pare dels dos fills havia mort quan no li tocava per culpa d'un Josep Ferran de Babiera que ha vingut al present quan els fluorescents li han fet pampallugues a la Roser.

Es queda parada: com pot ser? Com pot ser que recordi el què hauria d'haver sigut? Això només pot voler dir una cosa: el futur està decidit! La Roser es rebel·la contra la conclusió a la què acaba d'arribar: Mira, que el passat estigui escrit i fer-hi algun canvi ho alteri tot, mira, això ho puc acceptar; però el futur, no! No pot ser que jo no sigui el responsable dels meus actes, no pot ser que algú hagi decidit per mi! Què hi pinto jo si no puc dir què faig i què no faig?

Un somriure se li escapa als llavis: És clar! Tinc la solució al davant! Es mira el nen. En Josep Ferran és la clau per impedir el determinisme: és un nen fora de la seva època de qui la simple presència ha fet que el què hauria de ser no sigui; això vol dir que encara que hagi de fer trampes, el futur es pot canviar! I decideix que deixarà de perseguir el nen i no el tornarà a la seva època. Total, la història no ha canviat i així podrà viure més enllà del què li tocava i així la gent –si més no aquells amb qui es trobi– podrà decidir per si mateixa quin rumb ha de seguir la seva vida. I serà com el famós efecte papallona: els tres nens no naixeran i la dona tampoc coneixerà el qui havia de ser el seu marit i per tant viurà una vida diferent a la que li tocava i coneixerà algú altre i s'hi casarà i per tant no viurà la vida que havia de viure!

Torna al seu bloc de pisos amb un somriure als llavis, puja els graons de dos en dos i se'n torna a polir les joies de la seva mare. I els fluorescents tornen a fer pampallugues.

Oh no! Dues vegades el mateix dia no! Deixa el drap a sobre de la taula i estreny les joies amb força.

La pantalla de cinema la torna a envoltar; aquesta vegada s'hi veu ella mateixa rentant les joies de la seva mare. I de cop i volta veu aparèixer el nen al costat del seu altre jo en el passat, i es veu a si mateixa dir-li al nen que no entén absolutament res del què diu. I de cop i volta el nen torna a abonyegar la pantalla i salta del seu passat al seu present; el torna a tenir allà, al costat! El record de l'Hug salvant l'infant del cotxe se li esborra de la memòria: es casarà i tindrà els tres fills.

On és en Josep? Mira al voltant, però torna a estar sola; i se n'adona que ara és ella qui és a la pantalla que envolta una Roser del futur; i el Príncep d'Astúries, hereu de la Corona d'Aragó, hereu de la Corona de Castella i de tantes corones més, ha saltat cap a aquella Roser. Però encara n'hi ha més: la Roser del pervenir, que no ha envellit gens ni mica, també és en una pantalla i l'infant ha saltat a una Roser que és més enllà, i torna

a saltar; salta una vegada més i torna a saltar... La Roser empal·lideix: No! El futur s'ha protegit i el temps, sense en Josep Ferran de Babiera, seguirà el seu curs previst per sempre més!

José Antonio S. Sánchez Suicido 6.0

13 de marzo, 2056

Lessy M. y Kp17 eran incapaces de resetear su entusiasmo. Los optimizados procesadores de identidad que habían adquirido en Cyber-Systems.net apenas una hora atrás acababan de perder la virginidad.

Lessy M. y Kp17 se sabían libres al fin, a un paso de la fama, en la cresta de la civilización, y eran absolutamente conscientes de que nada en este mundo podría separarles. Tampoco la muerte. Sabían que cada latido, cada beso, cada jodido byte de existencia, quedarían minuciosamente registrados en el disco duro de sus memorias. Por duplicado. Hasta el final. Ni un píxel de menos al servicio de la potencial audiencia millonaria.

Comenzarían con algo espontáneo.

Probablemente con un primer plano de sus manos entrelazadas, con el objetivo de poner en situación al espectador y dar pie a un zoom de los códigos de barras tatuados en sus muñecas, con el detalle de los caracteres numéricos idénticos. La siguiente toma pretendía ser un poco más complicada. Consistiría en una amplia perspectiva del cielo crepuscular, que dejase constancia, mediante un barrido circular, del movimiento parsimonioso de las nubes y de la presencia invisible del viento, para enlazar así un plano fijo del Sol rojo y ácido que moría lentamente en Occidente, desafiando el sentido común en cada nuevo nivel de interpretación. Tenían programado finalizarían su particular blockbuster film con un primerísimo plano de los ojos de cada uno – resaltando los verdes magenta y rojos bermellones que, respectivamente, les caracterizaban– como preámbulo a un fundido en negro que daría paso a un plano cenital, seguido por un plano secuencia, de los seiscientos setenta y ocho metros en caída libre que separaban el mirador de la torre Hallow del asfalto de la Encrucijada 66, mientras, y ésa era la consecuencia necesaria, sus cuerpos de sangre y software adolescentes caían directos al vacío, abrazados por la inercia de la gravedad.

Un rápido clip –de camino a la repisa de cristal que remataba el mirador de la torre Hallow– les había proporcionado datos exactos.

La torre Hallow tenía doscientas dieciséis plantas. 3,141592 metros de altura por planta certificados ante notario y los representantes del S.D.D.P.I. el día de la inauguración. Vox Lighton, el arquitecto-filósofo-matemático fundador del movimiento  $\Pi$  Negativo, había diseñado el coloso de acero con el propósito de darle una nueva imagen a Viejo Edén. Según el contenido de su discurso de apertura,  $\Pi$  representaba la irracionalidad en las matemáticas, la imposibilidad de una certeza absoluta, ya que nadie conocería jamás su valor auténtico por la sencilla razón de que el número de decimales a calcular no tenía fin. Sin bien tales afirmaciones parecían chocantes en un principio, éstas ponían de manifiesto que  $\Pi$  estaba realmente vivo en opinión de Vox Lighton, al menos tanto como lo estaban las ingenierías genéticas e informáticas en el devenir de las metrópolis modernas.  $\Pi$  era, por ende, la nueva medida del hombre, la

medida de la humanidad. De ahí que la torre Hallow albergase doscientas dieciséis plantas. Una por cada trillón de decimales que tan ilustre número tenía en la actualidad. Las últimas palabras del reputado arquitecto-filósofo-matemático habían sido: “Algún día la torre Hallow tocará el cielo y la megalópolis del futuro que en ese momento se extiende a sus pies se hará un hueco en la divinidad.”

Interesante.

Aunque no lo suficiente. Para Lessy M. y Kp17 la información relevante se hallaba precisamente en la dirección contraria.

La Encrucijada 66: los cimientos de la torre Hallow, donde convergían las arterias neurálgicas del Distrito Mode.

Cien mil almas nocturnas cada medianoche. Siete centros comerciales con un promedio de ciento ochenta mil clientes diarios. Doce canales de televisión. Veintiocho agencias de publicidad. Catorce pasarelas de alta costura. Treinta y siete clínicas de neo-estética. Cuarenta y cuatro centros de implantación de prótesis 2.0. Y más de trescientos establecimientos especializados en ofertar diversión a la carta entre pubs, discotecas, locales de rave, bancos-casino de última generación, prostíbulos XXY, teatros sado y clubes de strip-tease mixtos. Nadie que fuese, o pretendiese ser, alguien en Viejo Edén negaría haber llevado a cabo buena parte de sus fantasías al dictado de las cuatro esquinas de la Encrucijada 66. ¡Gley Holmes tenía su estatua allí! ¡Zsa J2 tenía uno de sus locales allí! ¡Los Drakers habían celebrado su último concierto allí! ¡Watcho, el mítico Watcho de los Órdenes 091, había sentenciado en su testamento que quería ser enterrado allí! Formar parte de la leyenda de la Encrucijada 66 era, en consecuencia, lo más parecido a pertenecer a la Élite, ser uno de los que importaban, un icono que creaba tendencia. ¡Lo más parecido a rozar la inmortalidad!

Lessy M. y Kp17 se sonrieron.

Amazing, decían sus miradas envueltas en lentillas digitales. Todo y nada, a sólo un paso, eternamente indivisibles. ¿Por qué no hacerlo? ¿Por qué no reciclar la aritmética sinrazón de un arquitecto trasnochado y proporcionarle un auténtico sentido a aquel edificio esculpido en complejos cálculos matemáticos? ¿Por qué no ser consecuentes con un cielo que siempre se resistiría a ser acariciado y regalarle al mundo un recuerdo que jamás pudiese ser olvidado? Antes de centrar la mirada y comenzar a grabar por última vez, Lessy M. y Kp17 tentaron un guiño hacia el vacío. Cuando el abismo les devolvió la mirada no pudieron evitar sonreírse de nuevo. Eran concededores –por supuesto lo eran– de que esa breve contracción muscular en el abdomen y ese leve arqueado de labios sostenido en el tiempo significaban que, ante la cámara, veinte kilocalorías eran pasto del olvido.

María Eijo López Subciudad

La aguda voz de la megafonía se escuchó en toda la estación.

–Cómo odio que algunos de los avisos los den solo en nuevo-esperanto. Como si lo hablásemos, o algo –resopló un joven.

–¡Yo lo entendí, hermanito! Bueno, todo no. ¡Pero dijo algo de los trenes!

–Tan útil como siempre, Dinna...

Se mezclaron con el gentío que aguardaba para subirse a los tranvías. La estación



nunca dormía, el bullicio mantenía en pie sus paredes. Las voces tampoco descansaban. Conversaciones acerca de la compra del día, de la escasez de trabajo, del gobierno, de las buenas noticias... se mezclaban formando una melodía a la que todos los habitantes de los suburbios estaban más que acostumbrados. La mezcla de sonidos solo se veía eclipsada por los anuncios de los altavoces y por los enormes holopaneles de publicidad. Nadie les hacía verdadero caso. Los productos que intentaban vender no estaban al alcance de nadie de la subciudad.

Con una mano en el bolsillo y otra agarrada a la de su hermana pequeña, Janik permanecía con la vista distraída a la espera de la llegada de su tren. Vestía unos sencillos vaqueros oscuros y una sudadera marrón. No tenía mucho dinero disponible para dedicar a la moda, y el poco que obtenía lo gastaba en la pequeña Dinna, que sí llevaba una falda blanca con unas finas y largas cadenas plateadas que se dejaban arrastrar por la fuerza de la gravedad, tintineando y moviéndose con gracilidad ante sus pasos. Incluso combinándola con una sencilla camiseta color amarillo pálido, su estilo recordaba ligeramente al de la Urbe. Janik se había propuesto desde el nacimiento de la niña que haría todo lo posible por conseguir su ascenso a la ciudad. Ella se lo merecía.

—¿Qué tal van las clases de idiomas? —le preguntó. Dinna esbozó una amplia sonrisa.

—¡Bone! Eso significa “bien”. Creo que pronto conseguiré entender los anuncios —respondió.

—Eso sería estupendo —dijo Janik revolviéndole el pelo.

Mientras ambos reían, el tren se aproximó a la vía. No era más que uno de los viejos vehículos que habían desechado en la Urbe, pero a Janik siempre le había impresionado el avance de la tecnología actual. El tren cruzaba todo el entramado de túneles de la subciudad sin rozar los raíles de emergencia a una velocidad que en su infancia jamás hubiese soñado. Agarró a su hermana para evitar los empujones del tránsito de gente, y esperó a que pasaran todos para entrar. Se acomodó con Dinna en una esquina al lado de la puerta. El tren iba más vacío de lo habitual, pero en las últimas semanas eran muchas las familias que habían perdido su trabajo y que ya no tenían la necesidad de utilizar el transporte público. Él mismo apenas lo usaría si no tuviera que recoger a su hermana de la escuela.

Puso a prueba sus reflejos abriendo la casi cerrada puerta para dejar pasar a una chica que parecía haberse cruzado la estación entera corriendo para llegar a tiempo. La sirena de salida sonó con fuerza mientras ella traspasaba el umbral, con gotas de sudor perlado su frente y la respiración entrecortada. Se apoyó en la pared, intentando recobrar el aliento.

—Gra... gracias —le dijo a Janik—. No podía perderlo. El siguiente es dentro de una hora.

El chico esbozó una sonrisa. No la conocía, pero siempre cogían el mismo tren. No era la primera vez que la veía entrar apurada. Siempre le había parecido interesante, pero nunca había tenido la oportunidad de mantener una conversación con ella sin parecer demasiado lanzado. Decidió aferrarse a esta oportunidad como fuera.

—Lamento decirte que cobro caros los favores —Janik exhibió su mirada más encantadora—. Por lo menos, vas a tener que decirme tu nombre.

Notó un codazo en las costillas, y vio como su hermana pequeña fingía fruncir el ceño mientras aguantaba la risa. No era la primera vez que veía a su hermano flirtear

descaradamente con cualquier chica guapa que se le pusiera a tiro.

—Mi nombre es Megan, señorito caradura —respondió la chica, mientras sacaba una goma del pelo de su bolso para anudarse el cabello largo y negro en una coleta. Acto seguido alzó la mirada, clavando sus ojos verdes en Janik mientras sonreía, divertida.

—Te he visto más veces. Eres habitual de este tren, ¿verdad?

El chico asintió con la cabeza, extendiendo la mano.

—Mi nombre es Janik, y esta es mi hermana Dinna —el apretón de manos fue firme.

—Tengo una hija de tu edad —dijo Megan dirigiéndose a la pequeña—. Ahora mismo me está esperando en casa.

—Lo dices como si eso fuera algo malo —comentó Janik.

—No la veo todo lo que quisiera. Por eso no puedo permitirme perder el tren — Observando su mirada perdida a través del reflejo de la ventana, uno podía darse cuenta de que las sonrisas no duraban mucho tiempo en la subciudad.

—¿En qué parada te bajas?

—Dentro de dos. O quizá en la siguiente, creo que el tren se ha saltado un apeadero.

Janik miró por la ventana enarcando una ceja. La zona por la que transitaban en esos momentos no le sonaba en absoluto. El paisaje de los suburbios corría veloz al paso del tren, pero él conocía el camino a la perfección. Se llevó las manos a la cabeza.

—Dinna, creo que nos hemos confundido de tren —dijo mientras buscaba un botón para solicitar parada. No encontró ninguno, lo que aumentó su desconcierto. Megan se mordió el labio, confusa, mientras se acercaba a una señora sentada en uno de los asientos laterales. Esta asintió primero enérgicamente con la cabeza, mirando después a su vez por la ventana para comprobar que el tren se había desviado de su ruta.

—El tren es el correcto —dijo la chica al volver, seria—. Lo que no sé es a dónde nos está llevando.

—¡Qué emocionante! —aplaudió Dinna, que parecía ser la única que estaba disfrutando la situación. Sus mejillas sonrosadas exhibían sendos hoyuelos provocados por la amplia sonrisa de la niña.

Janik la cogió de la mano, mirando de nuevo a su alrededor. Una pequeña melodía dio paso a la megafonía. El chico agitó a su hermana para instarla a prestar atención. Incluso dentro de los trenes, los mensajes estaban en nuevo-esperanto, así que la pequeña era la única forma de saber por qué el tren se había desviado de su ruta. El semblante de Dinna se volvió serio mientras se forzaba a entenderlo todo, entornando la mirada.

—Janik... es el mismo mensaje que dieron antes en la estación. Ahora lo he entendido mejor. Dice algo de no subir al tren, y de saber hablar nuevo-esperanto.

El chico tragó saliva, deseando que su hermana estuviese equivocada. No era ajeno a los rumores que corrían por la subciudad. Leyendas urbanas que hablaban de trenes fantasma llenos de gente que dejaban los suburbios para no ser vistos nunca más. Líneas cortadas durante horas a la espera de que los túneles se abrieran al tránsito. Familiares que deberían haber vuelto a casa y de los que nunca se había vuelto a oír hablar.

Megan asimiló la información de la misma forma que él. Con presteza, sin detenerse ni un segundo, avanzó por el vagón en busca de una manera de abrir la puerta. Parecían haber eliminado toda la tecnología de parada: desde los botones de emergencia hasta el rudimentario martillo para romper el cristal de las ventanas. El murmullo comenzó a

crecer entre el resto de la gente mientras la certeza volaba de boca en boca. El tren cogía cada vez más velocidad, alejándose de la subciudad, dirigiéndose a los suburbios inhabitables.

Un hombre de mediana edad intentó derribar la puerta con el peso de su propio cuerpo, sin éxito: la estructura metálica era demasiado sólida. A los pocos minutos eran varios los que le prestaban ayuda. Megan había iniciado una suerte de colecta, consiguiendo que todo el mundo vaciara sus bolsos o mochilas en busca de algún objeto contundente que les ayudara a escapar. Intentando mantener la calma examinaron el contenido, sin éxito. El montón crecía poco a poco con libros, cuadernos y monederos, pero nada útil para la situación. Atisbos de histeria comenzaban a dejarse ver de algún modo como una paranoia colectiva en la cual todos estaban seguros de lo que estaba pasando a pesar de no tener confirmación de los hechos. La población de la subciudad alcanzaba límites preocupantes por exceso, eso era una realidad. Algunos individuos de la misma eran aprovechables y conseguían ascender a la Urbe, pero el requisito básico e imprescindible era conocer el idioma de los ricos.

Observó a su alrededor. El tren ya había alcanzado una velocidad desorbitada. El pánico había dejado ya su honda impronta en la actitud de la gente. Algunos golpeaban con la fuerza de sus puños los cristales, sin obtener respuesta de los mismos. Otros apenas podían contenerse y dejaban ver su frustración a través de gritos. Una pareja en el fondo del vagón se acariciaba el rostro susurrándose palabras de amor. Pudo ver a Megan acurrucada en una esquina, con una foto en la mano y las lágrimas bañando su rostro. Lamentaba no haberse atrevido a hablar con ella antes.

«Nos están purgando, maldita sea», pensó Janik con rabia mientras abrazaba con fuerza a la pequeña Dinna, que sollozaba apretando la cara contra su pecho. Para ella podía haber habido esperanza, si no se hubieran subido al maldito tren.

### Alberto de Olano El Último Neandertal Ibérico

Hace unos cinco años durante una visita en Marrakech, mientras tomaba un té en el Café Argana viendo al atardecer como se estaban formando los grupos alrededor de los contadores de cuentos y encantadores de serpientes en esa magnética plaza 'Jemaa el Fna', se acercó a mi mesa uno de aquellos viejos bereberes que intentan vender al turista cualquier producto fantástico por sus propiedades curativas, rejuvenecedoras, y revigorizantes... Sin embargo, para mi sorpresa, lo que me mostró con gran sigilo, fueron unos rollos de pergamino muy antiguo escrito en caracteres que entonces eran desconocidos para mí. Mi primera idea fue la de no mostrar ningún interés en su ofrecimiento, pues es muy común que se intente engañar a los turistas con falsas antigüedades, pero esto cambió cuando vi algo en uno de los pergaminos que me sorprendió fuertemente. Se trataba de unos dibujos que parecían representar unas tablas con escritura parecida al cuneiforme acadio que debido a mi profesión como arqueólogo me era familiar y, que aunque no era la misma, parecía auténtica. Lo que hizo disparar mi interés fue la improbabilidad de que unos falsificadores callejeros tuvieran conocimiento de aquella escritura tan antigua, y compré aquellos rollos al viejo por lo que primero me pidió, excitado por la curiosidad y aún dudando de su autenticidad.

Lo que descubrí en ellos me ha tenido intensamente ocupado desde entonces, pues

pronto comprobé que los caracteres en las tablas dibujadas eran una variante de la escritura cuneiforme acadia que se propagó hacia el occidente del norte africano antes de la aparición de los jeroglíficos egipcios.

La parte no dibujada de los pergaminos, la que está escrita, lo está hecha en escritura Tifinagh, mucho más moderna que la cuneiforme y que se utilizó en el norte de África hasta hace unos 2000 años.

Tras consultar con colegas expertos en esas lenguas berbero-libicas aprendí a interpretar lo que estaba escrito en los pergaminos. El texto empezaba explicando que lo que en él se relata es la traducción, basada en la transmisión oral de lo que los antepasados del escribano habían documentado en las tablillas que se encontraron en una cueva sagrada, en algún lugar de la costa norafricana occidental.

Lo que expongo a continuación es ese relato que nos ofrece una visión de la vida en el sur de Europa, y concretamente en Iberia, en una época de transición hace ya más de 20.000 años. El modo de expresión original del escrito es muy arcaico por lo que me he permitido actualizar su estilo para facilitar la comprensión de los lectores contemporáneos.

Yo, primer escribano del gran país de Tamazgha, que se extiende al sur del Gran Rio Salado (1) y del Gran Mar (2) hasta que se pierde la capacidad de retorno, quiero dejar escrito lo que mis antepasados grabaron y fueron cantando de una generación a la siguiente hasta llegar a mi conocimiento en mis primeros años de vida y que, como otros antes, fui encargado de memorizarlo pues vemos con preocupación cómo se están perdiendo las sagradas costumbres de guardar el saber de quienes eran nuestros antepasados y de cuáles son nuestras tierras y porqué.

“Mi llegada al mundo allí en el país del frío (3) fue muy dolorosa pues me contaron que a las pocas lunas de salir del vientre de la que me trajo al mundo, una hiena me atrapó del pie izquierdo mientras dormía con mis hermanos y me arrastró fuera del grupo con intención de alimentar a sus hijos.

Para cuando los míos pudieron salvarme librándome de los dientes de la hiena, mi tierno pié izquierdo ya estaba en su estómago (de esto aprendí la distinta suerte de estar entre los que comen o la de estar entre los que son comidos!).

Mis antepasados eran del clan del Mar donde Sol muere (4) y vivieron muchas generaciones cerca de este mar al pie de las Montañas entre Mares (5) que se extienden como gran pared de rocas desde el Mar donde Sol muere hasta el Mar donde Sol renace (2) en una gran distancia de al menos media luna de marcha para un cazador con fuertes piernas.

Desde que la memoria existe, en estas grandes praderas solo cazaban nuestros clanes: los Claros, hasta que empezaron a llegar los Oscuros, que al principio eran pocos y amistosos pero al pasar el tiempo fueron siendo muchos y progresivamente exigentes y agresivos.

Donde yo vine al mundo se encuentra varias lunas de marcha de allí hacia donde Sol es más alto porque mis padres tuvieron que abandonar aquellas tierras para evitar el acoso de los Oscuros. Yo conocí demasiado bien las maldades de los Oscuros pues me llevaron a vivir con ellos hasta que pude escapar.

Ocurrió en tiempo de mis padres que el frío se hacía más fuerte cada invierno y esto enviaba los rebaños hacia donde Sol da más calor y tras ellos los Oscuros entraron en

las zonas que siempre habían sido de mis antepasados no conformándose con quitarles la caza sino que también empezaron a atacar, a matarnos y a tomarnos como esclavos para obligarnos a cazar para ellos e incluso a ser cebo para su caza.

En el tiempo de mis padres, los Claros tuvimos que marchar nuevamente hacia donde Sol es más alto para poder vivir sin luchas, pero los Oscuros eran tantos que siempre había hostigamientos y acoso cercano. Por lo que la migración continuó hasta llegar al gran Gran Río Salado, y más allá no se podía seguir pues la distancia a la otra orilla era tanta que nadie pensaba siquiera en la posibilidad de cruzarlo.

Como ya he dicho, desde el principio de mi vida me faltaba el pie izquierdo y esto me incapacitaba para las largas marchas de caza con los hermanos mayores, y así fue que mi iniciación en el clan fue más de mujer que de hombre.

Hasta que se manifestaron mis habilidades fui ignorado por los líderes del clan, y cuando me miraban yo intuía lo que sentían en su interior. Pensaban que quizás hubiera sido mejor dejar que la hiena terminara conmigo y ahorrarse un estomago como el mío, pues consumía más que contribuía.

Por ello, y sobre todo por mi discapacidad, desarrollé habilidades distintas de los otros. Yo lo oía todo a gran distancia, y también sabía cómo eran los pensamientos de los otros sin que los hablaran, aunque en realidad lo que yo hacía es oír lo que otros no oyen: sonidos que se hacen al respirar que muestran la verdadera intención del que respira, y sobre todo si dice la verdad.

También imitaba como nadie a los animales y corría reptando como muchos de ellos con manos y mi único pie, lo que hacía reír a mis hermanos, pero también fueron descubriendo la gran fuerza que desarrollé en mis brazos cuando cortaba la risas con alguna imparable bofetada que era capaz de dar antes de que el receptor pudiera defenderse.

Los mejores momentos de aquel periodo eran cuando los mayores marchaban por varios días en busca de carne. En nuestro pequeño territorio quedábamos guardando la propiedad del espacio las mujeres, unos pocos ancianos, los niños más pequeños, y yo. Yo cuidaba de todos ellos y era capaz de tener a raya a los depredadores que nos rodeaban y a veces acosaban cuando percibían la ausencia de los más fuertes.

Durante esas largas jornadas de permanencia en nuestro nicho fui aprendiendo de la convivencia con las mujeres, y especialmente de las que habían vivido más inviernos, los trabajos más útiles para hacer la vida más agradable: hacer y mantener el fuego, preparación de pieles para los vestidos y los nidos para dormir, a despiojar y curar, y a cantar como las aves cuando termina el invierno.

Donde mejor se notaba mi arte era en la elaboración de lascas para cortar carne y preparar las pieles. Las mías eran las más afiladas y eficaces y lo conseguí con la práctica y la motivación que desarrollé para ser útil, como defensa ante la inseguridad de mi situación en el clan. También aprendí de los mayores a distinguir entre las diversas calidades de las piedras, y a encontrar las que más interesaban solo con mirar las rocas en la lejanía.

Estas habilidades fueron creciendo en los años siguientes junto con otra nueva: la de percibir las intenciones de los que me rodeaban aun sin verlos, y mi rol en el grupo empezó a ser mejor considerado por los líderes más exigentes que en ocasiones se disputaban mis servicios de fabricación de lascas para la caza.

Mi doble arte me permitía darles la mejor satisfacción pues adivinaba lo que cada uno de ellos más apreciaba, sin que apenas me lo tuvieran que describir, y sorprendiéndoles con una variedad de materiales que antes no habían conocido. También sabía curar mejor que los que más, solo con desearlo y tocar con mis manos, muchas dolencias de músculos y huesos se aliviaban. Con estas dotes que destacaban mejoró mi papel en el grupo y tras unos pocos inviernos ya era reconocido y respetado como miembro productivo.

Durante mis prácticas con las diversas piedras, descubrí algo que nadie me había enseñado antes: al golpear las Piedras de Hielo' (6) durante un instante se enciende una luz distinta de la del fuego en su interior, algo como un pequeño relámpago, y si se golpeaban muchas a la vez se conseguía tener dentro de la cueva luces como las estrellas de la noche.

Los Mayores decretaron que aquello era sagrado y en adelante yo fuera nombrado "El que hace la Luz". Y en nuestras fiestas para conectar con las fuerzas que nos ven y no vemos ya siempre había una sesión que yo había ideado con un grupo elegido entre mis hermanos que, cantando y chocando las Piedras de Hielo donde la cueva era más oscura, creábamos música acompañada de luz, lo que aumentaba la alegría de todos en las fiestas para soñar despiertos. Y así se descubrió lo más importante para nuestro grupo y que confirmaba mis cualidades especiales: que los enfermos se curaban durante aquellas fiestas de luces y cantos, y se comprobó que tras estas sesiones las heridas sanaban y cicatrizaban más rápido y mejor.

No pasó mucho tiempo sin que mi fama de "Mago que cura más" trascendiera nuestro clan y llegara a los otros clanes, y para mi desgracia la fama de este poder se extendió más de lo que podíamos desear. Así, un mal día una embajada de Oscuros se acercó amenazadoramente a nuestro territorio para exigir que les acompañara a cambio de pieles y lascas que entregaron a los mayores de mi clan. Y así fue como me vendieron y fui alejado de los míos contra mi voluntad.

Los Oscuros no son como nosotros, hablan con muy distinta lengua moviendo mucho las manos. Son débiles pero numerosos y se organizan mejor para tener una vida más fácil que nosotros los Claros. Me llevaron con ellos para que les enseñe a hacer esta Luz sin fuego y curar los males con la rapidez que les habían dicho que yo lograba, pero como esto era sagrado y prohibido para ellos, yo aguanté todo cuanto pude sin enseñarles lo que bien sabía haciendo creer que no les entendía y que me faltaba el juicio además del pie.

Esta experiencia con los Oscuros duró muchas lunas y pude aprender, puesto que al pensar que yo era un idiota sin remedio hablaban abiertamente ante mí, de todas sus cosas y sobre todo de sus intenciones de echarnos de nuestros territorios, y de sus planes para exterminarnos. También pude comprobar que se estaban agrupando varios clanes y que su número desbordante nos haría imposible a los Claros frenarlos o evitar que siguieran empujándonos hacia donde Sol es más alto.

Cada día que pasaba yo recibía peor trato, apenas me daban comida y me pegaban porque era un idiota sin conocimientos sobre las piedras de luz ni veían por ningún lado mis artes de curación. Yo seguía exagerando mi invalidez para que me consideraran inútil para sus planes y en eso me ayudaba el pasar el tiempo imitando a los animales para fortalecer mis brazos sin levantar sospechas, y así creían que mi idiotez se explicaba

en que yo tenía algún hechizo producido por algún animal extraño.

Para reírse de mí me fabricaron un traje con grandes plumas de buitres entrelazadas y me hacían correr ladera abajo para que intentara volar cuando mi único pie ya no podía aguantar la velocidad de bajada en el precipicio. Esto les daba mucha risa, sobre todo en mis sangrantes aterrizajes, y hacían apuestas sobre cuanto distancia podría alcanzar planeando, o si sobreviviría a aquellos vuelos en el gran precipicio.

Pasaron así más de dos inviernos y empezaron los primeros ataques directos a mis hermanos los Claros. Yo veía los botines que traían junto con los restos de sus víctimas que exhibían en las fiestas de celebración de sus sangrientas victorias. También me obligaron a comer de ello, pero lo vomitaba siempre que podía.

Habían olvidado su interés por mis facultades de mago de la luz y conociendo la fortaleza de mis brazos me obligaban durante días a cavar grandes agujeros de los que no tardé en comprender la utilidad, tras pensar que era un castigo más que me aplicaban para divertirse: eran trampas para cazar a mis hermanos y matarlos o usarlos para trabajar según el interés del momento.

Llegó un día en que no pude más. La vista de aquellas matanzas y crueldades con mis hermanos se me hizo imposible de soportar y ya no podía seguir disimulando mi idiotez. Decidí escapar y abrir los ojos de los míos para librarnos del exterminio masivo que para mí era evidente se nos avecinaba.

Así fue que la siguiente vez que me llevaron a excavar una gran fosa, me procuré unas cañas y me enterré en un rincón de la fosa para desaparecer de la vista y olfato de mis guardianes. Respiraba a través de las cañas y así estuve durante dos días sin comer ni beber hasta que se disipó mi olor del entorno y dejaron de buscarme en aquella zona.

Después anduve durante las noches enterrándome durante el día hasta que reencontré los de mi clan y les conté todo lo que había aprendido sobre el gran peligro que nos acechaba.

Durante estos días de mucho peligro para mi vida y en el trance que me permitió soportar el tiempo que pasaba inmóvil en mi tumba, tuve sueños muy especiales que me mostraban que había un territorio muy lejos hacia donde Sol es más alto, al otro lado del Gran Río Salado, donde gentes como los nuestros vivían en paz y sin Oscuros, y esto me ayudó a ser más insistente con los jefes de mis clanes.

Les convencí para ir todos hasta el Gran Río Salado y una vez allí hacer nuestro el territorio en la Montaña más Alta (7) y organizar la resistencia. Y tras una marcha con grandes dificultades así lo hicimos.

Pero los Oscuros no se contentaron con el territorio que les habíamos dejado. Unas cuantas lunas después de nuestro asentamiento los Oscuros nos rodearon y solo nos salvaba la altura en la que nos podíamos defender con ventaja. Pero ellos ponían fuego en todos los bosques del territorio y ahuyentaban los animales que nos servían de alimento.

En nuestras reuniones de sabios para encontrar alguna solución pronto concluimos que solo teníamos dos escapatorias: o atravesar el Gran Río con balsas de troncos que algún sabio recordaba ya usaban los antepasados o, como yo propuse, seguir el ejemplo de las cigüeñas que pasan al otro lado cada año antes de terminar los calores siguiendo vientos ascendentes, y aprender de ellas a subir en altura haciendo círculos de subida.

Para ello volví a fabricar el traje de plumas de cigüeña más grande que pude,

atándolas con intestinos de cabra y, junto con un grupo de los más jóvenes, comencé a practicar el tomar vuelo en las laderas de la montaña. Al principio era frustrante pues solo conseguíamos aguantar unos pocos aleteos y planear en caída hasta el agua. Pero con las pruebas mejoramos la forma y la flexibilidad de las alas y con el entrenamiento el número de aleteos antes de caer aumentaba.

No era fácil remontar en altura como las cigüeñas, y solo se conseguía con mucha practica y cuando el viento era más fuerte. Este primer traje de plumas continuó mejorando y luego lo tomamos como modelo que copiamos al hacer los trajes de plumas para todos los que optamos por la vía del cielo.

Cuando el acoso de los Oscuros era ya insoportable pues nuestros verdugos estaban ya sitiando las cercanías de nuestra Gran Cueva de la montaña, nos separamos en dos grupos, los de las balsas bajaron al mar durante la noche y los de las plumas subimos a la cima de la montaña.

Al amanecer de aquel último día, los más jóvenes estábamos preparando nuestros amarres en los trajes de plumas, calentando los músculos de nuestros brazos y piernas y también quitando el miedo al abismo que teníamos delante. Cuando Sol llegó a lo más alto, empezaron a llegar las cigüeñas en grandes grupos que iniciaban, según se iba calentando la roca, amplios círculos ascendentes y después se las veía planear hacia la otra lejana orilla en filas como hormigas que saben bien donde van.

Con este ejemplo y ya con mucho viento ascendente en aquel caluroso día, invité a los que me acompañaban a olvidar el miedo al fracaso y dedicar todas las fuerzas para imitar las cigüeñas y subir al máximo aprovechando aquel aire caliente que facilitaba la subida, y dando un gran grito de ánimo me lancé el primero ladera abajo hasta que mi único pie no podía ya seguir la caída y comencé a batir mis grandes alas, poco antes de llegar a las rocas del fondo del precipicio, saliendo del agua.

Empecé a notar que al mover las alas como tantas veces había imitado en las aves, ascendía y me alejaba de las rocas que me esperaban para destruirme. La sensación de ascenso me reconfortaba y me dio la lucidez para iniciar los círculos que me mantenían en la burbuja de aire ascendente. El esfuerzo necesario y la excitación del momento me impidieron volver a mirar atrás para saber cómo les iba a mis compañeros y a todo esto, tras subir en círculos durante muchas vueltas, me sorprendió un gran frio que me quería paralizar, pero yo solo tenía una idea: avanzar ahora para que me siguieran como la fila de hormigas hacia el otro el lado del Rio Grande, donde estaríamos libres de la amenaza de nuestros enemigos.

Después no tengo más recuerdos en mi memoria, hasta que desperté entre unos Claros que hablaban distinto de los míos, pero de los que entendía lo más básico, y que como me vieron llegar del cielo con un traje que sorprendió a todos, me dieron un lugar principal en su clan sacerdotal, y más cuando volví a practicar mis curaciones con las piedras de luz. Mi sueño de que habían Claros al otro lado del Gran Rio se había cumplido.

De mis familiares y acompañantes en la Montaña ante el Rio Grande (7) no tuve noticias. Desde mi llegada al nuevo territorio, el animal más venerado es la cigüeña que cada año al final de la luna de más calor llega hacia nosotros en gran cantidad. Les recibimos con alimentos y bailes, agradeciéndoles su visita y su ejemplo para la supervivencia.”



Este es el relato de nuestro patriarca y padre de nuestra nación que llegó del cielo, como de ello dieron fe los que así lo vieron. Sus poderes le pusieron a la cabeza de nuestros antepasados. Él lo relató a los hijos que engendró tras su venida del cielo en estas mismas palabras y así se ha transmitido fielmente durante más generaciones que dedos hay en veinte amazighes. Esto es lo que él nos transmitió y que yo, primer escribano del gran país de Tamazgha, ahora escribo cumpliendo con mi deber para que no se pierda ni con el tiempo ni con las mentiras de nuestros ambiciosos enemigos.

Hasta aquí el texto de los pergaminos. Para mí ha sido muy excitante haber encontrado estos rollos casi al mismo tiempo que la aparición de los primeros estudios que demuestran la conexión 'neandertal' de los pobladores autóctonos del Norte de África. Esto hace que nuestro protagonista hace unos 20.000 años consiguiera cerrar un círculo que se inició unos 600.000 años antes cuando los primeros grupos de Neandertales salieron por el Este africano hacia Europa, migrando durante esos largos años por el Norte del Mediterráneo hacia el Oeste.

Esto pone de relevancia la posibilidad de que no todos esos Neandertales de África salieran hacia Europa, y que una parte de ellos fue migrando por el Sur del Mediterráneo, esto es, por el Norte de África también hacia el Oeste llegando hasta el estrecho de Gibraltar, donde se produce el reencuentro con este pionero de 'homo volans'.

Notas del editor:

Los lugares como se conocen hoy:

(1) (Estrecho de Gibraltar)

(2) (Mar Mediterráneo)

(3) (Sur de Pirineos)

(4) (Océano Atlántico)

(5) (Montes Pirineos)

(6) (Cristales de cuarzo)

(7) (Peñón de Gibraltar)

# Great Britain

## Sylvia Spruck Wrigley Plague of Locusts

"I was nine the year the aliens came to Dünendorf," Frau Steigner said. She peered out from filmy eyes. Gray-white hair lay limp across her pink skull. "I remember it exactly. It was the year that Frau Tahir had to leave because she wasn't allowed to teach with her headscarf on. My new teacher was Fräulein Sittner who took us on a school trip to the zoo. We saw the monkeys from the Amazon and the zebras of Africa and then I remember that we watched the penguins splashing through the dark blue lake they called the South Pole. I remember the penguins." She rocked back and forth, eyes half-closed. The ancient rocking chair creaked under her sagging weight as if in pain.

Frau Steigner's words were dissonant and harsh: her strong accent obliterated the gentle consonants of their language. It was hard for the children to hear the simple words without thinking her stupid, but Third Teacher told them that it was important to just listen and try to understand. They jostled for position on the bright yellow plastic floor while the old woman's head nodded and shook. Rock sat near her friend Chys, trying to avoid staring at the papery skin of Frau Steigner's wrinkled face. There was dust in the corners of the room and the remnants of a web.

Third Teacher gave the children a warning glance. Once everyone was quiet and settled down, she left with the nurse. Their footsteps clicked against the hard floor of the hallway, disappearing into the distance.

It was frightening to be alone with the old woman. Rock shuffled backwards and crouched near the door, ready to be ahead of the crush if she had to run. She kept a jealous eye on Chys, who had scooted to the front, right up close to the runners of the rocking chair. Chys wasn't afraid of anything. A few miscreants rough-housed at the back wall: Bubbler and his friends pretending that they weren't interested. When they got too loud Chys turned around and hissed at them to shut up.

"There was a loud boom," said Frau Steigner. "It sounded like a bomb. The adult persons panicked. We, we were not adults. The young persons." She twisted her fingers in her lap as she searched for the words. "The children, we splashed around the zoo lake. We all knew about the Twin Towers in America. We heard about terrorism but we did not think it could happen to us. It was exciting. Soon, the adults began to get themselves in grip and they took us away from the penguins and back to the school buildings. By that time, the television news stations began to talk about the ship from outer space, breaking through the sound barrier and landing in the city. They did not yet say the word invasion. We were told to go home and stay indoors."

Frau Steigner crinkled her nose. "Mrs. Hartman, who used to be kept in the room next to mine, she accused me of trying to cause self-importance when I say that they went to my house first. But it is not so. That is exactly how it happened."

Tinny music wound its way through the window, blasted through an old megaphone bolted onto the roof of an ancient metal vehicle driving past. Rock's mouth went dry at the thought of the chilled water sold by the rusted vans. Even Frau Steigner paused to

listen. Her voice was softer when she continued. "You still use the old things. Those musics are from the ice-cream man, who would drive down our street with huge tubs of chocolate and strawberry ice cream. My mother would let me choose a sugar cone or a little paper cup and he would scoop it in." She shifted in her seat. "That was when we still had strawberries, when we still had zoos. That was before the aliens came and ate all the animals." She exhaled a sigh of sorrow and closed her eyes. The children nudged one another.

"You shouldn't use that word. We're just creatures, just like you," said Chys, showing her sharp teeth. Frau Steigner opened her eyes and leaned forwards. The front few children scuffled back into the safety of the crowd but Chys stayed firm, antennae quivering.

"You came here to hear how it was, did you not?" said Frau Steigner, squinting at her. Her gravelly voice increased in force. "Then you should listen and you should not argue." Rock held her breath.

The resulting silence was broken by a soft clicking: Bubbler tapping his claws nervously against the chipped wall. Frau Steigner turned her head towards the sound and it stopped. She looked at each of the children as if daring them to speak. No one did.

After three slow heartbeats she leaned back into her rocking chair. "The Earth belonged to us. My mother was the first casualty."

"I don't understand why we even keep an old person like her alive," whispered Bubbler. His friends nodded their agreement.

Chys turned and snapped at him. "You shouldn't say that, either! She's the last one." Bubbler glared but held his tongue.

Frau Steigner leaned forward again and the children quieted. "Let me tell you how it was. I came to find my home broken into, the front door smashed. A pot of vegetable stew simmered on the stove but no one was there. I knew then that something terrible must have happened. My mother was gone. I ran through the house, calling her name, trying to find her. Then I found thick blood splattered over the bright green apples hanging from the small tree in the garden. A scrap of blue and white fabric stuck to the grass, a piece of her apron. I sat under the apple tree until my father came home. By that time, everyone knew what was happening. An invasion." She raised a hand to still the children before any of them could challenge her. "Your people, you were invading. You ate my mother."

"We don't eat people," whispered Rock from her position by the door.

Frau Steigner jabbed a bent finger at her. "You lock me up, you poke and stare, you call me a liar!"

Chys jumped to Rock's defense. "We protect you. You are too old and frail to live on the outside, in the heat."

Frau Steigner's voice rose to a high pitch. "You locked us up, you ruined our lands, you ate our mothers!" She pressed her hands to the sides of her chair but she did not have the strength to stand.

Bubbler held a hand up to his head, snapping his pincers in the silent symbol of crazy. His friends chittered. Rock edged into the doorway to look for Third Teacher.

"Don't you understand what you took from us?" shrieked Frau Steigner. "Don't you

regret a single thing that was lost when you destroyed our world?"

Fast footsteps clicked along the linoleum hallway. The nurse pushed Rock out of the doorway and grabbed the old woman with her claws sheathed. Third Teacher dashed in behind her, a steaming cup of stewed bones still in her hand.

"She'll be fine," said the nurse. She rummaged in her pockets for a syringe and pinned the old woman to the rocking chair. "Sometimes she has these fits but they pass once she's tranquilized. I think you should probably go now."

Third Teacher nodded her agreement and motioned the children to follow her out. Rock could still hear Frau Steigner screaming in the distance as the class marched across the glowing sand in single file. The heat was blistering after the cool shadows of the building.

Rock positioned herself at the front of the line and tugged at Third Teacher's arm. "Is it true what she said, about her mother? That the colonists ate her mother?"

Third Teacher's smile broadened, her needlelike teeth catching the sunlight. "Ludicrous," she said. "Earthling propaganda. The humans claimed that we would eat anything." She shuddered. "But let me tell you, human dietary habits would make your stomachs seize. You wouldn't have wanted their food, even second-hand."

She eyed the children but only Rock was listening. Third Teacher sighed and lowered her voice. "Perhaps, I don't know, one or two humans might have been eaten, in the initial rush." She raised her arms in a shrug. "You must remember that the colonists had been quite some time in the transport. I am sure they must have been ravenously hungry when they arrived. So you can see that it is possible that someone could not have recognized the dominant race of this planet and simply made a meal. But it wasn't common in any way. The chances that her mother was eaten are next to nothing. She's just repeating the same old lies." She raised her voice again. "And we certainly don't blame every human for mistakes made by one or two, now do we? We are tolerant and quick to forgive. What are we?"

"Tolerant and quick to forgive," echoed the children.

Third Teacher's smile returned. "That's right."

Rock was silent for a moment and then tugged at her teacher's arm again. "What's a penguin?"

"They were one of the odder inhabitants of this world," said Third Teacher, shaking her off. "It was a black and white bird with a big belly. Rather fatty."

Rock stared up at the bright white sky, squinting her eyes against the blinding sun. "I wish I could see a penguin," she said. "I think that old lady misses the old world very much."

"Don't they all," sighed Third Teacher. "Don't they all."

They reached the rusting station building and filed through it to the tracks. The children clambered into an ancient train. The animals were gone and Rock had never seen the green trees of the story. Oil and iron and steel remained, unaffected by the burning temperatures as the atmosphere disintegrated. It made for a sad memorial, she thought. All browns and greys and dark smudges.

Third Teacher led all the children into a coach for the journey back to the hive. They sat by the gaps of the windows to try to gain a small wisp of a breeze, chattering to each other until the train began to move.

"Did we all enjoy our trip out to see the human?"

The children called out their approval.

Third Teacher smiled at them. "Good. It is our duty to learn about the worlds we inhabit. What is our duty?"

"To learn about the worlds," they shouted. A landscape of sand and broken steel flashed by.

"Correct. And to that end, I would like each of you to save a copy of what you learned to the swarm. One day, your memories will be the only record left of this world. We must fulfill our duty."

Rock stared out the window, trying to imagine the world that the old woman had known, a beautiful globe of greens and blues. "I'll remember the penguins," she whispered as she stared into the bright-white sky.

*Deborah Walker Aunty Merkel*

*An English church. An August wedding.*

*Aunty Merkel sits at the front of the church, staring at the happy couple. She's wearing her wedding suit, a three-buttoned crotched jacket over a matching dress. The light from the stained glass windows reflects off her wing-tipped, milk-bottle glasses.*

*Two widows, Edith and her sister, Moira, sit, whispering to each other, passing comment on the rest of the congregation. They have chosen a respectable position in the middle of the rows of pews: close enough to show that they are family, far enough to show that they are not pushing themselves forward.*

*"Is that Aunty Merkel?" says Moira. "My word, yes, it is."*

*"She must be getting on a bit," says Edith. "I remember her being around when I was just a kiddie."*

*"She attends every family wedding," say Moira. "She must love weddings."*

*"She can't love them that much; she's an old maid," says Edith.*

*"What's that in her bag? It looks like a rat." Moira leans forward to observe the strange creature peeping out from Aunty Merkel's handbag.*

*"That's Mr Tegmark," says Edith. "Aunty Merkel's hairless cat. She was always rather eccentric."*

*"It's an odd looking creature," says Moira. When she catches the cat's eye, it disappears into the depths of Aunty Merkel's bag. "That's a cat that doesn't like to be looked at," says Moira with a sniff.*

*The bride's matron of honour walks to the front of the church. She grips the sides of the eagle lectern. Her voice trembles as she speaks.*

*"Nerves," says Edith.*

*The words of the matron of honour flow over the sisters:*

*"Wither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge. Thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God. Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried. The Lord do so to me, and more also, if aught but death part thee and me"*

*"Ruth is such a lovely book," murmurs Moira.*

*Edith nods, lost in the past. They had read from the Book of Ruth at her own marriage. Such a happy marriage. She misses her Bert so much . . . She seems to remember the glint of reflected light at her ceremony. "She never comes to the reception,"*

she says.

“Who doesn’t?”

“Aunty Merkel.”

“Ah.”

“She never gave me a present, either,” whispers Edith, running her finger along the neckline of her dress, which has been bought especially for this wedding and which is a little too tight.

The sounds of the organ fills the church: *All Things Bright and Beautiful*. It's a well chosen hymn. The congregation know this one and they join in with gusto.

Then Cousin Mitch stands up to make the final reading.

Edith nudges her sister, “The nerve of him, bringing his fancy piece to a family wedding,” she says.

Moira raises an eyebrow in agreement, “He says she’s trying to get a divorce.”

“Divorce? I don’t approve of divorce,” says Edith.

Cousin Mitch stands at the lectern and reads aloud:

“Love is never boastful, nor conceited, nor rude; never selfish, not quick to take offense. There is nothing love cannot face; there is no limit to its faith, its hope, and endurance. In a word, there are three things that last forever: faith, hope, and love; but the greatest of them all is love.”

The sisters have forgotten Aunty Merkel. Thoughts slide around Aunty Merkel; it’s better that way.

Aunty Merkel never brings a present, she brings something better. She’s staring at the happy couple and she’s shifting through their futures, unravelling the ball of tangled string to find the thread of their happy marriage.

Chaotic inflation means that multiverse is always stretching, like a loaf of bread, forever baking in the oven of eternity. Aunty Merkel likes wedding; she likes this family; she likes this bubble universe that stopped expanding a while ago, and sits static in the bread. When this bubble formed in a spasm of spontaneous symmetry it enclosed linear time. You can keep the other  $10^{10^{10^7}}$  bubbles with their diverse physical constraints. Aunty Merkel likes linearity; she likes ceremony; she likes repetition.

The couple make their vows.

A successful marriage is difficult, but in this bubbleverse there are plenty of worlds to choose from, there’s room for happiness. Aunty Merkel searches for the dopplegangers of the happy couple; through the parallels and possibilities; through the hubble volumes; discarding the myriad worlds of sadness, disappointment, divorce; always following one thread: there are three things that last forever . . . the greatest of them all is love.

When the couple finish their vows and kiss, Aunty Merkel gives the couple their gift. Moira was right: Aunty Merkel is a romantic. And, although, she never brings a present; she always gives the couple their future.

The wedding is over and the congregation wait outside the church while the couple sign the register.

Edith rummages in her handbag for a box of confetti.

“Where’s Aunty Merkel?” asks Moira.

“She must have slipped away.”

*“Why, Edith you’re crying.”*

*Edith wipes away the tear, “I had such a happy marriage, Moira.”*

*Moira grips her sister’s hand so tightly that her knuckles show white through the skin, “I know, my love. We both did. We were both blessed.”*

### *DJ Tyrer A Strange Habitation*

*It had come as no great surprise when it was confirmed that the Martian atmosphere in the lowest depths of the great Valles Marineris was of a thickness capable of supporting life – not Earthly life (no human explorer would walk about unmasked down there), but life nonetheless. The suggestion that it might be so had been made before, even if it had flirted more with science fiction than science fact. It was not even a great surprise that life was discovered down there, not after the confirmation of bacteria in the soil of Syrtis. What was a great surprise was that not only were there higher life forms down there, but some of them appeared to be sentient, if far inferior to humanity in their technological and cultural advancement.*

*After the initial scepticism gave way to acceptance that the discovery was genuine, the debate turned to the nature of these native Martians. Going by the handful of verified finds elsewhere on the red planet, which seemed to belong to the same cultural base, the species must once have been widespread across the surface of their world and of a level of advancement comparable to, at least, the classical civilisations of Earth. But, over long ages of time, their race had been driven into decline as the atmosphere thinned and the climate cooled, until, finally, the very lowest reaches of the canyon offered them a barely passable environment. Trapped in their limited world, unable to walk westward to where the Valles Marineris grew shallower and unable to ascend the sheer canyon walls, they were a tiny, presumably inbred remnant with little understanding of their homeworld, let alone the wider Universe, or their place in it. Within the limited bounds of their existence, it seemed that they had not only ceased to progress but had retarded in all areas of endeavour. The probes and drone flights sent to learn more about them showed a moribund race of stone-age ability that subsisted on the peculiar, boulder-like fungi that was the dominant flora of their restricted world.*

*That the Martians posed no threat to humans was Neal’s assessment of the situation. Unfortunately for them, the planet was to be terraformed and they would be collateral damage to the grand experiment. Neal’s job was to descend into the Valles Marineris and make an anthropological study of what was likely to be the final generation of that doomed remnant of a once-proud race.*

*He trekked in from the west, having negotiated his way through an ever-descending network of gulleys and defiles until he entered the so-called Labyrinth of Night, through which maze of canyons he worked his way until he arrived at the upper reaches of the Valles Marineris through which he hiked, ever downward. Even at its lowest level, Neal had to keep his survival suit and helmet on as it was still too cold and the air too exotic for a human to thrive. By night, he retreated into his inflatable pop-tent with its simple but effective zippered airlock. With plentiful supplies of freeze-dried foodstuffs, he would not starve. Water was more of a problem, but one that was overcome through the use of a small filtration unit to purify the liquid taken from frost hollows or from beneath the*

frozen crusts of the pools and streams that he encountered with relative frequency. A system in his mask, as in his tent, converted the Martian atmosphere into one tolerable to human lungs, negating the requirement for oxygen tanks besides a single small, highly-compressed canister for use in emergencies.

At last, his long walk drew to an end as he neared his destination. Here in the lowest reaches of the canyon, the Martians dwelt alone, in pairs or apparent family groups in caves or simple shelters built of crudely-piled stones. No matter how excellent the resolution, the footage sent back by drones and probes had been unable to reveal much about the structures and he wondered just what he would discover. Were these vaguely-conical buildings merely just shelters or did they serve other purposes, too? Did the Martians use some as store rooms or as temples? Might he find some crudely-carved statue of a deity within one? Did some serve as tombs? So many questions that he hoped to answer before they were lost forever: not only would the Earthly atmosphere poison the beings in a genocide that would be the merest of footnotes to man's greatest achievement, but, as the atmosphere thickened and the planet grew warmer, floodwaters would rush through the canyon obliterating all traces of their existence. Although the planet would not be habitable for humanity for decades, and the process would be ongoing for centuries, there were maybe eighteen or twenty-four months until the changes wrought irreversible damage down here.

The Martians were not the little green men of old literature that yet lived on in the tall tales of the miners and terraformers, whose stories equally described lost cities, strange alien sphinxes and the peculiar beasts known as booglies and oojams that hid beneath the rusty dust of the deserts. The remnant race was nothing like that.

As the footage had shown and his own observations confirmed, the Martians were a little taller than men but much more lightly built thanks to the lighter gravity of the planet. Neal guessed that they were probably comparable in strength to a human in their own environment, but that a human on their world, used to the higher gravity of Earth, would seem quite superior to them in terms of strength, speed and agility; a fact offset, in his case, by the restrictions of his suit. The beings were of some invertebrate ancestry and tended to have carapaces in hues reflective of their environs: rusty reds, sulphurous yellows, oranges and tans, mottled with darker greys and browns. Their heads were small and sunk into shoulders, with small, clicking mandibles, and the beings had the general outline of a human with a second pair of much smaller arms near the head that seemed largely to serve as aids to feeding.

The lives of the beings, as Neal observed them, seemed utterly banal and he found himself thinking that humanity might be doing them a favour in destroying their dead-end existence. They seemed almost entirely incurious, barely even seeming to notice him, let alone betray any interest in his presence in their domain. Much of the day seemed to be spent indolently in lounging upon rocks to catch what wan sunlight came their way, sleeping or eating. They did very little, seldom moving and walking only the shortest of distances to find fungus to eat or ice to chew. There was not even much evidence of discourse, even amongst members of family groups.

Tools were barely in evidence and, then, only crude stones and he saw no evidence of fire use – not that he was sure how well a fire would burn in the Martian atmosphere. The shelters were more simplistic in design than the footage had suggested and none



seemed to have any other role. Indeed, there were no real signs of material culture at all. It all seemed quite pathetic to him – they were little better than animals!

As he explored the area, he confirmed that there were many cave openings, some of which served the Martians as dwellings. There was a theory that the entire region was riddled with karst-like cave systems. Although the possibility had not been explored, Neal realised that it was quite likely that if any caves descended to a substantial depth, the atmosphere in them would be thicker and more conducive to life. If correct, that would explain why there were so few sightings of animal life, yet he had noticed tracks and other evidence of nocturnal creatures active in the canyon. Curiosity getting the better of him, Neal resolved to explore the caves a little in order to see if he could discover any evidence to support his theory.

Several of the caves he tried either failed to extend any great distance or else only offered substantially smaller passageways than would take a man. But, one cave, outside of which he spotted plentiful spoor in the dusty soil, did offer quite a substantial network of caverns and passages descending deep into the Martian bedrock. As he went, the small sensor unit mounted on the wrist of his survival suit indicated that the atmosphere within the cave was, indeed, growing denser.

Something skittered past his feet and he shone his torch down to see something similar to a metre-long centipede scuttling by. A little further, something like an ant and a spider and with a body the size of a dinner plate ran up the wall. There were also growths of tall, spindly toadstool-like plants in damp corners. The cave system certainly was abundant with life, at least in terms of the dying world.

Delving deeper, Neal was surprised to note a faint glow ahead; he rationalised his discovery as some sort of phosphorescent moss or something on the cave walls. He was, in fact, entirely wrong: the light was coming from octagonal gems set in worked-stone fittings, and it revealed signs of the cave walls, floor and roof having been shaped. The further he went, the more frequent the glowing gems became and the more artificial his surroundings until he was making his way dazedly along well-lit corridors.

Suddenly, from around a bend, came a trio of Martians; only these examples were a little shorter than those outside the caves and were a pale bluish white mottled with greys. They moved with a purpose that betrayed none of the languor or incuriosity of their kindred in the canyon. They halted and stared at him with their black, multifaceted eyes and he had a horrible sensation that they could read his mind and knew why he had come and what fate was destined to befall their world. Worse, he realised that not only were these not stupid and brutish beings but intelligent and skilled ones, but that they quite possibly had the ability to halt humanity's plans for their planet that he had unwittingly brought to them. Perhaps it was their insectoid appearance, but he had a sudden thought of a foolish boy prodding a wasp nest.

Unbidden, unable to stop himself, he found himself walking towards them and, as he was led away to a brief captivity, he felt a certainty that humanity had made a terrible mistake in disturbing this ancient and mysterious world.

# Netherlands

## Mike Jansen De achttiende van Rasmussen

Het oponthoud op de 'Vijfde van Rasmussen' duurde uiteindelijk bijna een week. De toeristen aan boord van de Strevende Zaramaster waren er niet rouwig om. De wereld die voortdurend zichtbaar was vanaf het panoramadek was een waar paradijs en vrijwel dagelijks bezochten groepjes de verschillende continenten en vierden daar feest met de inheemse bewoners.

Jason Achterdam was het na de eerste tripjes wel zat en hij vermaakte zich met het doorlezen van de vele aniviertjes, die als felkleurig bewegende vlinders op een slordige stapel op een van de loungetafels lagen. Ze vertelden onder andere over de geschiedenis van de ontdekker van de diverse planeten die Strevende Zaramaster aandeed. Hij kon zijn omgeving niet zomaar veranderen, nu hij er eenmaal in zat.

De tocht van het luxueuze cruiseschip langs de Smaragden Gordelwerelden was begonnen op de 'Eerste van Rasmussen', de planeet die destijds als eerste door de vorser Palle Rasmussen was ontdekt, als eerste in een serie Aardachtige planeten met voor mensen vriendelijke atmosfeer en ecosystemen.

De sterrenhoop waarin Rasmussen de Gordelwerelden aantrof was klein, enkele honderden sterren, maar dicht op elkaar en voornamelijk g-type sterren met een hoge kans op werelden in de leefbare zone. En die werelden vond Rasmussen, zeventien in totaal.

Helaas verdween Rasmussen op zijn terugreis naar de Aarde. Gelukkig waren zijn boodschappen wel aangekomen via de quantumshunt, een effect van de aandrijving die Rasmussen in staat stelde grote afstanden in korte tijd te overbruggen. Het deel van de ruimte waar hij verdwenen was, werd later tot verboden gebied verklaard.

Toen de dag van vertrek was aangebroken verzamelden de toeristen zich op het balkon dat rond de quantumput gebouwd was. De aandrijving maakte gebruik van eigenschappen van de tijdruimte die fluctueerde als de eb en vloed van de oceanen op Aarde. Hij zorgde ervoor dat het schip kon meesurfen op een quantumgolf.

Een effect van het opwekken van aandrijving was dat de vloer van de put tijdelijk in een staat van flux werd gebracht, solide, maar toch ook weer niet, met kans op onwaarschijnlijke gebeurtenissen voor objecten die in de buurt van de vloer kwamen. Zoals muntjes, kralen, schillen, zakmessen, papiertjes en alles wat mensen maar konden bedenken dat interessante effecten kon bewerken in een quantumveld. Natuurlijk faalde de sprong de helft van de tijd, want het wel of niet slagen was immers volslagen onvoorspelbaar. Jason observeerde zijn medepassagiers zorgvuldig terwijl hij zijn zakmes klaar hield om naar beneden te gooien.

Een sirene ging af in het schip en de passagiers gooiden hun voorwerpjes naar de vloer. Er was een ziekmakend verschuiven van de werkelijkheid en boven hen veranderde het immense panoramadak in een uitzicht op de 'Zesde van Rasmussen', de waterplaneet die de gelijknamige vorser enkele dagen na de paradijsplaneet 'Vijfde van Rasmussen' gevonden had.

Veel van de passagiers bewonderden hun nieuwe uitzicht en begaven zich naar de observatieplatforms om een volledig uitzicht op de omgeving te krijgen. Maar een aanzienlijk aantal was benieuwder naar het lot van de voorwerpen die naar beneden gegooid waren.

Jason Achterdam volgde zijn medepassagiers de trappen af naar de quantumvloer, de decimeterdikke metalen plaat die de aandrijving van het schip gescheiden hield van het schip zelf. Toch was de invloed van het apparaat op de omgeving zo groot dat vooral kleine voorwerpjes die gevangen werden in het veld zich raar gedroegen. Muntjes bleven op hun kant op het dek staan, papiertjes vouwden zich tot uniek gevormde origami kunstwerkjes, een glazen knikker veranderde in een Lichtenberg sculptuur en een mandarijn was veranderd in een langwerpige vrucht, rood met felgroene stekels.

De scheepskronieker tekende alles nauwgezet op voor het nageslacht. Er mocht eens ooit een patroon te vinden zijn in de veranderingen die het quantumveld bewerkte.

Jason vond zijn zakmes terug, of wat er van over was. Toen hij de grijze klomp metaal oppakte, merkte hij dat het gewicht van het voorwerp veel groter was dan hij verwachtte. Hij moest er zelfs moeite voor doen het van de vloer te tillen.

‘Interessante uitkomst,’ zei de scheepskronieker.

‘Zeg dat wel,’ zei Jason. ‘Ik schat dat dit klompje een kilo of zes is, voor zover je dat met kunstmatige zwaartekracht kunt schatten.’

De kronieker pakte een scanner uit zijn zak en liet de boordcomputer het ding doorlichten. ‘Interessant,’ zei hij. ‘De boordcomputer geeft aan dat het een tweehonderd is, een van de stabielere elementen.’

‘Iets waard?’ vroeg Jason.

‘Er zijn verzamelaars voor dit soort objecten,’ zei de scheepskronieker. ‘Maar ik ken ze niet. En toch een leuk aandenken, lijkt me.’

‘Misschien krijg ik er iets voor op de Schepen van Moeder Oceaan,’ zei Jason en hij dacht aan de excursie die hij geboekt had naar de drijvende steden op de planeet. Hij keek naar boven en zag door het panoramadak de schaduwrand van de planeet net over een van de steden glijden, die opgloeide als een veelarmig wezen.

De scheepskronieker nam afscheid en Jason draaide het loodzware zakmes om en om in zijn handen, in gedachten verzonken. Zijn overpeinzing werd onderbroken door een zachte stem. Hij draaide zich om en keek in het gezicht van een man van middelbare leeftijd. Ergens deed hij Jason aan iemand denken, maar hij kon er zo snel zijn vinger niet opleggen. ‘Excuus, ik verstond u even niet.’

De man schudde zijn hoofd. ‘Het geeft niet,’ zei hij met zachte stem. Hij had een smal gezicht, bruin haar, grijs aan de slapen en diepliggende, donkerbruine ogen die geaccentueerd werden door de donkere wallen onder en de rimpels rond zijn ogen. Hij droeg een archaische, donkerblauwe tuniek, bijna als een uniform. ‘Ik vroeg me af waar ik... waar we zijn, maar ik zag de zesde wereld door die koepel daar, dus nu weet ik het.’

‘De Zesde van Rasmussen,’ zei Jason, ‘de oceaanplaneet. De onderzeese steden schijnen een beleving op zich te zijn, en gebouwd op de ruïnes van rassen die hier lang geleden leefden.’

‘Dat wist ik niet,’ zei de andere man. ‘In mijn tijd was ik al blij als een planeet voldoende zuurstof had, water en groene planten. Dat betekende in ieder geval dat het een leefbare plek voor mensen kon zijn.’

‘Ah, u bent vorse geweest? Planeetontdekker?’ vroeg Jason. Was dit de man die hij verwachtte? ‘Dat is een uitstervend beroep. Maar u komt me wel ergens bekend voor, kan het zijn dat ik u eerder ergens gezien heb? Mijn naam is Jason Achterdam overigens.’

‘Dat zou ik niet weten,’ zei de man. ‘Mijn naam is Rasmussen.’

‘Ah, familie van, natuurlijk,’ zei Jason. ‘U hebt wel iets van hem weg.’

Rasmussen keek hem aan en kneep zijn ogen iets samen. ‘Zo zou je het kunnen stellen, ja.’ Hij keek om zich heen en leek bijna zenuwachtig. ‘Kunnen we misschien een wat rustiger plek opzoeken?’

Jason kneep zijn ogen lichtjes samen. Hij ziet er anders uit dan ik verwachtte, maar hij is het wel! ‘De observatiekoepel aan de ruimtezijde van het schip is meestal leeg.’

Rasmussen glimlachte minzaam. ‘Dat verbaast me niet. Mensen voelen zich van nature niet op hun gemak in het duister. De oneindige ruimte schrikt velen af.’

Jason ging hem voor. ‘Inderdaad. Des te bijzonderder dat de vorsers van toen zich in hun badkuipen de wijde ruimte in waagden.’

‘Ach, het aftellen voor de quantumsprong was telkens weer spannend. Zeker in de beginjaren toen de afstelling na elke sprong of poging opnieuw gekalibreerd moest worden. Tenzij je over de lichtjaren uitgesmeerd wilde worden,’ zei Rasmussen.

‘U vertelt erover alsof u het zelf hebt meegemaakt, meneer Rasmussen,’ zei Jason. ‘Als ik niet in de folders gelezen had dat Palle Rasmussen meer dan tweehonderd jaar geleden in de Verboden Zone is verdwenen, zou ik u ervan verdenken hem te zijn.’

Rasmussen verstijfde even. ‘Verboden Zone? Tweehonderd jaar? Weet u dat zeker?’

‘Toevallig net een paar dagen terug gelezen, dus vrij zeker, ja,’ antwoordde Jason.

‘En wat nu als ik inderdaad die Rasmussen ben, wat dan?’ vroeg Rasmussen. Hij ging aan de bar in de observatieruimte zitten. Een zachte gloed straalde vanonder de toog en baadde zijn gezicht in een spookachtig licht.

Jason ging naast hem zitten en vouwde zijn handen. Hij voelde een zekere mate van amusement en interesse voor deze vreemde man en hij besloot het spel mee te spelen. ‘Dan zou ik u vragen wat u allemaal beleefd hebt, sinds u verdween in de verboden zone. Iemand als u heeft vast een interessant verhaal te vertellen.’

Rasmussen tikte een glas bier in op de autobar. Hij nam een grote slok van het gouden vocht en smakte even. ‘Lekker. De Verboden Zone, zoals u hem noemt, ligt pontificaal in het midden van het lokale cluster. Er komt geen licht uit -of door- de zone, dus na het ontdekken van planeet nummer zeventien, toen de kansrijke zonnen waren uitgeput, besloot ik via de Verboden Zone, die toen nog niet verboden was, terug te reizen naar de Aarde.’

‘Maar dat ging verkeerd?’

‘Nee, dat ging perfect. Er zweeft veel donkere materie rond en af en toe leek het alsof mijn schip door dikke soep gleeed. Verder kwam ik het gebruikelijke ruimtepuin tegen, rotsen, ijs, gaswolken, niets bijzonders dus.’

‘Waar ging het dan uiteindelijk verkeerd?’ vroeg Jason. Zijn nieuwsgierigheid was nu toch geprikkeld en hij vroeg zich af of deze Rasmussen, over wie hij nu toch wel twijfelde, misschien toch niet de echte Rasmussen van lang geleden was.

Rasmussen was een tijdje stil en staaarde naar de duisternis buiten. ‘Wat jij de verboden zone noemt, is gevuld met donkere materie, donkere energie. Maar die zijn een bijproduct van de quantumstaat van het heelal op die plek.’

*‘Ik ben geen geleerde, meneer Rasmussen, ik weet dat de aandrijvingen op quantumtechnologie gebaseerd zijn, maar verder dan dat reikt mijn kennis ook niet,’ zei Jason.*

*‘Dat geeft niet, ik leg het uit,’ zei Rasmussen. ‘Dezelfde technologie van onze aandrijving, komt ook van nature voor in het universum. Maar waar wij een tijdelijke golf van quantumeffecten genereren en daarop meesurfen, is dit als een getijdenpoel, stilstaand, meer of minder invloeden van buitenaf, maar altijd op de grens van onze realiteit. Een plek waar het ondenkbare denkbaar wordt en vaste waarden zo vloeibaar worden als stromend water.’*

*‘Zoals het effect van de quantumput waar we voorwerpjes op gooien om te zien hoe ze veranderen?’ vroeg Jason.*

*‘Een voortdurende staat van flux die verandering uitstraalt en die al je wensen kan laten uitkomen als je in de buurt komt. Immers, de staat waarin materie zich bevindt wordt beïnvloed door je waarneming.’ Rasmussen schudde zijn hoofd. ‘Alsof je in het hart van een donkere ster kijkt die je mooiste, diepste, verborgen, donkerste, vuilste dromen kan laten uitkomen.’ Hij sloot zijn ogen en wreef met zijn hand over zijn voorhoofd. ‘De dingen die ik gezien heb, meegemaakt heb...’*

*‘Dat klinkt als een mooie plek om te zijn,’ zei Jason. ‘Ik kan me voorstellen dat je, eenmaal daar, niet meer wil vertrekken.’*

*‘Jij ziet alleen de mogelijkheden en denkt dat je er een positieve draai aan kunt geven,’ zei Rasmussen. ‘En je maakt de grootste fout van allemaal: je denkt dat de mens alleen is in het heelal.’*

*Jason keek naar Rasmussen. ‘Wilt u zeggen dat u anderlingen bent tegengekomen?’*

*Rasmussen zuchtte. ‘Ja en nee.’*

*‘Dat klinkt verwarrend,’ zei Jason.*

*‘Het effect van een langdurig verblijf in een quantumput.’ Rasmussen grijnsde. ‘Maar ik weet dat ik niet alleen was. Er was iets bij me, in het hart van die donkere ster, dat me liet zien, voelen en ervaren en dat meer was dan ik me voor zou kunnen stellen.’*

*Jason grijnsde. ‘Als u het niet gezien hebt, hoe weet u dan dat het niet menselijk was? Me dunkt dat sommige mensen gedachten hebben die ze liever niet openlijk toegeven.’*

*‘Dat zou een verontrustende gedachte zijn,’ zei Rasmussen. ‘Een mens die werkelijkheden, zoals ik gezien heb, kan creëren door enkel zijn waarneming te sturen, dat zou formidabel beangstigend zijn.’*

*‘Dat niet alleen, het zou ook nog een expressie van uw onderbewustzijn kunnen zijn. Wie kan zeggen hoe exotische materie reageert op gedachten? We weten nog niet eens hoe de verandering van de objecten, die de toeristen in de quantumput gooien, veroorzaakt worden,’ zei Jason. ‘Dus ik zou onderbewuste nog niet uitvlakken.’*

*Rasmussen werd bleek. ‘Mijn onderbewuste zou me een beeld kunnen voorschotelen van een luxe cruiseschip terwijl ik eigenlijk nog gewoon in mijn schip in de Verboden Zone ben...’*

*Jason fronste. ‘Ik dacht dat we ervan uitgingen dat u Palle Rasmussen niet was?’*

*Rasmussen keek nerveus om zich heen. ‘Ik moet gaan. Op dit moment ben ik nergens meer zeker van. Zelfs niet of ik hier werkelijk ben.’*

*‘U ziet er voor mij echt genoeg uit,’ zei Jason, maar Rasmussen was de observatiekoepel al uitgelopen. Een minuut later klonk er een alarm, ten teken dat één*

van de reddingsloepen gelanceerd was.

Jason glimlachte en nam nog een biertje. Zijn spel met Rasmussen nam steeds grotere en complexere vormen aan en waar hij voorheen enkel indirect invloed kon uitoefenen, begon hij de man nu zodanig te snappen dat hij zelfs direct contact met hem kon hebben.

Hij herinnerde zich nog heel goed zijn aankomst bij de donkere ster, waar hij de verkenner van Rasmussen trof met daarin het slapende lichaam van de planetenzoeker, uitgeteerd, maar in leven gehouden door zijn boordcomputers. Zijn eerste nachtrust daar opende zijn ogen en zijn geest. Hij zag het hart van de donkere ster en de mogelijkheden die voor het grijpen lagen, mogelijkheden die hem beangstigden en die tegelijk een onzalige euforie veroorzaakten. Hij snapte heel goed waarom Rasmussen bij zeventien gestopt was. De achttiende was de kroon op het werk.

En Rasmussen was zijn weg naar binnen, de vorser die al dozijnen jaren droomde in de talloze werkelijkheden van de getijdenpoel en die zich helemaal aangepast had aan de fluxtoestand van de lokale ruimte. Een eigenschap die hij zich eigen wilde maken. Want wie wilde er nu planeten ontdekken als er meerdere universa voor het oprapen lagen?

Hij nam zijn laatste slokken en wilde de observatiekoepel uitlopen toen een schim in de eeuwige duisternis zijn aandacht trok. Een heel kort moment dacht hij het gezicht van de scheepskronieker te zien, maar zodra hij met zijn ogen knipperde, was dat beeld verdwenen. Zijn twijfel duurde hooguit een seconde.

Hij haalde zijn schouders op en glimlachte terwijl hij dacht aan zijn volgende scenario's om Rasmussen definitief over de rand te laten gaan zodat hij zijn kennis en kunde van de donkere ster kon stelen...

### Mike Jansen Rasmussen's Eighteenth

The delay on 'Rasmussen's Fifth' lasted nearly a week. The tourists on board the Striving Zaramaster were not particularly distressed. The world below them, plainly visible from the view deck was true paradise and there was a daily shuttle service to allow groups of visitors to visit the continents and celebrate with the local populace.

Jason Rearfell was fed up with it all after the first few trips, so he killed time reading the ever changing faces of the liv-a-zines that lay draped on one of the lounge tables like many colored, fluttering butterflies. After all, he couldn't just alter his surroundings now that he was here. One article he found, highlighted the history of the many planets that Striving Zaramaster visited.

The cruise of the luxury liner along the worlds of the Emerald Belt started on 'Rasmussen's First', the habitable planet that explorer Palle Rasmussen discovered first in a series of Earthlike planets with human friendly atmospheres and ecosystems.

Rasmussen found the Belt in a small star cluster, no more than a few hundred stars, but they were close together and most of the Sol g-type with high odds of having worlds in the green zone. And he found them, Rasmussen did, seventeen in all.

Unfortunately Rasmussen disappeared on the voyage back to Earth. His messages, fortunately, did arrive through the quantum shunt, an effect of the star drive that allowed Rasmussen to cover extreme distances in a very short time. The part of space he

disappeared in, was later designated a forbidden area.

When the day of departure arrived, the tourists converged on the balcony above the quantum pit. The star drive used effects of time and space, tidal fluctuations much like the oceans on Earth. It allowed the ship to surf the waves of quantum.

Another effect of the starting drive was the flux that surrounded the engine, causing the floor and walls of the pit to be solid, yet fluid at the same time and the odds of odd things happening to increase by orders of magnitude, especially to any objects that happened to get near the floor. Objects such as pocket knives, beads, rinds, coins, paper and anything people happened to carry with them that they suspected could result something interesting inside the powerful quantum fields. The surf attempt failed half the time, of course, as it was completely unpredictable. Jason observed his fellow passengers carefully while he kept his pocket knife ready to drop to the floor below.

A sharp siren call resounded throughout the ship and the passengers through their objects over the railing. Reality shifted with a nauseating wrench and above them the huge view roof showed the water planet 'Rasmussen's Sixth' that the discoverer had encountered only days after finding the paradise planet 'Rasmussen's Fifth.'

Many passengers admired their new view and moved to the observation lounges to get a full view of their surroundings. A sizeable part of them however walked down the stairs to the pit, to see what fate had befallen their discarded objects.

Jason Rearfell followed them down the stairs and stepped onto the quantum floor, a dozen inch thick metal plate that kept the drive separate from the rest of the ship. Still the influence of the device was so great that it affected especially the smaller objects that got caught up in its fluctuating fields, causing strange results. Coins dropped to the deck on their sides and remained standing, pieces of paper folded into uniquely shaped origami art pieces, a glass marble was transformed into a Lichtenberg sculpture and an orange was changed into a long fruit, red with bright green thorns.

The ship's chronicler registered everything carefully for later researchers. Some day someone might find a pattern, somehow, in the changes the quantum field created.

Jason retrieved what was left of his pocket knife. He picked up the gray lump of metal and noticed its weight was much, much larger than he expected. It even took him substantial effort to lift it from the floor.

"That looks interesting," the ship's chronicler said.

"You can say that again," Jason said. "I estimate this little lump is around ten pounds, in as far as one can estimate in this artificial gravity."

The chronicler held a pocket scanner over the lump and uploaded data to the ship's central brain. "Interesting indeed," he said. "Brain says it's a trans two hundred, one of the more stable ones."

"Is it worth something?" Jason asked.

"There are collectors who like this sort of thing," the chronicler said. "Don't know any, by the way. Still, it's a nice memento, I think."

"Perhaps it will bring something on the Mother Ocean Ships," Jason said, thinking of his upcoming excursion to the floating cities on the planet below. He looked up and through the view roof saw the shadow edge of the planet slide across one of the cities that started to shine like a many armed creature.

The chronicler said goodbye and Jason turned the heavy knife around in his hands,

pondering, waiting. His thoughts were interrupted by a soft voice. He turned and looked into the face of a middle aged man. He reminded Jason of someone, but his mind wasn't working at full speed. "I'm sorry, I did not get that."

The man shook his head. "That's alright," he said with a soft voice. His eyes seemed to tremble as he looked left and right. Jason noticed a narrow face, brown hair, gray temples and deep lying, dark brown eyes with dark blue bags beneath them and many wrinkles all over his face. He wore an archaic, dark blue tunic, almost like a uniform. "I was just wondering where I... where we are, but I saw World Six through the window, so now I know."

"Ah yes, Rasmussen's Sixth," Jason said, 'Ocean planet. The submerged cities apparently are something else. And they were built on the ruins of races that lived there long ago. Can you imagine the time scale?"

"I did not know that," the other man said. "In my time I was happy if a planet had sufficient oxygen, water and green plants. At least I could be somewhat certain then it would support human life."

"Aha, you were a discoverer? A Planet Finder?" Jason asked. Was this the man he expected? "It's a dying profession. But you seem familiar somehow, could it be I've seen you before? My name is Jason Rearfell, pleased to meet you."

"I would not know about that," the man said. "My name is Rasmussen."

"I see, you must be related," Jason said. "You resemble him somewhat."

Rasmussen looked at him, his eyes narrow. "You could say that, yes." He looked around and seemed almost nervous. "Can we go someplace a little quieter?"

Jason looked at him again. His appearance is not what I expected, but it is him! "The observation dome on the space side of the ship is usually empty."

A slight smile graced Rasmussen's face. "I am not surprised. Humans are by nature uncomfortable in the dark. The endless space out there, its absence of light, terrifies them."

Jason walked ahead. "So it does. That makes the fact that the discoverers of yore dared venture into space in their bath tubs all the more special."

"Ach, the countdown for each quantum jump was exciting, always, especially in the early years when the settings needed to be calibrated after each jump or attempted jump. Unless you fancied being an atom thick smear across many light years," Rasmussen said.

"You relate it as if you were there, Mister Rasmussen," Jason said. "If I had not read in the liv-a-zines that Palle Rasmussen disappeared in the Forbidden Zone over two hundred years ago, I would suspect you of being him."

Rasmussen went taut. "Forbidden Zone? Two hundred years? Are you sure?"

"Just read it a few days ago, so fairly certain, yes." Jason answered.

"And what if I really am that Rasmussen, then what?" Rasmussen asked. He sat at the bar in the observation dome. A soft glow emanated from beneath the counter, bathing his face in ghostly light.

Jason sat next to him and folded his hands. He felt amusement for and interest in this strange man and decided to play along. Any information could be useful to him. "I would ask you what adventures you have had in the mean time, since your disappearance in the Forbidden Zone. I'll bet you have some interesting tales to tell."



Rasmussen tapped a glass of beer from the auto bar. He took a large swig of the gold liquid and smacked his lips. "Nice. The Forbidden Zone, as you call it, is dead center within the cluster. No light is emitted from it, or shines through it, so after I found Planet Seventeen, I decided to return to Earth via the Forbidden Zone, that was not forbidden at that particular time."

"But something happened?"

"No, all went well. There is a lot of dark matter in the area and it sometimes seemed like my ship was sailing through thick soup. Other than that is was the usual space junk, rocks, ice, gas clouds, so nothing special."

"But something must have happened, right?" Jason asked. The doubts he had about the authenticity of this Rasmussen were slowly receding. Maybe this was the real Rasmussen, after all.

Rasmussen remained silent for some time, staring at the darkness outside. "The Forbidden Zone, as you call it, is filled with dark matter and dark energy. However, they are merely a by product of the quantum state of the universe at that particular spot."

"I'm not a scientist, Mister Rasmussen, I know the star drives use quantum technology, but that is as far as my knowledge reaches," Jason said.

"That's alright, let me explain," Rasmussen said. "The same effect our star drive technology employs occurs naturally in the universe. But, whereas we create a temporary wave of quantum effects and surf along on that, this is like a tidal pool, stagnant, with more or less influences from the outside, but always on the edge of our consensus reality. It's the place the unthinkable becomes feasible and the foundations of our universe become fluid like running water."

"Like the effects of the quantum pit when we throw small objects down to see how they change?" Jason asked.

"A continuous state of flux that emanates change and that can and will make all your wishes reality when you approach. After all, the state of matter is influenced by our observation." Rasmussen shook his head. "It's like looking into the heart of a dark star that knows your deepest, hidden, darkest, most vile dreams. And makes them real..." He closed his eyes and rubbes his hand over his forehead. "The things I've seen. All that I've experienced..."

"It sounds like an intriguing place to be," Jason said. "I could imagine that once there, one might not want to leave, ever."

"You only see the possibilities and think you can work this in a positive way," Rasmussen said. "And it would be the biggest mistake of all: you think humanity is alone in the universe."

Jason looked at Rasmussen. "Are you telling me you found aliens?"

Rasmussen sighed. "Yes and no."

"That sounds confusing," Jason said.

"The effect of prolonged stay inside a quantum pit." Rasmussen grinned. "I know, I felt that I was not alone. Something was there with me, inside the heart of that dark star, that showed me, made me experience and that was so much more than I could ever have imagined."

Jason smirked. "If you never sa wit, how do could you tell i fit was human or not? I'm fairly certain most humans have thoughts they rather not disclose to an onlooking

universe.”

“That would be very worrisome,” Rasmussen said. “A human who could create realities such as I’ve seen, just by guiding his observation. It would be the greatest threat to humanity ever.”

“Have you even considered that it might also be an expression of your subconscious mind. Who can tell what reaction exotic matter might have to those deep thoughts? We do not even know yet how the objects the tourists throw onto the floor of the quantum pit are transformed,” Jason said. “I would definitely not rule out subconscious.”

Rasmussen turned pale. “My subconscious could be showing me an image of a luxury cruise liner, while I’m really in my vessel inside the Forbidden Zone.

Jason frowned. “I thought we determined you weren’t Palle Rasmussen himself?” I nearly have you where I want you, old man.

Rasmussen looked around, obviously nervous. “I must leave. I cannot be certain of anything right now. Not even if I’m really here at all.”

“You seem real enough to me,” Jason said, but Rasmussen had already departed the observation dome. One minute later an alarm sounded signaling the launch of one of the rescue ships.

Jason smiled and took another beer. His game with Rasmussen was getting larger and more complex. Once he was only able to exert only marginal influence, but now he was getting to understand the man behind the man to such an extent that he could directly communicate with him.

He remembered his arrival at the dark star well, finding Rasmussen’s discovery module with the sleeping body of the planet finder inside, emaciated, but kept alive by the ship’s brain. His first night there opened his eyes and his mind. He saw the heart of the dark star and the possibilities there for the taking, possibilities that frightened him, yet filled him with wretched euphoria. He understood now, quite well, why Rasmussen stopped at seventeen. The eighteenth was his crowning achievement. And Rasmussen was his way in: the explorer had been dreaming for dozens of years in the countless realities of the tidal pool, completely adjusted by now to the flux of local space. He wanted to own those abilities. Who wanted to discover planets with multitudes of universes there for the taking?

He swallowed the last of his beer and was about to leave the observation dome when he noticed a shade in the eternal darkness. One very, very short moment he thought he saw the face of the ship’s chronicler, but when he blinked his eyes, the image was gone. His doubt lasted less than a second.

He shrugged and smiled, thinking of the next scenarios he would play to push Rasmussen over the edge, allowing him to steal the old man’s knowledge and experience of the heart of that darkest star.

Paul van Leeuwenkamp

Op weg naar het tentamen Commercieel Management

Nadat hij de zaal had geïnspecteerd en de nog bruikbare lichaamsdelen apart had gelegd, spoot Thijs een forse waterstraal over de vloer en begon vanaf de plint stevig te schrobben.

*Spuiten, schrobben, spuiten, schrobben. Het gemorste bier vormde samen met de vuiligheid een zwarte prut, die hij elk meter in een emmer deponeerde. Daarbij gebruikte hij natuurlijk zijn schrobber en blik, want ook al had hij handschoenen aan, je wist maar nooit. Hij zou de eerste niet zijn die in een afgebroken naald greep en zelfs niet de eerste die in een afgebroken naald greep met AIDS.*

*Voor hij de prut in de emmer gooide veegde hij er een paar keer met de schrobber door en haalde er voorzichtig de muntstukken uit. Er werd hier altijd met geld gesmeten, wat één van de redenen was dat hij hier nog steeds schoonmaakte, aangezien het salaris zelf niet al te veel voorstelde. De tweede reden waren de lichaamsdelen, die op de zwarte markt nog wat konden opbrengen. Alle beetjes hielpen en aangezien je als opgroeiende burger overal zelf voor verantwoordelijk was, moest je ook zelf alles verdienen; om je collegegeld te betalen, de huur van een kamer en nog wat te kunnen eten. Je kon wel wat tegen een marktconforme rente lenen, maar dat was niet genoeg. Je moest wel bijverdienen. En dus was het spuiten, schrobben, prut in de emmer, spuiten, schrobben, prut in de emmer.*

*Thijs was een paar uurtjes bezig om de grote zaal schoon genoeg te krijgen voor het optreden van de komende avond, een of andere rapper. Van onder de radiatoren kwamen nog een aantal bruikbare ogen en vingers tevoorschijn en in de hoek achter de stoeltjes lagen zelfs een hele voet en een onderarm. Hij stopte de lichaamsdelen in een plastic vuilniszak, deed er de armen en het hoofd bij die hij eerder al apart had gelegd.*

*Wilde avonden waren het, waarbij menigeen niet meer op zijn benen had kunnen staan of goed uit zijn ogen had kunnen kijken. Maar dat hoorde er bij.*

*Tenslotte pakte Thijs een trapje en haalde de laatste, al gescheurde posters van de muren. 60up ging weer down en de komende maanden zou zijn schoonmaken zich kunnen beperken tot het opruimen van kots, naalden en plastic glazen. Pas dan zou Dé dansavond voor 60+ opnieuw plaatsvinden en zouden de oudjes weer danig uit hun bol gaan.*

*Thijs pakte de vuilniszak en liep fluitend de zaal uit, op weg naar het tentamen Commercieel Management.*

*Paul van Leeuwenkamp*

*On the way to the Commercial Management exam*

*After he had inspected the hall and had put the remaining usable body parts separately Thijs squirted a strong jet of water on the floor and began to scrub starting from the skirting boards.*

*Spray, scrub, spray, scrub . The spilled beer together with the filth formed black goo, which, he deposited every meter in a bucket. In addition, of course, he used his scrubbing brush and dustpan, because even though he had gloves on, you never know. He would not be the first to grab a broken syringe needle or even one with AIDS.*

*Before he threw the goo in the bucket, he wiped it a few times with the brush and carefully pulled out a few coins. There was money thrown around here and this was one of the reasons he was still working here, as the salary itself wasn't very much. The second reason was the body parts could still make some money on the black market.*

Every little bit helped and as a developing citizen you had to pay for everything like your tuition fee, renting your room and to eat something as well. You could probably borrow some money at market rates, but that wasn't enough. You had to earn some extra money. And so it was, spraying, scrubbing, dumping goo in bucket, spray, scrub, dump goo.

It took Thijs a couple of hours trying to get the main hall clean enough for the performance of some rapper the next evening. From under the radiators some usable eyes and fingers appeared and from the corner behind the chairs even a whole foot and forearm. He put the body parts in a plastic bin bag and added the arms and head he had found earlier and put aside. They were wild nights and many would not have been to stand up or could have seen clearly. This was all part of it.

Lastly Thijs picked up a stepladder and removed the last, already torn posters from the walls.

60up went down and for the next few months he would only be cleaning vomit, syringe needles and plastic cups. After that, the dance for 60 + would happen again and the oldies would go mental again. Thijs grabbed the bin bag and walked whistling out of the room on his way to the Commercial Management exam.

Oxana Langbeen Frivool

"En hij was viool." De nieuwslezer liet een stilte vallen en vervolgde met: "Tot slot de weersverwachting tot volgende maand." Een piepje volgde, waarin het weer voor de rest van augustus besloten lag, maar Diana verkoos het dat te negeren. Wat kon haar het weer van de komende maand schelen?

Rare uitdrukking hoor, met betrekking tot zo'n masculiene Centaur. Om die viool te noemen. Ze sloeg er verder geen acht op.

De plantjes in het inversarium zwommen enthousiast tussen de vissen door. Een halfuurtje geleden hingen ze nog wat chagrijnig rond. Ze waren nu echter net gevoerd en hadden er weer zichtbaar zin in. Het bleef een intrigerend gezicht, met de aan stokjes bungelende vissen, die luchthappend het kunstlicht omzetten in voedingsmiddelen en zuurstof. Maar de planten waren wel sierlijk, wanneer zij, met als het ware lange achter hen aan slepende gewaden, langs de stokjes zwommen.

Ze zong een liedje en het duurde even voordat ze beseftte dat het Fish in a tank van de De Werkende Mannen was. Wonderlijk. Hoe kwam ze daar nu toch bij? Ze had het nummer in geen tien jaar meer gehoord! De zilverglanzende witte bloemen, die uit haar mond waren ontstaan, dwarrelden naar de einder. Ze bekeek ze met een serene glimlach.

Gelukkig had ze als kustenaar volop tijd en enkele tellen later zat ze temidden van haar collectie op de grond in de huiskamer. Met onder zich opgerolde benen, vanwege haar lange, gebloemde sarong. Waar was dat album nu toch? Ze kieperde nog een doos ondersteboven. De kat zag z'n kans schoon en vloog haar op de schoot. Het leek alsof zelfs hij het vrolijke deuntje van de werkende mannen nu floot. Maar dat was haar overspannen fantasie, want de melodielijn werd al snel volstrekt anders. Hij begon zijn verenkleed te wassen.

Ze kon het album niet vinden.

De puinhoop op het vloerkleed latend voor wat het was stond ze even later op het balkon van haar houten kluisje. Uitzicht over de zee. Dat bleef prachtig, hoe vaak je er ook naar keek. Het voorrecht van de kustenaar, die aantoonbaar artistiek talent had en die bovendien werd geacht nabij de zee te wonen. Uiteraard op kosten van de gemeenschap. Kustenaars had je nooit genoeg en wie het talent bezat mocht aanspraak maken op beloning en genoot zekere vrijheden.

De hond had het zichtbaar moeilijk met de nabijheid van het zilte zeewater. Zijn takken bleven enigszins ondermaats. Zijn wortels zochten in de zandgrond waarschijnlijk meestentijds vergeefs naar zoet water, dat wellicht alleen kort na een regenbui te vinden viel. Maar ze zat graag in zijn schaduw. En het was wel prettig dat hij zo waaks was. Het kon hier best eenzaam zijn. Ze keek langs de zeereep naar de einder. Ter linker noch rechterzijde was geen enkel ander huis te zien (dat was gisteren wel anders geweest!) en geen mens waagde zich op dit vroege uur op het strand. Straks zou dat wel anders worden, want ze voelde aan haar rechterteennagel dat er mooi weer onderweg was. En haar rechterteennagel had bijna altijd gelijk.

Thee!

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Ze had het schilderij gelukkig juist af, toen hij plotseling verscheen. Het doek stond zacht spinnend op de ezel en de verf grijsde haar toe, vers uitgesmeerd en nog nat van de inspanning. Achter het raam van het huisje ter rechterzijde zwaaide de nieuwe bewoner enthousiast naar haar.

Ineens kreeg ze het gevoel dat er voor haar iets bewóóg en haar blik verplaatste zich.

Hij was leuk om te zien. Zijn donkere haar zat in een olijke kuif, lachend bovenop zijn mannelijke hoofd. Een stoere kaaklijn, precies zoals zij ze graag zag. En dan die ogen, hè. Grote, donkere, prachtige ogen. Zoals je ze in mangastrips ziet. Sop-ogen, noemden ze dat vroeger bij haar thuis (als het huis er eventjes was, dan). Hij had zo'n belachelijke afritsbroek aan, zo'n broek die mensen dragen als ze geen benul hebben of ze een korte broek of ouderwetse pantalon verkiezen. Maar hèm stond het schitterend. Een strak T-shirtje probeerde wanhopig zijn zich daartegen verzettende, gespierde torso te omhullen.

"Hé, hallo....," stamelde ze schaapachtig. Ze leek waarachtig wel een schoolmeisje. Ze kon haar ogen niet van hem af houden. Van weeromstuit had ze twee vlechtjes gekregen, waaraan ze nerveus begon te friemelen. Ze grimlachte naar hem, maar wist verder niets te zeggen. In de verte klonk een eenzame viool.

Hij lachte een goddelijk gebit bloot. Rechte tanden, hagelwit. Natuurlijk. Hoe kon het ook anders! "De deur stond open..." - Zijn handen maakten een inviterend gebaar naar de voordeur, zijn palmen naarboven gericht.

Ze keek naar de voordeur, schuin achter hem, die haar bevestigend toeknikte, en besepte dat ze behoorlijk stond te stuntelen.

"We hadden een afspraak voor vandaag," vervolgde hij.

Het duurde enige tijd voordat de strekking van zijn woorden in haar overspannen hoofd een plek had gevonden.

"Ach...," sprak ze weifelend. Inmiddels was ze erin geslaagd een glimlach te

produceren (als het maar niet eentje met zo'n raar vertrokken bekkie was, zo eentje waarmee ze stevast op een foto bleek te staan...!)

"Ik ben niet zo goed met afspraken en zo." Ze lachte hem vriendelijk toe, oprecht nu. Dat was het understatement van de eeuw: ze was een wandelend rampenfonds met afspraken! Maar tja - dat had je dus met kustenaars, hè...

Ze wapperde haar lange, blonde haar naar achteren en streek ze glad met haar rechterhand. Dat had vroeger weleens gewerkt, tijdens een zomerkamp, bij die hardloper. God... Hoe heette die ook alweer...? Nou ja... Dat was nu niet belangrijk. Wat was ze toch een chaoot. Tjzus - alle albums lagen nog over de grond verspreid. Het leek wel of er in de huiskamer een bom was gevallen!

Hij lachte terug. Ze voelde hoe haar lichaam daarop reageerde.

"Kom," zei ze, enigszins in paniek en om de stilte snel op te vullen. "Laten we lekker op het balkon gaan zitten. Daar is het juiste mengsel van zon en schaduw." Direct daarna flapte ze eruit: "En ik heb vers sap gemaakt." Haar linkerhand maakte een uitnodigend gebaar naar de openstaande balkondeuren.

Ze stapten het balkon op. Diana gebaarde naar de zitsmoelen. Hij keek er verbaasd naar en ze realiseerde zich dat ze nog even iets moest uitleggen.

"Dit zijn zitsmoelen. Ik heb ze een jaar of drie, vier geleden gemaakt." Ze glimlachte toen ze de verrassing in zijn ogen opmerkte.

Hij knikte en liep waarderend om de smoelen heen. De gezichten bloosden van alle aandacht en Rosa, de smoel waarin (of moest je zeggen waarop?) Diana bij voorkeur zat, giechelde zelfs eventjes verlegen. Haar hart sloeg over, toen ze zijn lange, slanke vingers met een teder gebaar langs de bekleding en rugleuning zag gaan, en haar adem stakte even.

"Het zit veel prettiger dan je in eerste instantie denkt, hoor." Alsof hij daaraan zou twijfelen. Hij zou toch zeker zelf ook wel zien dat het heerlijk zitten zou. Ook al was het wel een vreemd idee om je achterwerk op de lippen van de smoel te laten zakken. Sommige mensen kregen daarbij associaties met verstikking.

Het werd haar bijna teveel, toen haar gast plaatsnam op Rosa en ze fantaseerde over de lippen, die zijn strakke mannenkontje mochten betasten.

"Ik zal even het sap uit de koeling halen," pufte ze daarom maar snel, dankbaar met het excuus om even (héél even maar!) alleen met zichzelf in de keuken te mogen zijn. Ze moest eventjes bijkomen.

"Het zit inderdaad lekker," hoorde ze in de keuken zijn zware stem opgetogen, vanaf het balkon. "Heel comfortabel."

"Ja," hijgde ze, terwijl ze zich met beide handen leunend op het aanrecht met enige moeite in evenwicht hield. "Dat valt best mee, hè?" Ze ademde rustig diep in en uit. Het ging gelukkig snel weer wat beter. Met een plof! opende zich de koeling, die zich, hoe voorzichtig en voorkomend ze hem ook behandelde, daar altijd tegen bleef verzetten. Waar stond die verdraaide kan? Ah, daar! Ze graaide om de pakken melk heen, waarachter hij zich angstig probeerde te verschuilen, en greep 'm bij zijn oor. Ze streelde voorzichtig zijn buik, toen ze voelde hoe hij trilde en ze lispelde: "Het valt best mee, hoor. Er overkomt je geen kwaad."

Fred bleek een rijke Centaur te zijn (ook dat nog...!) en hij had haar een tijdje geleden benaderd omdat hij het schilderij van de Lachende Ma(rara)Donna zo aantrekkelijk vond. Hij kocht het en wilde het hoogstpersoonlijk komen ophalen. En daarbij ook meteen met haar kennismaken.

Blijkbaar had ze met hem de afspraak voor vandaag gemaakt. Diana kon zich daar niets van herinneren. Maar dat was niet bijzonder, want zo ging ze nu eenmaal met afspraken om. Voor haar als kustenaar waren afspraken en agenda's immers de ongrijpbare wezens van gene zijde, van de wereldse kant, waarop zij geen vat had en die haar konden bezoeken naar believen. Het was somtijds moeizaam communiceren...

Hij vond haar net zo leuk als andersom. Ze accepteerde het feit zoals ze dergelijke feiten placht te accepteren.

Nadat ze urenlang gepraat hadden, waarbij ze het sap soldaat hadden gemaakt (dat vervolgens enthousiast was heengemarcheerd, begeleid door klaroengeschal en met stampende laarzen), belandden ze dus in haar smetbed. Daar werd menig smetje bijgevoegd. Het was heerlijk en ze voelde zich nadien weer volkomen ontspannen. Hij ook, want hij lag verrukkelijk te slapen. Echt op de manier waarop dat soort mannen dat kunnen doen, ook al bevinden ze zich in een onbekende omgeving.

Eindelijk kon ze hem in zijn volle naaktheid ongegeneerd goed van top tot teen bekijken. Heerlijk.

Ze stond kort nadien langdurig in de deuropening van het balkon. Ze liet de fonkelende windbloemen haar naakte lichaam beroeren. Plezierig was de sensatie waarmee ze haar streelden. Het dunne gordijn fonkelde, wapperend als de sleep van een bruid op de nachtelijke bries.

Ze had tijdens de conversatie ontdekt dat Fred de Centaur was waarover de nieuwslezer vanochtend had gerept.

En ze realiseerde zich ineens dat daarbij niet zozeer gesproken was over viool, maar over frivool.

Ook dát klopte dus...

Oxana Langbeen Bold

"And he was mold." The news reader paused and continued: "Lastly, the weather forecast for the next month." A beep followed, which contained the weather forecast for the rest of August, but Diana chose to ignore that. What did she care what next month's weather would be like?

Such a weird expression; referring to a masculine Centaur as mold. She paid no further attention to it.

The plants in the inversarium swam in between the fish enthusiastically. They had been hanging around crankily just half an hour ago. They had been fed now, however, and were visibly happy. It was always an intriguing sight, with the fish dangling from sticks, converting the artificial light into nutrients and oxygen by gasping for air. The plants were graceful, though, with their so-called robes flowing behind them as they swam past the sticks.

She sang a song and it took her a while to realise it was Fish in a Tank by The

Working Men. How peculiar. What had given her that idea? It had been ten years since she had last heard that song! The white flowers which had risen from her mouth gleamed silvery and fluttered towards the horizon. She watched them with a serene smile.

She, as a coastist, fortunately had plenty of time and several seconds later she was sat on the living room floor amidst her collection. She sat with her legs curled under her, because of her long, flowery sarong. Where had that album gone? She turned another box upside down. The cat seized the opportunity and jumped into her lap. It seemed like even it was whistling the cheerful tune by the working men. That was just her overworked imagination, however, because the melody quickly changed completely. It started washing his plumage.

She could not find the album.

Moments later, she left the mess on the rug for what it was and stood on the balcony of her wooden peach house. View of the sea. She never grow tired of it, no matter how many times she looked at it. The privilege of the coastist, who had proven to be talented and who was expected to live near the sea. At the expense of the community, of course. There were never enough coastists and those who had the talent could claim rewards and enjoy certain freedoms.

The dog was visibly uncomfortable being this close to the salty sea water. Its branches looked a little small. Its roots were searching for fresh water, which might only be found shortly after a rainshower. She enjoyed sitting in the dog's shadow, though. The fact that it was very watchful was nice, too. It could be quite lonely here. She looked past the sea strip and at the horizon. Neither on the right nor on the left were any other houses in sight (things had been very different yesterday!) and no one would dare venture to the beach at this early hour. This would soon change, because she could feel in her right toenail that fair weather was underway. And her right toenail was almost always right.

Tea!

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Luckily, she had just finished the painting when he suddenly appeared. The canvas was purring softly on the easel and the paint was grinning at her, freshly smeared and still wet from the exertion. In the window of the house to her right, the new occupant waved at her enthusiastically.

She suddenly had the feeling that something was stirring in front of her and her gaze moved.

He was nice to look at. He had a rogue quiff in his dark hair, smiling on top of his masculine head. A sturdy jawline, just the way she liked it. Not to mention his eyes. Big, dark, beautiful eyes. Like those you see in manga comics. Sappy eyes, as her family used to say back at home (if the house was actually there for a change). He was wearing a pair of those ridiculous zip-off pants, the kind people wear when they have no idea whether they prefer trousers or shorts. They looked wonderful on him, though. A tight T-shirt was trying desperately to envelop his resisting, muscular torso.

'Hey, hello...' she stammered sheepishly. She sounded like a schoolgirl. She could not keep her eyes off him. Due to the shock she had grown two braids, which she started



fiddling with nervously. She smiled at him, but did not know what else to say. In the distance, a lonely violin was playing.

He smiled, exposing his divine teeth. Straight teeth, pearly white. Of course. How could it be different! "The door was open..." – His hands made an invitational gesture towards the frontdoor, his palms facing up.

She looked at the frontdoor, diagonally behind him, which nodded at her affirmatively, and realised that she was blundering quite badly.

"We had an appointment for today," he added.

It took some time before the meaning of his words had found a place in her overworked head.

"Ah..." she spoke hesitantly. In the meantime, she had succeeded in producing a smile (hopefully it was not a weirdly distorted grimace, like those she always ended up with in pictures...!)

"I'm not very good at appointments and stuff." She smiled at him amiably, sincerely this time. That was the understatement of the century: she was a walking disaster when it came to appointments. Well, that is just the way coastists are, right?

She flipped her hair back and smoothed it down with her right hand. It had worked before, during summer camp, with that runner. God... What was his name again? Oh well... It did not matter now. She was such a scatterbrain. Jesus – all the albums were still scattered on the floor. It looked like a bomb had gone off in the living room!

He smiled back. She felt her body respond.

"Come," she said, panicking a little and trying to break the silence quickly. "Let's sit on the balcony. It has the best mixture of sun and shade." Right after that she blurted out: "And I made some fresh juice." Her left hand made an invitational gesture towards the open balcony doors.

They stepped onto the balcony. Diana gestured towards the sitty faces. He looked at them in surprise and she realised she had to explain something first.

"They are sitty faces. I made them about three, four years ago." She smiled when she noticed the surprise in his eyes.

He nodded and walked around the sitty faces appreciatively. All this attention made the faces blush and Rosa, the face Diana preferred sitting in (or should you say on?) even giggled shyly. Her heart skipped a beat when she saw his long, slim fingers gently stroke the upholstery and back of the chair, and she gasped.

"They're really much more comfortable than you'd think." As if he would doubt that. Surely, he could see for himself that they would be very comfortable. Even if it was a strange idea to lower your backside onto the lips of the sitty face. Some people associated it with suffocation.

It almost became too much for her when her guest took a seat on Rosa and she fantasised about the lips, which were allowed to touch his tight behind.

"I'll go get the juice from the refrigerator," she puffed, grateful for an excuse to be by herself in the kitchen for a moment (just for a bit!). She had to regain her breath. "They really are comfortable," she heard his deep voice say cheerfully from the kitchen. "Very comfortable."

"Yes," she panted, while she leaned on the counter with both hands, struggling a little to keep herself balanced. "They're not bad, right?" She inhaled and exhaled slowly.

Fortunately, she was quickly feeling a little better. The refrigerator, which always offered resistance no matter how carefully and considerately she handled it, opened with a plop! Where was that darn jug? Ah, there it was! She reached around the milk cartons, which it was desperately trying to hide behind, and grabbed it by its ear. She softly stroked its belly when she felt it tremble and she whispered: "Don't worry. Nothing bad will happen to you."

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Fred turned out to be a wealthy Centaur (to top it all off...!) and he had approached her a while ago because he thought the painting of the Smiling Ma(rara)Donna was very attractive. He had bought it and wanted to pick it up in person, and meet her at the same time.

Apparently, she had made an appointment with him for today. Diana could not remember it. That was nothing out of the ordinary, though, because that was just the way she dealt with appointments. To her, as a coastist, appointments and diaries were intangible creatures from beyond, from the worldly side, which she had no grip on and which could visit her whenever they pleased. It made communicating difficult sometimes...

He liked her just as much as she liked him. She accepted that fact in the way she usually accepted such facts.

After they had talked for hours, during which they had dispatched the juice (which had then marched away enthusiastically, accompanied by clarion call and pounding boots), they ended up in her blot bed. Numerous blots were added. It was delightful and she felt completely relaxed afterwards. He did too, because he was sound asleep. In the way only men like this one were able to sleep, even if they were in unfamiliar surroundings.

She could finally take a good look at him in full nudity, unashamed. Bliss.

Afterwards, she stood in the doorway of the balcony for a long time. She let the sparkling wind flowers touch her naked body. The sensation of them touching her was pleasant. The thin curtain glistened, fluttering in the wind like a bride's train in the nocturnal breeze.

During their conversation, she had learned that Fred was the Centaur the newsreader was talking about this morning.

She suddenly realised that they had not been talking about mold, but about bold. It was all true...

Remco Meisner Kopie

Brian, eerste monteur van de reparatieafdeling van Falk in Old York, stapte opgewekt fluitend de werkplaats binnen. Knallend sloot de deur zich achter hem, de echo's galmden vermoeid door de holle ruimte.

Een zwartbehaarde, robuust gevormde man kroop achter een werkbank vandaan en groette kort.

'Zo vroeg al aan 't werk?'

*'Ja,' bromde Wilcox. 'Die vervloekte kopieermachine is nog steeds niet gerepareerd. En je weet hoe de baas is!'*

*'Een beetje opvliegerig heè?'*

*'Zeg maar gerust explosief!'*

*Brian lachte daar hartelijk om, en hij volgde Wilcox toen deze hem wenkte. Hij bleef staan bij een geopende machine.*

*'Is dat niet dat ding van The Old York Times?'*

*'Ja,' bevestigde Wilcox. 'Hoezo?'*

*'Ik weet het niet precies meer. Ik geloof dat er in de krant van vanmorgen iets over werd geschreven.' Brian zocht in zijn binnenzakken en haalde een opgevouwen dunne krant tevoorschijn. Hij vouwde hem zorgvuldig open. 'Ja. Zie je wel! Op de voorpagina staat het: Hoofdredacteur door psycholoog vals van kranzinnigheid beschuldigd. Een grote kop in The Old York Times van vanmorgen. Mooie boel!'*

*'Hier staat dat hij werd vrijgesproken wegens gebrek aan bewijs.' Wilcox grijnsde breed. 'Ik denk dat alle journalisten een beetje gek zijn.'*

*'Dat zal het zijn!' Hij lachte kort en stopte de krant weer weg. 'Nou brave borst, wat mankeert er aan dit ding?'*

*Wilcox wees met een besmeurde vinger naar een vettig mechanisme, onderin het toestel. 'Dáár, het overbrengingsmechanisme van de papierrol blijft steken. Ik weet niet waardoor.'*

*'Weet je wat, neem jij die reparatie van die drukpers maar van mij over, dan kijk ik wel of ik met dit beestje raad weet.'*

*'Graag! Bedankt. Dat klereding komt me m'n keel uit!' Wilcox wees naar een deuropening. 'De onderdelen liggen op die werkbank, en de mantel staat in de schuur.'*

*'Oké. Ik ga me eerst verkleden.'*

*Even later verscheen een in een vlekkerige overall geklede Brian Lassander in de werkplaats. Hij begon zijn karwei. De rest van de ochtend zou uitsluitend geklik in de werkplaats hoorbaar zijn, regelmatig afgewisseld door een welluidende vloek.*

*Wilcox had een betrekkelijk eenvoudig werkje aan de drukpers, enkel het vervangen van een veer; heel wat gemakkelijker dan het repareren van de driedimensionale kopieermachine, waaraan Brian nu werkte.*

*Harry Wilcox bevestigde juist de allerlaatste schroef, toen een luid gezoem en geratel klonk vanuit de aangrenzende ruimte. Hij glimlachte. Zo te horen had Brian het kopieerapparaat gerepareerd was hij het nu aan 't testen. Maar deze gedachte werd bliksemsnel de grond ingeboord, toen een rauwe gil door de hersenen van tweede monteur Wilcox sneed. Zijn adem stokte, en het duurde enkele seconden voordat hij zijn positieven weer voldoende bij elkaar had om te reageren.*

*Tegen de tijd dat hij naar de kopieermachine beende was het gegil overgegaan in een benauwd gerochel, dat het ergste deed vermoeden. Hij holde verder, zijn hand ging snel naar de hoofdschakelaar, en de machine kwam langzaam tot rust.*

*Het gerochel was inmiddels ook verstomd, en Wilcox begon te zoeken naar zijn collega, die zich ergens in de machine moest bevinden. Hij zag een voet onder het apparaat uit steken, en hij trok de arme Brian daaraan onder zijn kwelgeest vandaan.*

*Brian was lijkleek, maar leek niet verwond, want hij opende na korte tijd de ogen. 'Dat rot ding begon opeens te draaien,' mompelde hij zwakjes.*

‘Ja. Ik ben je wat vergeten te zeggen. Je hebt dat palletje naast de papierrol waarschijnlijk aangeraakt, en dan start het apparaat. Maar gelukkig ben je niet gewond, dus we mogen niet klagen.’

‘Zeg dat wel! Voor hetzelfde geld had ik tussen die tandwielen gezeten!’ De eerste monteur huiverde. ‘Dat had me op z'n minst een paar vingers gekost!’ Hij keek op naar Harry, en zag dat deze naar een punt achter zijn rug staarde. Brian krabbelde overeind. ‘Wat is er? Wat kijk je vreemd?’

Toen hij zich omdraaide zag hij het ook. Een schok trok door zijn lichaam. Naast het kopieerapparaat stonden zes exacte kopieën van hemzelf!

Zijn mond zakte open. En bij alle zes de kopieën gebeurde hetzelfde. ‘Wat is dit?’ klonk het uit zeven kelen.

Harry, die tot dat ogenblik verstomd had staan toekijken, waagde het eindelijk zijn mond open te doen. ‘Heel eenvoudig. Je hebt zes kopieën van jezelf gemaakt, waarde Brian. Beter nog: je hebt een vierdimensionale kopieermachine uitgevonden!’

‘Ja. Prachtig,’ riepen weer de zeven stemmen in koor. ‘Maar wat nu?’

‘Tja, daar vraag je me wat.’ Harry schudde vermoeid met zijn hoofd. ‘Dat zou ik ook zomaar niet weten!’

‘Kunnen jullie,’ begon Brian zevenkoppig te spreken, ‘je handen stilhouden, terwijl ik de mijne beweeg?’ Brian tilde zijn rechterarm op, en bij alle zes de kopieën gebeurde hetzelfde.

‘Ze zijn volkomen afhankelijk van jou, Brian,’ zei Harry. ‘Ze bevinden zich natuurlijk in hetzelfde tijd-ruimtevak als jij, en zijn dus gedwongen bij je te blijven en alles te doen dat jij doet.’

Lassander zuchtte zevenmondig en ging zitten, waarbij de zes kopieën zijn houding nabootsten, maar dan zonder stoel.

‘Dus ik raak ze niet kwijt, wat ik ook probeer?’

Harry schudde zijn hoofd. ‘Volgens mij niet. Zelfs uit de grootste en sterkste kluis zullen ze ontsnappen; de krachten van de dimensies zijn groot, onmeetbaar groot vrees ik.’

‘Dit zal mijn vrouw, vooral 's nachts, niet erg leuk vinden,’ galmde het door de werkplaats. ‘Ik heb er geen trek in de rest van mijn leven met zes kopieën rond te blijven sjouwen.’ Hij keek zijn collega wanhopig aan. ‘Hier móet toch iets op te bedenken zijn?’ vroeg hij, bijna smekend.

Beide monteurs begonnen te peinzen, en de kopieën peinsden mee.

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Een week later bracht Brian een bezoek aan de hoofdredacteur van de Old York Times, de krant met de grootste oplage ter wereld.

Deze liet hem een halfuurtje gaarkoken in zijn sop, in de wachtkamer, alvorens zijn secretaresse opdracht te geven hem binnen te laten.

‘Dag Lassander,’ verwelkomde de hoofdredacteur hem.

‘Dag Wilkins,’ zei Brian koeltjes. ‘Je wilde me spreken?’

‘Ja. Over die uitvinding van je.’

‘Dat dacht ik al. Het is me gedurende enige tijd opgevallen dat je probeert het

zakendoen van mijn kant te verhinderen door negatieve artikelen te plaatsen in die krant van je.' Brian kookte innerlijk, maar bleef van buiten ijzig zakelijk.

'Kom kom, niet zo vijandig! Vertel me eens: hoe heb je het probleem met die zes kopieën van jezelf opgelost? Dat lijkt me een aardig verhaaltje.'

'Dat je ongetwijfeld zult verdraaien tot iets dat zich tégen me keert. Maar niettemin wil ik het je best vertellen.' Brian stak een vette sigaar op, zonder de ander er een aan te bieden. 'Het was eigenlijk heel eenvoudig. Ik deelde aan mijn kopieën lucifers uit, en stak er zelf een aan.'

'Wat alle kopieën natuurlijk óók deden,' onderbrak Wilkins hem.

Brian scheen geërgerd. 'Inderdaad. Vervolgens hield ik de brandende lucifer bij mijn voeten. De kopieën deden dat ook, en omdat zij van papier waren, vlogen ze in brand. Heel simpel.' Hij tikte nonchalant de as van zijn sigaar op het hoogpolige tapijt. 'Maar nu iets anders,' sprak hij na een korte pauze. 'Vanwaar die negatieve publicaties over mij en mijn uitvinding?'

'Kom, Brian, je wilt toch niet zeggen dat die van enige invloed zijn op jouw zaken? Je hebt in enkele dagen aan de uitvinding al tienduizenden Euro's verdiend! Je hebt nog voor miljoenen in de pen! Denk je nu werkelijk dat ik, met mijn krant, daar ook maar iets aan zal kunnen veranderen?'

'Neen, dat betwijfel ik. Mijn compagnon denkt er net zo over. Maar niettemin zal je me veel geld gaan kosten als je die campagne nog lang volhoudt.'

'Je zult evengoed miljardair worden,' sprak Wilkins schouderophalend.

'Uiteraard.'

Weer een korte stilte.

'Je kunt me niet tegenhouden met mijn artikelen, waarde Lassander. Voor de rechtbank sta je met lege handen.'

'Maar wat wil je van me?'

'Het komt hierop neer,' zei de ander, plotseling ter zake komend. 'Je hebt die uitvinding gedaan, doordat je mijn kopieermachine repareerde. Ik vind dus dat ik recht heb op een even groot deel van de winst als jij en je compagnon. Eén derde van de opbrengst.'

Deze man was duidelijk waanzinnig, overspannen wellicht, besepte Brian. Zijn blik verborg een bijna koortsachtig verlangen naar geld en macht. En daarvan bezat hij al te veel... 'En anders?' vroeg hij koel.

'Anders zal ik een definitieve maatregel nemen,' vervolgde de redacteur, terwijl hij een blopper uit zijn binnenzak haalde. 'Hij staat ingesteld op waanzin. Weet je hoe het is om waanzinnig te zijn?' Wilkins lachte hijgerig.

'Jij wel, geloof ik?' vroeg Brian met een grijns rond zijn lippen.

Wilkins' blik verhardde. 'Doe je het, of doe je het niet?' vroeg hij met overlaande stem, terwijl hij al half overeind kwam.

'Natuurlijk niet!' Brian keek hem, nog steeds kalmerend glimlachend, aan. 'Je bent gek, Wilkins. Je kunt beter met pensioen gaan. Het stijgt je naar je hoofd. Ik ben degene die de vierdimensionale kopieermachine heeft uitgevonden, en ik ben degene die het principe vervolmaakt heeft, zodat de kopieën ok onafhankelijk van het origineel kunnen denken en handelen. En het feit dat het jouw kopieermachine was die ik per ongeluk ombouwde, en dat ik daardoor de uitvinding feitelijk deed, heeft daar niets mee te maken.'

Wilkins wachtte niet op het einde van deze zedepreek. Hij haalde de trekker van zijn blopper over. Een lichtende straal spoot uit de punt van het wapen en ketste af op het nog steeds zalvend glimlachende gezicht van de ex-monteur.

Wilkins keek verbaasd naar Brian, die ongedeerd was, en vervolgens naar het wapen. Toen schoot hij nogeens, en nogeens. Maar steeds ketste de straal af op de glimlach van de ander.

'Beste Wilkins,' zei Brian tegen zijn aanvaller, die langzaam in zijn stoel zeeg. 'Ik ben een kopie,' en toen de ander hem nog steeds ongelovig aankeek, vervolgde hij: 'Ik ben van polypipostyreen, niet te verwoesten!'

Wilkins bleef met open mond zitten, en staarde.

'Ziezo, nu kan ik je laten opsluiten in een inrichting - voor je eigen bestwil.'" Hij grijnsde vriendelijk, maar niet geheel gespeend van de smaak der victorie, en wenkte de man die vanaf het raam achter Wilkins alles had gefilmd. Met een klik schakelde hij de geluidsrecorder uit. 'Zullen we dan maar gaan?' opperde hij, terwijl hij overeind kwam.

### Remco Meisner Copy

Brian, chief mechanic for Falk's repairs department in Old York, walked into the workshop, whistling cheerfully. The door closed behind him with a bang, the echos resounded wearily in the hollow room.

A black-bearded, robustly shaped man crawled out from behind a work bench and greeted him briefly.

'At work this early?'

'Yes,' Wilcox hummed. 'That cursed copying machine still hasn't been fixed. And you know what the boss is like!'

'A little quick-tempered, right?'

'More like explosive!'

Brian laughed heartily at that, and he followed Wilcox when he beckoned. He stopped at an opened machine.

'Isn't that the thing from The Old York Times?'

'Yes,' Wilcox confirmed. 'Why?'

'I don't remember exactly. I believe I read something about it in the newspaper this morning.' Brian searched his inside pockets and pulled out a folded, thin newspaper. He unfolded it carefully. 'Yes. Here it is! It's on the frontpage: Chief Editor Falsely Accused of Insanity by Psychologist. A big headline in The Old York Times from this morning. That's just great!' 'It says here that he was acquitted due to lack of evidence.' Wilcox grinned broadly. 'I think all journalists are a little crazy.'

'That must be it!' He laughed curtly and tucked the newspaper away again. 'Well, good fellow, what is the matter with this thing?' Wilcox pointed a smudged finger at a greasy mechanism, at the bottom of the machine. 'There, the paper roll's gearing mechanism is jammed. I don't know what's causing it.'

'You know what, how about you take over repairs on that printing press from me, and I'll see if I find out what to do with this thing.'

'Yes, please! Thank you. I'm fed up with that bloody thing!' Wilcox pointed at a doorway. 'The parts are on that workbench, and the casing is in the shed.'

*'Okay. I'll go change first.'*

*Moments later, Brian Lassander appeared in the workshop dressed in a splodgy boilersuit. He got started on the job. It was quiet in the workshop for the remainder of the morning, with the exception of clicking sounds alternated with melodious curses.*

*Wilcox did not have too much trouble fixing the printing press. He only had to replace a spring; much easier than repairing the three-dimensional copying machine Brian was working on now.*

*Harry Wilcox was just securing the last screw, when loud buzzing and rattling sounds started coming from the adjoining room. He smiled. Sounded like Brian had fixed the copying machine and was testing it now. This thought was quickly forgotten, however, when a loud scream pierced second mechanic Wilcox' brain. He gasped, and it took him several seconds to regain his senses enough to respond.*

*\*\*\**

*By the time he got to the copying machine, the screaming had turned into a smothered gurgling, which made him suspect the worst. He kept running, quickly turned the main switch with his hand, and the machine slowly settled down.*

*The gurgling had died down as well, and Wilcox started looking for his colleague, who had to be inside the machine somewhere. He saw a foot sticking out from under the machine and he pulled it to get poor Brian out from underneath his tormentor.*

*Brian was pale as a sheet, but did not seem hurt, because he opened his eyes after a short time. 'The bloody thing turned on all of a sudden,' he mumbled weakly.*

*'Yes. I forgot to tell you something. You probably touched that catch next to the roll of paper, and that starts the machine. But luckily you weren't hurt, so we can't complain.'*

*'You can say that again! I could have gotten stuck in those gears!' The chief mechanic shuddered. 'That would've cost me a few fingers at least!' He looked up at Harry, and saw that he was staring at a point behind his back. Brian scrambled to his feet. 'What's wrong? Why do you have that strange look on your face?'*

*When he turned around, he saw it too. A tremor went through his body. Next to the copying machine were six exact copies of himself!*

*His mouth dropped open. And the same thing happened with all six copies. 'What is this?' it came from seven throats.*

*Harry, who had been watching in silence until now, finally dared open his mouth. 'It's quite simple. You made six copies of yourself, dear Brian. Better yet: you've invented a four-dimensional copying machine!'*

*'Yes. Wonderful,' the seven voices shouted, in unison. 'But what now?'*

*'Well, that's a good question.' Harry shook his head wearily. 'I have no idea!'*

*'Could you,' Brian started talking seven-headed, 'hold your hands still, while I move mine?' Brian lifted his right arm, and the same thing happened with all six copies.*

*'They're completely dependent on you, Brian,' Harry said. 'They're in the same space-time continuum as you, of course, which forces them to stay with you and do everything you do.'*

*Lassander sighed through seven mouths and sat down, while the six copies imitated his position, except without chairs.*

*'So I can't get rid of them, no matter what I try?'*

*Harry shook his head. 'I don't think so. They'll escape from even the biggest and strongest safe; the forces of the dimensions are great, immeasurably great, I'm afraid.'*

*'My wife won't like this, especially at night,' it resounded in the workshop. 'I don't feel like walking around with six copies for the rest of my life.' He looked at his colleague desperately. 'There has to be a solution for this, right?' he asked, almost pleadingly.*

*Both mechanics began to ponder, and the copies pondered along with them.*

*\*\*\**

*One week later, Brian visited the chief editor of The Old York Times, the newspaper with the largest circulation in the world.*

*The editor let Brian boil in his own anger for half an hour, in the waiting room, before telling his secretary to let him in.*

*'Hello Lassander,' the chief editor welcomed him.*

*'Hello Wilkins,' Brian said coolly. 'You wanted to talk to me?'*

*'Yes. About that invention of yours.'*

*'Just like I thought. I've noticed for some time now that you've been trying to keep me from doing business by writing negative stories in that newspaper of yours.' Brian was boiling on the inside, but remained icily professional on the outside.*

*'Come now, don't be hostile! Tell me: how did you solve the problem of your six copies? It seems like quite the story to me.'*

*'Which you'll undoubtedly twist into something to use against me. Nonetheless, I'm willing tell you about it.'*

*Brian lit up a fat cigar, without offering one to the chief editor. 'It was quite simple, really. I handed matches to my copies and lit one myself.'*

*'And of course, all the copies did the same thing,' Wilkins interrupted him.*

*Brian seemed annoyed. 'Exactly. Subsequently, I held the burning match next to my feet. The copies did the same thing, and since they were made of paper, they caught fire. Quite simple.' He nonchalantly flicked his cigar ashes onto the high pile carpet. 'But let's change the subject,' he said after a short pause. 'Why those negative publications about me and my invention?'*

*'Come, Brian, you don't mean to tell me that those have influenced your business in any way? You've earned tens of thousands of euros on that invention in a matter of days! You'll make millions! Do you really think that I, with my newspaper, can change that?'*

*'No, I doubt it. My business partner feels the same way, but nonetheless, you're going to cost me a lot of money if you continue that campaign for much longer.'*

*'You'll still be a billionaire,' Wilkins said, shrugging.*

*'Of course.'*

*Another short silence.*

*'You can't stop me from publishing articles, dear Lassander. You'll go to court empty-handed.'*

*'But what do you want from me?'*

*'It comes down to this,' the other man said, suddenly getting to the point. 'You*



*invented something, because you were fixing my copying machine. I believe I'm entitled to an equal share of the profits, just like you and your partner. One third of the profits.'*

*This man was obviously insane, perhaps overworked, Brian realised. His eyes harboured an almost feverish longing for money and power. And he already had too much of it... 'Or else?' he asked coolly.*

*'Or I'll take permanent measures,' the chief editor went on to say, while taking a blopper from his inside pocket. 'It's set to insanity. Do you know what it's like to be insane?' Wilkins laughed wheezingly.*

*'You do, I believe?' Brian asked with a grin on his face.*

*Wilkins' expression hardened. 'Will you do it, or not?' he asked with a catch in his voice, almost getting up.*

*'Of course not!' Brian looked at him, still smiling soothingly. 'You're insane, Wilkins. You're better off retiring. It's getting to your head. I'm the one who invented the four-dimensional copying machine, and I'm the one who perfected the principle, so that copies can also think and act independently of the original. The fact that it was your copying machine I accidentally converted, and the fact that I actually made the invention through it, has nothing to do with it.'*

*Wilkins did not wait for Brian to finish his lecture. He pulled the blopper's trigger. A beam of light erupted from the tip of the weapon and bounced off the – still smiling unctuously – former mechanic's face.*

*Wilkins looked at Brian, who was unharmed, with surprise, and then looked at the weapon. He fired again, and again. The beam bounced off the other man's face every time.*

*'Dear Wilkins,' Brian said to his attacker, who slowly sank back into his seat. 'I am a copy,' and when the chief editor kept looking at him in disbelief, he added: 'I'm made of polypipostyreen, indestructable!'*

*Wilkins sat and stared, with his mouth agape.*

*'There, now I can have you put away in an institution – for your own good!' He grinned amiably, but not completely devoid of the taste of victory, and beckoned the man who had been filming everything from the window behind Wilkins. He turned off the sound recorder with a click. 'Shall we go then?' he proposed, as he stood up.*

*Michael Blommaert De Godgestalt*

*Het kantoor van Vincent Specter lag op de grens van twaalf stadszones in drie woonniveau's tegelijk. Zijn keus voor de plek was weloverwogen, omdat die hem toegang verschaftte tot de Gestalt van de vele bevolkingsgroepen in Nueva York op Nueva Terra, zoals Halcyon Ivd in de volksmond genoemd werd.*

*Het gebouw waarin hij vertoefde was een van de oudste koloniale betonkolossen, een bijna volledig zelfvoorzienende arcologie die nu dankzij haar ligging en uitgebreide renovaties was omgevormd tot luxe woonelementen voor de gegoede burgerij. Vince rekende zich daar graag onder. Hij woonde er, maar hij ontving er ook de gasten van zijn adviesbureau.*

*De inrichting van zijn kantoor was een zorgvuldige replica van de voorstelling in de gangster- en detective platfilms van enkele eeuwen terug. Het effect op zijn bezoekers*

was niet alleen waardevol, maar ook verhelderend. Waar de inwoners van de metropool Nueva York gewend waren aan pure gebruiksvoorwerpen die zichzelf opborgden wanneer niet gebruikt, was de overdaad die hij vertoonde met zijn echt leren bank en zijn notenhouten bureau voor velen overweldigend. Aan de muur hing een levensgrote replica van een twintigste-eeuwse filmposter van Bogart en Astor. Alles was erop gericht zijn bezoekers af te leiden. Het hielp hem zijn potentiële klanten beter inschatten, zowel hun problemen als de dikte van hun kredietlijn. Noodzakelijk ook in zijn beroep, want zijn klanten vertegenwoordigden meestal de extremen van de samenleving, van bendeleiders tot politici, van holosterren tot beroemde wetenschappers. Allen met problemen die onoplosbaar leken, tot Vince zich erover boog en alles in een helder perspectief plaatste.

Op een mooie yule-morgen landden meerdere zwevers op het matglazen dak van het gebouw. Dat op zich zette Vince al aan het denken. Vervolgens stroomden zwaarbewapende mannen en vrouwen in zwarte pakken met communicators de gangen van het gebouw in en werd zijn deur hardhandig opengegooid. Vince bleef onbewogen zitten en wachtte op het belangrijke bezoek dat deze voorhoede aankondigde. Een voor een stapten Carlos Salazar van het Plebiscaat, Jannes de Torquemada van het Caelicorum en Juan Franco van de Militia Popular naar binnen. Zij drieën vormden het Triumviraat, de leiders die volk, kerk en leger vertegenwoordigden.

Vince Specter zag ze binnenkomen en voelde de sfeer in de ruimte veranderen, zoals enkel een echte Gestaltfluisteraar dat kon. Van zijn niveau waren er op de vele koloniën slechts enkelen, en geen van hen had de kennis en geestelijke bagage die hij bezat om betekenissen te kunnen duiden. De mannen hier aanwezig waren openlijk vijandig naar elkaar, maar er was een onderliggende reden die hen hier samenbracht en Vince voelde die als een tastbare aanwezigheid: angst.

‘Heren, neemt u plaats,’ zei hij. Hij lachte hen vriendelijk toe terwijl ze elk ongemakkelijk in een van de gemakkelijke stoelen gingen zitten.

‘Nu dan, wie van u voelt zich geroepen mij uw probleem te vertellen?’ vroeg hij nog steeds allervriendelijkst. ‘U weet wel, dat probleem dat u angst aanjaagt...’

‘Hoe weet u daarvan?’ vroeg Jannes De Torquemada. Hij keek opzij naar Salazar en Franco. ‘Mij is verzekerd dat buiten het Triumviraat slechts een enkeling op de hoogte is, laat staan een... burger.’ Het laatste woord kwam eruit alsof hij een vieze smaak in zijn mond had.

‘Ik denk dat meneer Specter ons gewoon goed leest,’ zei Juan Franco. ‘Ik heb er een paar van zijn soort in mijn staf. Maar die zijn minder capabel dan hij.’

Vince glimlachte naar de aanvoerder van het leger en knikte naar hem. ‘Mijn honorarium bedraagt twaalfduizend credits per dag, buiten de onkosten. Ik ga ervan uit dat dit geen probleem is voor het Triumviraat?’

Carlos Salazar wierp een kredietstick op zijn bureau. Het ding gloeide bijna violet ten teken van een extreem hoge limiet. ‘Volstaat dit?’

Vince knikte langzaam. ‘Voorlopig. Gezien de aard van uw bezoek wil ik u erop wijzen dat er gevarentoeslag wordt gerekend, wanneer ik daar de noodzaak toe acht.’

‘Duidelijk,’ zei Carlos Salazar. ‘Dan wil ik u nu verzoeken met ons mee te gaan. Er draait een voorstelling die we moeten zien.’

Gedecideerd pakte Vince Specter zijn mantel en hoofddeksel, gestijld naar de ouderwetse Aardse Stetson. Hij inspecteerde zijn voorkomen in de spiegel in zijn kantoor.

Zijn bakkebaarden waren doorspekt met grijze haren, maar zijn haar was nog donkerbruin. Zijn bruine ogen glinsterden in de schaduw die de hoed over zijn ogen wierp. Hij zag eruit als een heer van stand uit voorbije eeuwen, dus net voldoende om zich in het openbaar te kunnen vertonen.

De gangen, hallen en roltrappen werden zwaar bewaakt door meer bewapende mannen en vrouwen in de bekende zwarte pakken. Vince was verbaasd over de aantallen mensen die waren ingezet. Het Triumviraat was weliswaar belangrijk voor Nueva York, maar ook weer niet zo dat dit vertoon nodig was. Tenzij er een -vermeende- dreiging van buitenaf was, gericht op de regeringsleiders.

Een drietal zwevers wachtte hen buiten op, elk voorzien van een ander regeringslogo. Vince liet zich in de middelste plaatsen, samen met Jannes De Torquemada. Er was meer dan voldoende ruimte om alle aanwezigen te herbergen, maar hij begreep de noodzaak van spreiding van risico zodat elk van de regeringsleiders vervoerd werd in zijn eigen zwever. Hij merkte aan alles dat zijn mede-passagier nerveus was, van de zenuwtic in zijn linkeroog tot het plukken aan een eeltkorstje op zijn linkerpink.

‘Uw geloof lijkt te wankelen, heer De Torquemada,’ zei Vince zacht terwijl de zwever opsteeg.

Jannes De Torquemada veegde zweet van zijn voorhoofd. ‘Onzin. Mijn geloof in de Heer en zijn Voorouders is sterk als altijd.’

Vince herkende de leugen onder de ontkenning direct. ‘Toch zie ik u niet de geloofsgebaren maken die u altijd in het openbaar bezigt. Ik verwacht dat deze gebaren, zoniet gemeend, dan toch minstens tweede natuur zijn geworden. Dus u hebt nooit geloofd en bent een goed acteur. Of u gelooft, maar uw geloof is geschaad, het wankelt.’

‘Ik kan u niets vertellen, behalve dat mijn geloof sterk is.’ Hij aarzelde. ‘Ik zal u geven dat aanvullende versterking welkom is.’ Met die woorden keerde hij zich van Vincent af en keek uit een van de raampjes naar de uitgestrekte zee van lichtjes die onder hen voorbijgleed.

‘Ik zeg: dat is een understatement,’ fluisterde Vince, meer voor zichzelf dan voor iemand anders. Op dat moment vloog de zwever het Triumfasca in, het hoogste regeringsgebouw van Nueva York.

Jannes De Torquemada stond op en keek Vince aan met een boze uitdrukking op zijn gezicht. ‘Denk wat u wilt,’ zei hij. De passen waarmee hij de zwever verliet waren nijdig. Vince glimlachte enkel. Zijn mede-passagier had uitstekende oren.

Hun escorte voerde hen door de verlaten gangen van het gebouw. Kantoortuinen vol schermen en communicators waren leeg en verlaten, geen mens meer te zien. Hier en daar stonden schermen die door werknemers enkel op slot waren gezet, maar niet eens uitgeschakeld.

‘Ik zou bijna denken dat het gebouw ontruimd is. Gebeurt dat niet alleen bij een noodgeval of calamiteit?’ vroeg Vince.

‘We zijn gesteld op onze privacy wanneer we gedrieën bij elkaar zijn. En als dat betekent dat we een paar dozijn pennenlikkers naar huis moeten sturen, dan moet dat maar.’ Jannes de Torquemada volgde netjes de bordjes auditorium, tot ze in de verte een groep beveiligers zagen staan die al eerder gearriveerd waren. De regeringsleiders convergeerden bij de ingang van de zaal, begeleid door aides en informanten die hen van het laatste nieuws op de hoogte stelden.

Juan Franco gooide de deuren open en liep direct de zaal in die was ingericht als een ouderwetse filmzaal, in een stijl die Vince Specter goedkeurde. Fluwelen stoelen, hoogpolig, zwart tapijt en geluidsdempende muren. Hij vermoedde dat de muren holoprojectoren en meer cinefiele apparatuur bevatten. Iemand had de beveiligers geïnstrueerd buiten te blijven zodat de zaal grotendeels leeg bleef.

Hij overhandigde zijn mantel en hoed aan een hulpje en werd vervolgens op de voorste rij geplaatst. De achterliggende twintig rijen bleven leeg. Aan weerszijden namen de drie mannen plaats. Naast hen en achter hen gingen de hulpjes, vleiers en lakeien zitten. De stilte die volgde was bijna tastbaar.

‘Ik neem aan dat de voorstelling zo begint?’ vroeg Vince. ‘Heeft iemand aan popcorn gedacht?’

Juan Franco keek opzij. ‘Zijn we iets vergeten?’

Vince grinnikte. ‘Het geeft niet. Laat de voorstelling beginnen.’

De lichten dimden. Het witte doek voor hen lichtte op met beelden van een grottenstelsel. De drager van het instrumentarium klom blijkbaar over richels en door nauwe tunnels om telkens dieper de ingewanden van de planeet, een planeet, in te gaan. Regelmatig zag Vince natuurlijk druipsteenformaties verschijnen in de bundel licht die de ontdekker om zich heen liet schijnen.

Links en rechts in het beeld stonden de vele digitale metingen die het instrumentarium voortdurend uitvoerde. Daaruit maakte hij op dat de speleoloog zich ettelijke kilometers diep bevond en dat de temperatuur een comfortabele veertig graden Celsius bedroeg, relatief koel voor die diepte. Een aparte tabel gaf de luchtsamenstelling weer, die exact leek op die van Nueva Terra.

‘Stop de film,’ riep Vince. Het beeld verstilde.

‘Wat is er?’ vroeg Carlos Salazar.

‘Ik wilde even medelen dat mijn officiële half uur inname nu afgelopen is en dat de teller begint te lopen. Misschien ben ik daar formeel in, maar het voorkomt gezeur achteraf.’

Carlos Salazar ontspande zich zichtbaar, een teken dat Vince direct herkende. De regeringsleiders waren elk bijzonder gespannen. Hij vroeg zich af wat het betekende. Meestal werden mensen wat nerveuzer wanneer zijn toch aanzienlijke uurtarief inging. Dit was een reactie die niet in het gebruikelijke scala paste.

‘Het eigenlijke werk begint over een minuut of drie,’ zei Juan Franco.

Ze keken toe hoe de speleoloog zich verder een weg baande door grotten en smalle gangetjes. De bundel licht toonde verschillende kleuren van de aardlagen die op elkaar gestapeld waren en ooit uitgesleten door stromend water. En ineens was het daar. Een halfdoorzichtig, niet menselijk hoofd stak uit de muur, keek recht in de lens en verdween net zo snel. Het beeld schudde en stond vervolgens stil. Het instrumentarium toonde ook de biologische waarden van de drager en die had op dit moment een sterk verhoogd adrenaline niveau. Hij of zij was duidelijk geschrokken.

Vince vouwde zijn handen. ‘Dit is wat ik moest zien?’ vroeg hij.

‘Een eerste indruk?’ vroeg Juan Franco.

‘Het spookt in die grotten,’ zei Vince. ‘Werkelijk, op basis van zo’n klein stukje opname kan ik geen oordeel vormen. Ga verder met de film, ik wil zien wat er verderop gebeurt. En kunnen we misschien toch wat popcorn krijgen?’

‘Wie zegt dat dit niet het eind van de film is?’ vroeg Jannes De Torquemada.

‘Omdat jullie niet angstig reageerden,’ zei Vince. ‘Jullie hebben het al gezien, dat is duidelijk, en de eerste keer had het een schrik-effect, maar deze keer waren jullie voorbereid.’

De film ging verder. In een volgende gang wandelde een humanoïde vorm bestaand uit skelet en oplichtende zenuwbanen van rechts buiten beeld naar links. Dat op zich was niet vreemder dan het hoofd dat uit de muur stak, maar de vorm stopte midden in de gang, draaide zich naar de camera en schudde twee vingers heen en weer in een maar al te menselijk gebaar, alsof het wilde zeggen: ‘tot hier en niet verder.’

De speleoloog ging verder en de verschijningen kwamen vaker, van verschuivende beelden alsof twee realiteiten over elkaar waren gelegd tot monsters en vreemde entiteiten die de holenonderzoeker leken aan te vallen, maar telkens op het laatste moment vervaagden en in de lucht oplostten. Vince dacht een patroon te herkennen.

‘Stop de film!’ riep hij. Het beeld bevroor. Hij stond op en liep naar het doek. Het beeld was gestopt bij een gruwelijke muil vol bloederige dolkvormige tanden. Hij draaide zich om en keek zijn publiek aan. In het felle licht dat weerkaatste van het doek waren de gezichten van de toeschouwers ongezond bleek en hun ogen hadden een koortsachtige glans. ‘Een vraag, heren. Wie is deze onversaagde bezoeker van subterrane werelden? Me dunkt dat een normaal mens allang had verzaakt.’

Carlos Salazar keek om zich heen, maar toen de anderen van het Triumviraat strak voor zich uit bleven kijken, schraapte hij zijn keel. ‘Het is een soldaat. Sommige soldaten kennen door wat subtiele aanpassingen letterlijk geen angst meer.’

‘Dus de geruchten zijn waar?’ vroeg Vince.

‘U pretendeert discretie,’ stelde Carlos Salazar, ‘vandaar dat we bij u zijn gekomen.’

‘Ik stelde ook een vraag, ik dreigde niet met lekken van de waarheid naar de algemene, onbegrijpende bevolking,’ zei Vince. ‘Maar het is goed te weten...’ Hij draaide zich weer naar het scherm. ‘Wat zegt de folklore over deze grotten? Ik neem aan dat we naar beelden kijken die op Nueva Terra gemaakt zijn? Het is nu wat? Ruim tweehonderd jaar sinds de eerste kolonisten landden?’

‘Dat is correct,’ zei Juan Franco. ‘De statistieken van onze wereld wezen op een verdacht hoge concentratie anomalieën zo’n zeshonderd kilometer noordelijk van Nueva York.’

‘Geestverschijningen, wakende nachtmerries en boze dromen. Fluisteringen van kleine wezentjes in donkere bossen en sprookjesachtige verhalen die met name uit de omgeving van de Serra de Passagem komen. En u heeft de oorzaak gevonden, heb ik dat wel?’ vroeg Vince. Hij wachtte het Triumviraat niet af en ging verder: ‘En het is voor u onbekend wat het is. En wat u niet kent, vreest u.’

‘Daar komt het wel op neer,’ zei Jannes De Torquemada.

‘Laat maar zien dan,’ zei Vince. Hij liep terug naar zijn stoel en ging weer zitten. Een schaal verse popcorn werd hem aangereikt.

Alsof zijn opmerking gehoord was, werd in de volgende gangen een scène uit de kat met de negen koeienstaarten getoond. Vince herinnerde zich nog goed het begin van het sprookje: Er was eens een hele slimme kat uit Talparaiso... En hoewel het verder nutteloze statistiek was, de katten uit Talparaiso, aan de voet van een van de hoogste bergen van de Serra de Passagem, waren inderdaad aantoonbaar twee tot drie keer

*slimmer dan hun soortgenoten uit andere contreien.*

*Op het doek volgde het instrumentarium elke stap van de drager. In de volgende gang maakte een steengolem zich los van de muur, maar waar de eerdere beelden etherisch en half transparant waren, leek dit beeld solide. De drager ontweek de klap van het ding, maar een deel van de muur spatte uiteen in duizenden splinters waarvan er enkele de drager van het instrumentarium raakten. Een volautomatisch wapen verscheen in beeld en de golem werd tot kleine keitjes gereduceerd. Het lawaai dat door de zaal schetterde was oorverdovend en Vince voelde elk schot in zijn eigen lichaam doordreunen.*

*De stilte die volgde was ongemakkelijk. De dreiging van de golem was duidelijk, een klap zou dodelijk zijn geweest. De verandering van beeld naar realiteit was een schok voor Vince. Niet geheel onverwacht natuurlijk, hij was hier niet naartoe gehaald als het enkel om spookbeelden en geestverschijningen ging.*

*Er volgden enkele steile afdalingen en om elke hoek wachtte een nieuwe dreiging die telkens moeilijker te omzeilen was. Vince gebaarde dat de film stop moest worden gezet. 'Dit is waanzin,' zei hij. 'Een gewoon mens kan dit nooit volhouden, zelfs niet een die geen angst meer kent.'*

*Carlos Salazar kuchte even. 'Naast het verwijderen van angst is ook het een en ander aan biotechnologische innovaties toegepast om de soldaat sterker en sneller te maken en meer uithoudingsvermogen te geven.'*

*Vince zuchtte. 'Is er dan niets heilig voor jullie?'*

*Salazar grijnsde naar hem.*

*Vince las geen greintje spijt of schaamte in hem, enkel kille berekening. 'Zet maar weer aan,' zei hij.*

*De film ging verder en toonde uiteindelijk een immense, onderaardse zaal. Het midden van de zaal was gevuld met een gigantische kristalstructuur met vele miljoenen facetten, die een eigen licht uit leken te stralen.*

*Vince bekeek de metingen, de energieniveaus, de radiostraling en de vele andere minieme details die de apparatuur hem verschaftte. 'Wel, wel, dat is bijzonder.' Terwijl hij toekeek maakte een zonnestelsel zich los van het kristal, een zon omgeven door een dozijn planeten, klein en groot, met immense asteroïdengordels op regelmatige afstand. Het beeld zweefde weg door het hoge plafond van de grot.*

*'Nu komt het moment dat ons deed besluiten u te benaderen,' zei Juan Franco.*

*Een vaag beeld materialiseerde en werd binnen seconden meer solide, het was een beeld van een projectorzaal met daarin een aantal mensen. Vince herkende de leden van het Triumviraat en een figuur in een zeer stijlvolle mantel met Stetson hoed.*

*Ineens schokte en draaide het beeld en vlogen bloedspetters en menselijke onderdelen langs de lenzen. De film eindigde met een laatste, roodgetint beeld van een monsterlijk wezen, schubben, kaken, klauwen, tentakels, slijm, bloederige tanden en alle aspecten die het menselijke oerbrein op vecht-of-vlucht instelden.*

*'Dat was het,' zei Juan Franco. 'Onze risicoschatters hebben bepaald dat een van die wezens in Nueva York voor wijdverbreide paniek zou kunnen zorgen. En het is niet bekend of een dergelijk wezen bestreden kan worden met onze middelen.'*

*Het hoofd van Vince draaide overuren. Miljoenen scenario's passeerden zijn geestesoog en langzaam, langzamer dan normaal, vormden zich beelden en ideeën. Hij*

haalde diep adem.

‘Wat,’ zo vroeg hij met zijn blik op het plafond, ‘is nu eigenlijk het probleem?’

Juan Franco nam een koffertje aan van een van zijn hulpjes en opende dat. De inhoud was een eenvoudige constructie die bestond uit een schermplaat en drie separate, rode knoppen. ‘Dit is ons probleem.’

‘Is dat een detonatiekoffer?’ vroeg Vince. ‘Jullie halen wel alle Koude Oorlog clichés tevoorschijn.’ Hij beschouwde zichzelf als een kenner van Oude Aarde geschiedenis en zijn collectie beeldmateriaal van de diverse wetenschapskanalen uit die tijd was extensief. Met name de geschiedkundige Ian Fleming behoorde tot zijn favorieten.

‘Het is effectief genoeg,’ zei Juan Franco. ‘Maar mijn collega’s in het Triumviraat twifelen. Mijn pad is helder genoeg.’

‘U hebt de beelden gezien,’ zei Jannes. ‘We hebben te maken met een entiteit die we niet kunnen bevatten, vele kilometers onder de grond.’

‘Bedoelt u het monster of de kristalstructuur?’ vroeg Vince.

‘We hebben beide overwogen. De kristalstructuur voldoet meer aan ons beeld van een niet begrijpbare entiteit.’ Jannes stond op en liep naar het scherm waar in een hoek van het stilstaande beeld de kristalstructuur nog zichtbaar was. ‘Is dit God?’ vroeg hij. ‘Of is dit een wezen met krachten die net zo goed Goddelijk kunnen zijn, omdat wij ze toch niet kunnen bevatten?’ Hij hief zijn handen naar de hemel. ‘En kan een God sterven? Het Caelicorum is verdeeld als nooit tevoren.’

Vince begreep nu waar de eerdere twijfel en angst die hij bij Jannes zag, vandaan was gekomen. ‘En wat is de mening van het Plebiscaat?’ vroeg hij.

Carlos Salazar haalde zijn schouders op. ‘De burgers weten niets van dit alles. En dat is maar goed ook. Paniek is een slechte raadgever. Onze keus is begraven of vernietigen. Beide vind ik acceptabel.’

‘U denkt niet dat burgers in staat zijn een weloverwogen mening te vormen?’ vroeg Vince.

‘Ze hebben mij voor het Triumviraat gekozen, wat denkt u zelf?’ vroeg Carlos.

‘Touche,’ antwoordde Vince. Hijzelf was nooit een voorstander geweest van de verkiezing van Carlos Salazar die hij als eersteklas demagoog beschouwde, vergelijkbaar met de dictators van voorbije eeuwen. ‘Hebt u andere scenario’s overwogen? Als in de status quo handhaven?’

‘De plek die we onderzocht hebben ligt onder de Serra de Passagem en de minerale rijkdom daar is te groot voor ons om te negeren,’ zei Carlos Salazar. ‘Het volk heeft die rijkdom nodig.’

‘Net zei u nog dat het volk niet wist wat het wilde,’ zei Vince.

‘U hebt uw mening over mij al klaar,’ zei Carlos Salazar, ‘ik zal me niet verwaardigen die te wijzigen.’

Vince merkte de totale onbewogenheid en perfecte controle die de vertegenwoordiger van het Plebiscaat aan de dag legde en wist nu vrijwel zeker dat hij met een psychopaat te maken had. ‘En u hebt uw mening over wat hier moet gebeuren volgens mij ook al gevormd,’ zei Vince. ‘U hebt mijn diensten feitelijk niet nodig.’

Weer haalde Carlos Salazar zijn schouders op.

‘Toch bespeur ik angst bij jullie drieën, zelfs bij voorzitter Salazar,’ zei Vince. ‘De enige manier om die angst voor elkaar te krijgen is onwetendheid. Jullie hebben antwoorden

nodig om een finale mening te vormen, maar de repercussies kunnen jullie posities in gevaar brengen.' Hij glimlachte weer. 'Dus jullie hebben een de-facto schuldige nodig, een Christusfiguur om aan het kruis van jullie rechtvaardiging te nagelen. En die persoon ben ik.'

'Uw deductie is zuiver en accuraat,' zei Jannes De Torquemada. 'U kunt uw scenario's afgeven, wij maken de keus, wat er ook gebeurt, de schuld krijgt u toch. U hebt de zaak immers aangenomen, als ik u aan uw woorden van zojuist mag herinneren.'

'In dat geval,' zei Vince, 'presenteer ik u met drie mogelijkheden. Als eerste de nucleaire optie, totale vernietiging en de consequenties daarvan. Als tweede, het handhaven van de status quo, mogelijk in combinatie met het afsluiten van de omgeving voor menselijke invloeden. Als derde het herzien van de basis waarop ons geloof gebaseerd is en mogelijk het aannemen van nieuwe normen en waarden. U ziet, voor elk wat wils.'

Hij liep door de zaal en nam zijn mantel en hoed in ontvangst. 'Maar ik wil u een laatste mogelijkheid beschrijven, gratis en voor niets,' ging hij verder. 'De beelden die we hebben gezien lijken droombeelden. Wat nu als die droombeelden realiteit kunnen worden? Wat als die dromen van een slapende multidimensionale god zijn, die onze werkelijkheid droomt? Wat als er meer van dit soort goden in ons heelal zijn, een godgestalt, die de consensusdroom van die goden vormt? In het gunstige geval verdwijnt een deel van onze realiteit. In het slechtste geval hoeven we ons toch nergens meer zorgen om te maken. U wenst voor God te spelen, maar ik raad u dit ten sterkste af.' Hij sloeg zijn mantel om zich heen en zette zijn hoed op. 'Heren, het was mij een genoegen.'

'Bedankt voor uw diensten, meneer Specter,' zei Carlos Salazar, 'we zullen uw laatste advies overwegen en dezelfde waarde toekennen die u haar hebt gegeven.'

Vince glimlachte wrang. 'Meer had ik van het Triumviraat ook niet kunnen verwachten.'

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Buiten het regeringsgebouw snoof hij de frisse avondlucht in. Hoewel het een heer van zijn stand niet betaamde te lopen, besloot hij toch een wandeling langs het kanaal te maken. Had hij meer kunnen doen, vroeg hij zich af. In zijn gedachten speelde hij de scenario's nog eens af, de opties die de regeringsleiders overwogen. Hij schudde zijn hoofd. Alle tekenen die hij had waargenomen, wezen op een nucleaire optie. De gevolgen waren hem onbekend, hoewel hij vermoedde dat zijn ideeën de waarheid dicht genoeg benaderden.

Een bankje onder een Victoriaans gestijlde lantaarn met uitzicht over het kanaal en een van de stadsparken nodigde uit. Hij nam plaats, voelde de Gestalt van de mensen om hem heen, de energie van duizenden individuen die deze plek tot leven brachten.

Aan de zuidelijke hemel zag hij een sterrenbeeld verdwijnen. Het park verdorde voor zijn ogen tot een woestijn en de frisse avondlucht werd een kille wind. De Gestalt sidderde en het voelde alsof de vitaliteit van de energie die normaal de omgeving vulde, verminderde en deels verdween.

Het is begonnen, dacht hij. Hij zuchtte diep en voelde verdriet, schaamte en een diepe, diepe angst. Hij zou met genoegen alle schuld op zich nemen, maar hij vroeg zich af of



deze God wel vergevingsgezind was.

Michael Blommaert *The Sin of Deicide*

Vince Specter's offices were situated at the crossing of twelve city zones. Selecting the spot had been a conscious decision that gave him access to the Gestalt of the many population groups of Nueva York of Halcyon IVd, which its inhabitants also called Nueva Terra.

His office breathed the style and sophistication of the gangster- and detective flat-films of centuries ago, carefully replicated. The effect on his visitors was not just valuable, but also enlightening. The people of Nueva York were used to the purest utilitarian tools that hid themselves from sight when not used. The splendor and affluence he displayed in the real leather couch and the walnut desk overwhelmed many of them.

It helped him ascertain his potential clients, both the kind of problems they faced and the ease with which their credit flowed.

One fine Yule morning a delegation from the Triumvirate visited him. Carlos Nunez, the Plebiscan's representative, Jean le Baptiste of the Caelicorum and Nestor de Mesquite of the Militia Popular.

Vincent Specter observed their arrival and he felt the atmosphere of the room change in a way that only a Gestalt Whisperer like him could notice. Just a few of his level of sensitivity could be found on the many colonized worlds. None of them possessed his knowledge and spiritual fortitude to discern the nuance and variety of perceived emotions. The men here were almost openly hostile toward each other, yet some deep seated reason brought each of them here and Philip felt its near palpable presence: fear.

'Gents, please be seated,' he said. He smiled as they seated themselves uncomfortably on the comfortable couch.

'Now then, who of you is going to tell me your problem?' he asked and gave them his friendliest smile. 'You know, that problem that has you all scared...'

'How do you know of that?' Jean le Baptiste asked. 'I was assured that outside the Triumvirate only a select few were informed, let alone a... civilian.' He spoke the last word as if uttering it disgusted him.

'I think that Mr. Specter is an excellent reader,' Nestor de Mesquite said. 'I have a few of those on my staff. Albeit they're rather less formidable than he is.'

Vincent smiled at the army's commander and nodded. 'My fee is twelve thousand credits per day, apart from expenses. I assume this will not be an issue for the Triumvirate?'

Carlos Nunez threw a credit stick on his desk. It glowed in near violet, indicating a limitless credit line. 'Is this enough?'

Vincent slowly nodded. 'For now. Considering the nature of your visit I would like to point out that additional fees will be applied in dangerous situations, on my sole discretion. Is that clear?'

'Crystal clear,' Carlos Nunez confirmed. 'Now if you would please join us. There is a screening that we must attend.'

Decidedly Vince Specter took his mantle and hat, which was styled after the old Earth

Stetson. He inspected his appearance in the mirror in his office. His sideburns were peppered with grey hairs, but his other hair was still dark brown. His brown eyes glistened in the shadow that his hat threw across his face. He looked like a gentleman from centuries ago. Just passable enough to be seen in public.

Three gliders awaited them outside, each carrying the government logo. Vince was led to the middle one, together with Jean le Baptiste. There was more than enough room to seat all present, but Vincent understood the necessity of spreading the risk by transporting each of the government's leaders separately.

'Your faith seems... unsettled, monsignor Le Baptiste,' Vince said softly as the glider took off.

Jean le Baptiste wiped sweat from his brow. 'Nonsense. My faith in the Lord and his Ancestors is as strong as ever.'

'Yet I do not see you apply the same gestures of faith that you commonly use, when in public. I expect these gestures, if not truthful, to at least have become second nature. Either you have never believed and are in fact a great actor. Or you believe, but your faith has been damaged, it teeters.'

'I cannot tell you anything, except that my faith is strong. I will grant you that some reinforcement would be welcome.'

'And I say: that is an understatement,' Vince said. That moment the glider flew into the Triumfasca, the highest government building of Nueva York.

'Think what you will,' Jean le Baptiste said. He left the glider with angry paces. Vince just smiled.

The government leaders converged at the entrance to a hall, accompanied by aides and liaisons that kept them apprised of the latest news.

Nestor de Mesquite threw the doors wide open and walked into the hall that was decorated like an old fashioned cinema, a style that met with Vince Specter's approval. Velvet chairs, deep-pile black carpet en sound proof walls. He assumed holoprojectors and other cinophile equipment in the walls.

His mantle and hat he handed to an aide after which he was seated on the first row. The Triumvirate took seats next to him. Next to them and behind the were their aides, liaisons, cronies and sycophants. The ensuing silence was deafening.

'So, this show is about to begin?' Vince asked. 'Did anyone bring popcorn?'

Nestor de Mesquite looked at him. 'Did we forget something?'

Vince grinned. 'It's ok. Start the show.'

The lights dimmed and the screen before them lit up with images of a system of caves and grottoes. The wearer of the sensorium apparently climbed over ridges and through narrow tunnels to reach ever deeper into the bowel of the planet... a planet. Vince regularly saw natural stalactite formations appear on the screen.

To the left and right of the image were many digital measurements the sensorium performed continuously. From them he deduced the spelunker must be several miles below the surface and that the temperature was a comfortable one hundred Fahrenheit, which was relatively cool for those depths.

'Stop the film,' Vince said. The image froze.

'What is it?' Carlos Nunez asked.

'I just wanted to inform you gentlemen that my official half hour of intake is over

and that the clock is now ticking. I may seem formal on that, but it prevents discussions later on.'

Carlos Nunez clearly relaxed, a sign Vince recognized immediately. It contrasted dramatically with the tension the government leaders had expressed so far.

'The interesting part starts in about three minutes,' Nestor de Mesquite said.

They watched the spelunker find his way through caves and narrow passages. And of a sudden, it was there, a half transparent, non-human head, sticking out of the wall. It looked straight at the camera and then disappeared just as fast. The image shook and then froze.

Vince folded his hands. 'This is what I should see?' he asked.

'First impression?' Nestor de Mesquite said.

'Those caves are haunted,' Vince said. 'Continue the film; I'm curious to see what else occurs.'

'Who says this is not the end of the movie?' Jean le Baptiste asked.

'Because you weren't afraid,' Vince said.

The film continued. In the next corridor a humanoid shape consisting of a skeleton with a fluorescent network of nerves walked from the right, outside of the image, to the left. That in itself was not more strange than a head sticking out of the wall, but the shape stopped a moment, turned toward the camera and shook two fingers in an all too human gesture, as if saying: 'go no further.'

The spelunker continued and the apparitions became more frequent, varying from shifting images that resembled two realities layered one over the other, to monsters and strange entities that threatened to attack the cave researcher. Vince though he recognized a pattern.

'Stop the film,' he shouted. The image froze. He got up and walked to the screen. The image was halted at a gruesome maw filled with bloody, needlelike teeth. 'One question, gents. Who is this heroic visitor of subterranean worlds? I would have turned back a long time ago. Does he know no fear?'

Carlos Nunez coughed. 'He is a soldier. Part of a program in which subtle enhancements reduce or altogether remove fear.'

'So the rumors are true?' Vince asked.

'You claim discretion,' Carlos Nunez said, 'which is why we came to you.'

'I merely posed a question,' Vince said. 'But it's good to know. What do the folk tales say about these caves? I assume we are looking at footage shot on Nueva Terra? And it is now what? Over two hundred years since the arrival of the first colonists?'

'That is correct,' Nestor de Mesquite said. 'We have statistics showing a high rate of anomalies some four hundred miles north of Nueva York.'

'Apparitions, waking nightmares and very bad dreams. And you have found the cause, am I right?' He did not wait for an answer from the Triumvirate. 'You know not what you are dealing with and since you do not know it, you fear it.'

'That about sums it up,' Jean le Baptiste said.

'Let's see it then,' Vince said.

The film continued and finally showed an immense, subterranean cavern. In the center was a giant crystal structure with many millions of facets that each seemed to emanate its own light.

Vince studied the readings, the energy levels, the radiation and the many minor details the sensorium gave him. 'My, my, that is special.' As he watched a solar system came into existence, floated up from the crystal and floated away through the high ceiling of the cavern.

'And here comes the footage that made us decide to approach you,' Nestor de Mesquite said. A vague image materialized, gaining solidity by the second. It was an image of the cinema with a number of people inside. Vince recognized the members of the Triumvirate and a striking figure in a very stylish mantle and Stetson hat.

The image quivered, the camera suddenly turned and blood and human parts flew past the lenses. The film ended with a last, red tinged image of a hideous creature, scales, jaws, claws, tentacles, slime, bloody teeth and all aspects that would trigger the human core brain into fight-or-flight mode.

'That was it,' Nestor de Mesquite said. 'Our risk-assessors have calculated that one of those creatures in Nueva York would cause mass panic. And we do not know if we can fight such a beast with our conventional means.'

Vince's mind worked feverishly. Millions of scenario's passed his mind's eye and slowly, but slower than usual, images and ideas appeared. He took a deep breath.

'What,' he asked while staring at the ceiling, 'is the real problem?'

Nestor de Mesquite took a suitcase from one of his aides and opened it. Its content was a simple construction, consisting of a small screen and three separate, red buttons. 'This is our problem'

'Is that a detonation suitcase?' Vince asked. 'You sure bring out all the Cold War clichés.' He considered himself an expert on Old Earth history and his collection of footage from the various science channels from those days was extensive. Especially the historian Ian Fleming was one of his favorites.

'It works well enough,' Nestor de Mesquite said. 'But my colleagues in the Triumvirate have doubts. My own path is clear to me.'

'You have seen the images,' Jean le Baptiste said. 'This is an entity that we cannot understand, many miles below the surface.'

'The monster or the crystal structure?' Vince asked.

'We have considered both. The crystal structure more closely resembles our ideas about unknowable entities.' Jean got up and walked toward the screen. In a corner of the frozen image the crystal structure was only just visible. 'Is this god?' he asked. 'Or is this a creature with powers that might be considered divine anyway, because we cannot fathom it?' He raised his hands at the skies. 'And is God mortal? Or not? The Caelicorum is divided as never before.'

Vince now understood some of the previous doubt and fear he had noticed from Jean le Baptiste. 'And what is the opinion of the Plebiscan?' he asked.

Carlos Nunez shrugged. 'The civilians know nothing of this. And a good thing too. Panic is a bad advisor. Our choice is bury or destroy. Both are acceptable to me.'

'You do not believe the civilians to be capable of forming their own, well informed opinion?' Vince said.

'They chose me for the Triumvirate, what do you think?' Carlos asked.

'Touché,' Vince answered. He himself had never been a proponent of the election of Carlos Nunez whom he considered to be a First class demagogue, comparable to the

dictators of ages gone by. 'Have you considered alternatives? Could you maintain the status quo?'

'The place we investigated is directly underneath the Serra de Passagem and its mineral riches are too great to ignore,' Carlos Nunez said. 'The people need that wealth.'

'Just now you said the people do not know what they want,' Vince said.

'You have already formed your opinion about me,' Carlos Nunez said. 'I will not stoop to changing it.'

Vince noticed the complete stoicism and perfect control of the representative of the Plebiscan and he now understood and knew he had a psychopath on his hands. 'It seems you have already formed an opinion,' he said. 'And in fact are not in need of my services, am I correct?'

Again Carlos Nunez shrugged.

'Still, I sense fear in you three, even in chairman Nunez,' Vince said. 'The only way for you to fear, is to not know. You need answers to form your final opinion, but you foresee a threat to your position, possibly the repercussion of your decision.' He smiled again. 'So you need an obvious scapegoat, your own personal Christ to crucify on the cross of your justification. And that would be me.'

'Your deduction is pure and accurate,' Jean le Baptiste said. 'You can give us your scenarios, but we will decide, no matter what they are. And you will get the blame. After all, you accepted this case, if I may remind you of your words just a few minutes ago.'

'In that case,' Vince said, 'I present you with three options. The first is the nuclear option, total destruction and the resulting consequences. Second, maintaining the status quo. This may mean locking down the area so it is not influenced by human presence. Third, you might want to reconsider the foundations on which our faith rests and perhaps assume new norms and values. As you can see, something for everybody.'

He walked toward the entrance of the cinema and received his mantle and hat. 'But I would give you a fourth option, free of charge,' he continued. 'The images we have seen, seem dreamlike. Do these dreamlike images become reality? Do they belong to a sleeping, multi-dimensional God who dreams our reality? Are there more of such Gods in our universe, together dreaming a consensus reality? Seeing you have more or less made up your minds, the most optimal result would be the disappearance of only part of our reality. Worst case we have no more worries at all.' He put on his mantle and hat. 'Gents, I am sure it was my pleasure.'

'Thank you for your services, Mr. Specter,' Carlos Nunez said. 'We shall consider your last advice and allot it the same value you placed on it.'

Vincent smirked. 'Which is as much as I could have expected of the Triumvirate.'

Outside the Triumfasca building he breathed the fresh evening air. Although a real gentleman would not deign to walking, he decided on a stroll along the canal anyway. 'Could I have done better?' he wondered. In his mind he replayed the scenarios he had come up with, the options the government leaders pondered.

He shook his head. All signs pointed to the nuclear option, of which the consequences were unknowable, although he suspected that his ideas would approach reality well enough.

A small bench beneath a Victoria-style lantern with a view of the canal and one of

the city parks invited him. He sat down and reached out to feel the Gestalt of the people in the vicinity, the energy that emanated from a thousand individuals and brought this place to life.

In the Southern sky he witnessed the disappearance of a complete cluster of stars. The park disintegrated before his eyes to become desert and the fresh evening air became a chill wind.

He would gladly carry any and all guilt, but he wondered if this God would be forgiving.

Maarten Luikhoven Kielzog

Bijna drie maanden moest ik wachten tot mijn kloonmoeder terugkeerde van haar spelevaart door de heliumstrata van de derde gasreus rond Nagira, een gele zon van middelbare leeftijd in de Sagittariusarm van de Melkweg. In die tijd bestudeerde ik de complexe rituelen van de Urh, de immense, intelligente gasblazen die zich met onverwachte gratie door de atmosfeer bewogen.

“Waarom heb je zo lang gewacht,” vroeg Nessaja zodra haar Schip haar uit de radioblokkade van de atmosfeer tilde. Haar complete naam was Nessaja Horvak Mistra Votriarus, maar ze duldde geen formaliteiten zoals andere Sapiens dat wel wensten. En dat was meteen ook de reden dat ik haar om raad kwam vragen. Van al mijn kloonouders was ze niet alleen het dichtst bij, ze gaf me altijd het gevoel dat we gelijken waren.

“Ik wilde je niet storen. En wat ik van plan ben duurt toch jaren, dus een paar maanden meer of minder...”

Haar antwoorden kwamen sneller naarmate haar schip het mijne naderde. “Dat klinkt als een transitie. Je bent pas driehonderd, wil je niet te snel volwassen worden?”

“Dat valt toch wel mee?” vroeg ik. “Ik herinner me maar al te goed wat je vertelde over je eerste zonneduik. En hoe oud je toen was.”

Nessaja lachte. “Gelukkig zul je me dat niet nadoen, die fout hebben we uit de Schepen gehaald. Wil je fysiek?”

“Ja, graag. Daar kom ik eigenlijk voor.” Onze schepen verbonden zich met elkaar, luchtsluis aan luchtsluis. Ik zweefde door de gangen en liet mijn lange armen en benen hun minimale werk doen om me kalmpjes voort te bewegen. Uit beleefdheid had Nessaja haar zwaartekracht op bijna nul gezet, ook al was ze gesteld op een half tot één.

Ik trof haar op het loungedek waar ze net een aquarel schilderde. De kleuren van haar kunst pasten niet bij het strandje, het meer en de weelderige begroeiing en deden meer denken aan de heliumatmosfeer van de gasreus. Haar lichaamskeus was op dit moment kort, gedrongen en geschikt voor omgevingen met hoge zwaartekracht.

Zodra Nessaja me binnen zag komen, begon ze te stralen. “Robate, kom hier en geef je oude moeder eens een knuffel.” Ik ging in op haar verzoek, vouwde mijn lange armen om haar lijf en voelde de ingehouden kracht waarmee ze me omhelsde. Ze stapte achteruit en bekeek me nog eens goed. “Je bent al helemaal voorbereid op een lang, gewichtloos verblijf, zie ik.”

Ik knikte zachtjes. “Mijn besluit staat wel vast, ja. Maar ik heb je herinneringen nodig, je oude herinneringen.”

“Oh jee, waarom denk je dat ik wel weet wat je zoekt, als je eigen Schip het al niet weet te vinden?”

“Ik weet het ook niet,” zei ik eerlijk. “En ik heb het idee dat mijn Schip en andere Schepen soms geen zin hebben iets te vertellen.”

“Je bent ook nog niet volwassen. Er zijn regels.”

“Dat vermoedde ik al,” zei ik. “Daarom ook een gesprek met jou, voor ik vertrek. Ik wilde Oude Aarde gaan zoeken. Ik wilde weten waar we vandaan komen en waarom we zijn weggetrokken.”

“Maar dat is toch geen informatie die de Schepen achterhouden?”

“Dat klopt, ik ben er ook al geweest.”

De verbazing op Nessaja's gezicht was duidelijk. “Maar dat duurt jaren, zo lang is het toch niet geleden dat we elkaar gezien hebben?” Haar ogen starden in de verte terwijl ze haar logboeken raadpleegde. Toen ze haar informatie had, keek ze me even boos aan. “Twintig jaar? Waarom heb je niets gezegd?” Maar ze werd vrijwel meteen weer de milde, nieuwsgierige Nessaja die ik mijn hele leven al kende. “Vertel me wat je allemaal gezien hebt.”

Ik ging op het bankje aan de oever zitten, rook de geur van de planten en bloemen en liet de herinneringen aan mijn zoektocht uit mijn langetermijnopslag rijzen. “Ik zocht eigenlijk al heel lang naar onze oorsprong. Oude Aarde was de term die gebruikt werd, maar ik kwam erachter dat er minstens drie dozijn werelden zijn die mensen ooit zo genoemd hebben, waarschijnlijk nog wel meer.”

Nessaja knikte. “Zo zijn mensen nu eenmaal.”

“Maar de oorsprong, de eerste Oude Aarde, die leek verloren te zijn in de archieven. Onze geschiedenis is niet perfect bewaard, Nessaja.”

Ze haalde haar schouders op. “Je hoeft niet alles te bewaren. Herinneringen zijn als voormalige minnaars, soms leuk, soms gevaarlijk, maar meestal gewoon lastig.”

Ik begreep wat ze bedoelde. Nessaja kon haar oorsprong traceren tot een van de eerste uit drie dozijn planeten genaamd Oude Aarde die ik had gevonden. Daarmee was ze een van de oudste, levende mensen die de Schepen kenden. “Het betekende dat ik de weg terug moest gaan zoeken. Daarom duurde het ook zo lang. De afgelopen miljoen jaar is de mensheid telkens verder getrokken langs de armen van de Melkweg, steeds verder weg van de oorsprong. De geheugens van de Schepen van voor die tijd waren toch aan slijtage onderhevig.”

Nessaja glimlachte. “Ja, mijn eerste Schip was af en toe ook vergeetachtig.”

“Het eerste jaar van mijn reis vloog ik van Oude Aarde naar Oude Aarde, telkens een paar duizend jaar verder onze geschiedenis in. De meeste zijn inmiddels weer teruggekeerd naar hun natuurlijke, wilde staat en op sommige wonen onze verre nazaten die destijds achter wilden blijven.”

“En mijn Oude Aarde?” vroeg Nessaja. “Heb je mijn huis nog gezien?”

Ik schudde mijn hoofd. “De planeet was ergens teruggevallen in technologie. In dat hiaat is een komeet in een van de zeeën gestort waardoor alle leven en gebouwen van het oppervlak zijn gevaagd.”

“Oh,” zei Nessaja. Ze leek bedroefd. “Dat is spijtig. Ik heb mijn huis aan boord van Schip ontworpen naar de omgeving daar. Een van mijn mooiere herinneringen.”

“Het universum is niet gastvrij, dat hebben we wel geleerd. Naarmate ik verder

terugging vond ik meer van dit soort gebeurtenissen. In een miljoen jaar verdwijnt veel, zoniet alles, dat we aan sporen hebben achtergelaten. De entropie van beschavingen is sneller en vernietigender dan de natuurlijke entropie van het heelal. Dus toen ik de oudste grenzen voorbijging, kwam er een lange tijd niets. Twee jaar op topsnelheid, tot ik radiosignalen opving.”

“Herrezen achterblijvers?” vroeg Nessaja. Haar ogen begonnen te glanzen. “Of ruimtevarende anderlingen?” Ze verwoordde het aloude probleem. In een universum dat zo groot is, moeten wel andere ruimtevarende rassen bestaan. We waren ze nog niet tegengekomen.

“Bijna. Chimpansees. Of eigenlijk de geëvolueerde nazaten van Chimpansees.”

Nessaja leek verbaasd. “Dat is opvallend nieuws,” zei ze. “We verlieten de eerste Aarde omdat we ons voortbestaan niet afhankelijk wilden laten zijn van één planeet. Blijkbaar zijn ze ons gevolgd.”

“Ze waren inderdaad op zoek naar ons, het ras voor hen dat de Aarde had verlaten en aan hen had overgelaten.”

“Je hebt ze gesproken? Liet Schip dat toe? Er zijn toch protocollen?”

Ik knikte en glimlachte. “Ja, er zijn protocollen voor contact met buitenaards leven. Maar Chimpansees komen van Aarde, net als wij. Niet buitenaards dus.”

Nessaja keek me aan en kneep haar ogen iets samen. “Hoeveel uur heb je met Schip hierover gediscussieerd?”

“Vier dagen om precies te zijn.”

Nessaja lachte. “Het klonk ook al te makkelijk. Wat heb je met ze besproken?”

“Niet teveel. Ik heb ze de weg gevraagd. Ze wilden me als een god onthalen. Wij mensen lijken voor hen een soort goden en volgens Schip zijn veel van hun mythen en legenden gebaseerd op onze eigen geschiedenis. Gelukkig waren ze realistisch genoeg om te begrijpen dat wij –raar om het zo te zeggen– ook maar mensen zijn, zeker niet almachtig. We lopen hooguit een paar honderdduizend jaar voor met onze technologie.”

“Ik vind het schitterend nieuws,” zei Nessaja. “Het voelt een beetje alsof je kinderen groot en volwassen geworden zijn. En ik kan weten hoe dat voelt.”

“Ik heb met ze afgesproken dat ik bij terugkeer een delegatie naar hen zal sturen. Die is waarschijnlijk al onderweg. Anders zou het nog vele duizenden jaren duren voor ze zelfs maar in de buurt zouden komen.”

“Ze wezen je de weg naar de oorspronkelijke Oude Aarde?” vroeg Nessaja.

Ik schudde mijn hoofd. “Ook zij waren die plek al vergeten. Ze konden me enkel wijzen naar de planeten en stelsels die ze in hun eigen geschiedenis hadden aangedaan. Blijkbaar maakten ze daarin dezelfde keuzes als wij destijds. Ons afscheid was hartelijk.”

“Ik ben blij voor ze,” zei Nessaja. “Volgens mij hebben we heel veel te bespreken.”

“Maar er komt meer,” vertelde ik haar. “Na de Chimpansees vloog ik weer door braakliggende ruimte, zeer herkenbaar, geen spoor van beschaving, tot ik weer signalen opving. Schip had er moeite mee, maar herkende uiteindelijk dolfijnspraak.” Ik stuurde Nessaja plaatjes van de habitats waarmee de dolfijnen de ruimte verkenden. Immense waterbollen, bijeengehouden door megastructuren die hun magnetische velden rond het oppervlak legden.

“Briljant. Heb je contact gelegd?”

“Ik heb het overwogen, maar Schip waarschuwde me dat onze referentiekaders



radicaal anders zijn dan die van de walvisachtigen. Er schijnt ook nog een hoop oud zeer te zijn. Dus ik laat het over aan experts.”

“Je vraagt je af waarom niemand er eerder over nagedacht heeft terug te gaan in ons spoor, om te zien hoe onze oorsprong zich heeft ontwikkeld,” zei Nessaja.

“Ik heb veel tijd gehad om na te denken en dit was inderdaad een van mijn gedachten.” Ik liet mijn woorden bezinken. “Ik denk dat het diepgeworteld ligt, in ieder geval in een deel van de mensheid, vooruit te kijken, telkens verder te gaan. Bij zo’n instelling past het niet telkens terug te kijken. En dat bracht me ook weer op andere vraagstukken. Filosofisch allemaal, dat geef ik toe, maar wel verhelderend.”

“Was je niet eenzaam?” vroeg Nessaja. Ze bleef een bezorgde moeder, zelfs bij de jongste van haar meer dan duizend nakomelingen.

Ik knikte. “In dit deel van de ruimte is altijd menselijk contact mogelijk. Afstanden verhinderen eenvoudige communicatie, maar er valt mee te werken. In de Orionarm van de Melkweg ben je dertigduizend lichtjaar ver van huis. Ja, ik was eenzaam. Niet zomaar, maar alsof je de laatste van je soort bent.”

“Arme jongen, gelukkig ben je weer thuis,” zei Nessaja met een glimlach.

“Is dat zo?” vroeg ik.

“Wat bedoel je?”

“Laat me je vertellen wat ik nog meer tegenkwam.”

“Er is meer? Ik dacht dat je inmiddels wel bij Oude Aarde aangekomen was.”

“Nee hoor. Ik was nog duizend lichtjaar verwijderd toen ik weer schepen tegenkwam. Ze zonden geen signalen uit en waren pikzwart. Schip herkende alleen primitieve krachtbronnen en veelal organische componenten. Toen we naderden, zagen ze ons. Hun schepen vertoonden meteen een heel scala aan kleuren en patronen.”

“Als sommige inktvissen,” zei Nessaja.

“Precies als inktvissen. Hun communicatie verloopt geheel via visuele signalen. Schip had een paar dagen nodig om hun taal te leren. Ik vermoed dat ik wel wat teweeg heb gebracht bij ze.”

Nessaja glimlachte. “Kun je je voorstellen hoe het moet zijn, een sterk geavanceerde beschaving tegen te komen? Daar konden en kunnen wij alleen maar van dromen.”

“In hun geval lag dat iets anders. Zij zijn opgegroeid met het idee dat hun goden en demonen ooit de Aarde verlaten hebben en ze zijn doodsbenuwd dat ze die ooit weer tegenkomen. Het maakt niet uit dat ze zelf ook de Aarde hebben achtergelaten of dat de roofdieren die vroeger op inktvissen joegen al duizenden lichtjaren verderop waren, de angst zit er nog goed in. En ook dat zette me aan het denken.”

“Maar ze wisten in ieder geval waar Oude Aarde lag, neem ik aan?” vroeg Nessaja.

“Oh ja, dat wisten ze. Maar ze waarschuwden ook dat er een vernietigende oorlog was geweest. De Aarde was niet of nauwelijks leefbaar meer.”

“Maar dat is eerder gebeurd. Meestal de directe aanleiding om de planeet te verlaten en je ras over de sterren te verspreiden.”

Ik knikte en pakte een paar steentjes uit het zand van het strandje. Een voor een gingen ze in slow motion het meer in. “Er klopt iets niet, Nessaja. Maar je ziet het alleen als je met het juiste perspectief kijkt. Wij waren altijd de steentjes, plonsden ergens de ruimte in, veroorzaakten rimpels, of beter, een kielzog. Maar waar raakten die rimpels? Als ze al iets raakten. En wie zag het kielzog. Als dat al gezien werd?”

“Dat is wel diep, Robate, hoe kom je aan die wijsheid?” vroeg Nessaja.

“Ik heb Oude Aarde gezien. De oorsprong. De planeet waar het voor de mensheid allemaal begon. Een lege woestijn, grotendeels drooggevallen zeeën, weinig begroeiing van betekenis. En toch straalt de planeet een vitaliteit uit die je als mens herkent en voelt.”

“Het moet een glorieus gevoel zijn,” zei Nessaja. Ze glunderde en ik wist dat ze oprecht blij voor me was. Het geluk van haar kinderen was altijd belangrijk voor haar. Nog meer reden om juist haar te vragen om haar oudste herinneringen.

“Ik heb onze laatste erfgenamen daar gezien,” zei ik. “De laatste soort die zal proberen de zwaartekrachtput te ontstijgen en zal proberen de oneindige ruimte te bewonen. Ze zijn gegroeid, krachtiger geworden en veel intelligenter. Tijdens mijn verblijf daar lanceerden ze hun eerste satelliet. Na hen is de planeet uitgeput... op.”

Nessaja keek me aan. “Je stemming ontgaat me. Ik kan je normaal lezen als een open boek, maar het enige dat ik nu van je opvang is verwarring.”

Ik lachte. “Dat komt omdat ik in de war ben. Ik ben al ruim tien jaar aan het nadenken over de implicaties van de kakkerlakken die in onze voetsporen volgen. Ik denk, ik vermoed, dat ik iets op het spoor ben. Maar als ik het bij het rechte eind heb, dan is ons bestaan niet zo bijzonder als we wel dachten. En zijn de doelen die we ons stellen niet onze eigen doelen.”

Nessaja ging voor me op het strand zitten, sloeg haar armen om haar benen en keek naar me op. “Vertel me je diepste gedachten, kind. Wat ze ook zijn, samen vinden we de antwoorden.”

“Mijn diepste gedachten voor de diepste herinneringen die je kunt leveren,” zei ik. “Maar daarvoor moet je weten welke vragen ik tijdens mijn terugreis samen met Schip heb gesteld. We zijn allebei nieuwsgierig naar de antwoorden.”

“Zoals je ziet wacht ik geduldig. Je zei het net al, wat is een maandje meer of minder?” Nessaja keek me aan met ernstige ogen.

“Hoe lang verblijft de mens nu in de ruimte? Vijfhonderduizend jaar? Een miljoen? Waarschijnlijk langer. In al die tijd zijn we niemand tegengekomen. Op kosmische schaal alsof je met je ogen knippert, dus het verbaast ons niet. Maar... niemand? Toch, in dat kosmische ogenblik heeft de Aarde ons, de Chimpansees, dolfijnen en inktvissen gelanceerd. En de kakkerlakken volgen ons op de voet.”

“Ik geef toe, dat is bijzonder,” zei Nessaja. “Misschien zijn we dan toch bijzonder, juist vanwege onze oorsprong?”

Ik schudde mijn hoofd. “We hebben veel bewoonbare planeten gevonden en ook bewoond. We hebben meer dan genoeg leven gevonden, soms zelfs intelligent leven. Maar nog nooit zo intelligent dat het de planeet kon ontvluchten. Dus waarom zijn we niet meer intelligente rassen tegengekomen?”

“Dat kan ik je niet vertellen, dat antwoord weet ik niet,” zei Nessaja. “Wat heeft dit met mijn diepste herinneringen te maken?”

“Jij zat bij de vroegste kolonisatiegolven en je hebt complete vloten aangevoerd. Je volgde de Orionarm in de richting van de Sagittariusarm. Waarom die kant op? Waren jullie bang de grote leegte over te steken naar de Perseusarm? Was de andere kant op, in de richting van Centaurus, te moeilijk? Welke reden had de mensheid om die kant op te gaan?”

Nessaja knipperde met haar ogen. Praten over het verre verleden raketde herinneringen op uit haar langetermijngheugen. “Ik weet niet of we bewust een goede reden hadden. We hadden altijd een soort voorkeur voor deze richting.”

“Net zoals de Chimpansees? En de dolfijnen? En de inktvissen? En ik kan je denk ik wel voorspellen waar de kakkerlakken heen zullen gaan.”

“Ja, maar die volgen in onze voetsporen.”

“Welke sporen? De Chimpansees vinden een heel enkele keer restanten van onze beschavingen. Bij toeval, met heel veel geluk. Maar bij hoeveel ‘toevallige’ vondsten praat je nog over toeval? Dat is wat Schip en ik de afgelopen tien jaar hebben geprobeerd te analyseren.”

“Goed, dat kan ik begrijpen,” zei Nessaja. Ze knikte langzaam. “Wat is jullie gedachte dan? Wat denken jullie dat er speelt?”

“We hebben nooit anderlingen aangetroffen,” zei ik. “Hebben we ooit restanten van een ruimtevarende beschaving aangetroffen?”

Voor het eerst ooit antwoordde Nessaja meer dan een minuut niet. De gebeurtenis was zo ongewoon voor me dat ik haar met open mond aanstaarde.

“Ik was het al bijna vergeten,” stamelde ze. “Maar nu je het zo vertelt, vallen er wat stukjes op hun plek. We vonden inderdaad restanten. Minimale overblijfselen van een oeroud, technologisch geavanceerd ras. Miljoenen jaren oud. Het leek ons niet heel erg belangrijk. We waren tenslotte kolonisten, op zoek naar leefruimte. Die oude gebouwen zouden alleen maar problemen veroorzaken bij het koloniseren.”

Ik haalde diep adem. De woorden van mijn moeder bevestigden vermoedens die Schip en ik al een tijd koesterden. “Occams scheermes. Wat zou de kans zijn dat die beschaving afkomstig was van Aarde? Met in het achterhoofd wat we net besproken hebben.”

“Niet nul. Ook niet praktisch nul, denk ik.” Nessaja wreef met haar vingers over haar slapen. “En indirect betekent het dat zij ook gestuurd werden. Of hun nakomelingen de juiste kant op stuurden.”

“Maar met welk doel?” vroeg ik haar. “Dat er iets bijzonders gebeurt, dat weten we. Maar we weten niet waarom.” Ik stond op en zette af in de richting van de buitenwand. Bij een van de patrijspoorten keek ik naar buiten. De kleurige helium- en koolstofbanden van de gasreus vulden een groot deel van het uitzicht. Een maantje schoot beneden ons voorbij en liet een zwarte schaduwstip over het oppervlak van de reus razen.

Nessaja kwam naast me staan en zei: “Wie volgen we nu eigenlijk? En hoe worden we bestuurd om deze kant op te gaan?”

“Daarom wilde ik je herinneringen raadplegen. Ik wil weten waarom je je keuzes maakte toen je vloten naar specifieke zonnestelsels dirigeerde. Sommige van je keuzes waren namelijk niet volkomen logisch,” legde ik uit.

Nessaja schudde haar hoofd. “Nee, die beslissing werd door de voltallige raad genomen.”

Ik haalde mijn schouders op. “Groepen zijn makkelijker te beïnvloeden dan individuen.”

“Denk je echt dat dat gebeurd is? Of nog steeds gebeurt?”

“Het is de meest logische oplossing. Tenzij je een beter voorstel hebt?”

Nessaja schudde haar hoofd en haar blonde krullen dansten rond haar oren. “Wat wil je nu gaan doen?”

*“De andere kant op gaan. Ik heb tot onze oorsprong gereisd en weer terug. Ik wil nu verder langs de Sagittariusarm reizen, in het kielzog van onze voorgangers, en misschien zelfs uitvinden waarom we die kant op worden gestuurd.”*

*“Maar daar heb je mijn toestemming toch niet voor nodig?” vroeg Nessaja.*

*Ik glimlachte. Het was wel eens goed te zien dat mijn moeder ook niet alles wist. “Vreemd genoeg weigeren alle schepen me verder dan een paar lichtjaar in de goede richting te vervoeren, daarna keren ze weer terug. Het is alsof de Schepen niet verder durven.”*

*“Dat kan niet. Het zijn machines.”*

*“Maar ze kennen zelfbehoud, moeder,” zei ik. “Ze zijn bang om de verkeerde beslissing te nemen. Wij worden gestuurd. Zij niet. Dus de kans dat wij het juiste doen is veel groter. Ik heb ze gevraagd hoe ik die blokkade kan opheffen. Jij schijnt me daarvoor volwassen te moeten verklaren, of een directe opdracht geven me te helpen.”*

*“Het zit in ons, merk je dat?” vroeg Nessaja.*

*“Wat zit in ons?”*

*“Het sturen en controleren van onze kinderen,” zei ze.*

*“Denk je dat wie of wat ons stuurt hetzelfde met ons voorheeft als wij met onze kinderen?”*

*“Ik hoop het maar,” zei Nessaja. “Ik hoop het maar.”*

*“Maar goed, je toestemming, je zegen, je goedkeuring om dit te gaan ondernemen?” vroeg ik haar.*

*Ze schudde haar hoofd. “Nee, die geef ik je niet.”*

*Vol ongeloof keek ik haar aan. “Dat kun je niet doen.”*

*“Lieve jongen, denk je dat ik je nog een keer twintig jaar ga missen? Natuurlijk niet.” De zwaartekracht nam iets toe, luiken schoven dicht en het licht in het Schip veranderde. Ik voelde motoren beginnen te werken gevolgd door een lichte versnelling.*

*Nessaja nam mijn hand in de hare en gaf me haar meest stralende lach. “Dit lijkt me een goede, gezamenlijke tijdsbesteding, moeder en zoon. Het is al zo lang geleden dat we echt iets samen hebben gedaan.”*

*Maarten Luikhoven Wake*

*Waiting for the return of my clone mother from her jaunt through the helium strata of the third gas giant circling Nagira, a middle aged sun in the Sagittarius arm of the Milky Way, took nearly three months. During that time I studied the complex rituals of the Urh, the immense, semi-intelligent gas bladders that manoeuvred through the atmosphere with unexpected grace.*

*“Why did you wait so long,” Nessaja asked as soon as her Ship lifted her out of the radio silence of the giant’s magnetic field. Her complete name was Nessaja Horvak Mistra Votarius, but she allowed no formalities, which other Sapiens often demanded. That was also the reason I wanted to ask her advice. Of all my clone parents she was not only the closest, she always gave me the feeling we were equals.*

*“I did not want to disturb you. And what I have in mind will take years, so a couple of months more or less...”*

*Her answers arrived faster as her ship approached mine. “That sounds like a*

transition. You're only three hundred, are you sure you're not trying to grow up too fast?"

"That's an acceptable moment, isn't it?" I asked. "I remember your stories about your first sun dive. And how old you were then."

Nessaja laughed. "Fortunately you won't be repeating that mistake. We took it out of the Ships. You want physical?"

"Yes, please. That's really why I'm here." Our Ships connected, air lock to air lock. I floated through the corridors and allowed my long arms and legs to do the minimal exertion to propel me forward leisurely. Ever polite Nessaja had reduced her gravity to near zero, even if she enjoyed half to one g more.

I found her on the lounge deck, painting an aquarel. The colors of her art did not match the sandy beach, the lake and the luscious greens and were more reminiscent of the helium strate inside the gas giant. Her body selection at this moment was short, stocky and suitable for high g environments.

As soon as Nessaja saw me enter she beamed at me. "Robate, come here, give your old mother a hug!" I acceded to her wish and folded my long arms around her body, feeling the subdued strength with which she hugged me. She stepped back and looked me over. "You're fully prepared for a long, weightless journey, I see."

I nodded slowly. "Yes, my decision is quite firm. But I need your memories, your oldest memories."

"Oh dear, why do you think I know what you're looking for, if your own Ship doesn't know how to find it?"

"I'm not sure," I said in all honesty. "And I get the feeling my Ship and other Ships sometimes just don't want to talk about things."

"Ah yes, you're not fully mature yet. We have rules."

"I suspected as much," I said. "That's why I wanted to talk with you, before I leave. I wanted to find Old Earth. I wanted to know where we come from and why we left."

"But that's not information the Ships withhold, is it?"

"That's correct. And I've already visited there."

The surprise on Nessaja's face was clear. "But that would take years. How long ago was our last meeting?" Her eyes stared into the distance while she scoured her logs. When the information came to her she looked at me angrily. "Twenty years? Why didn't you say something?" But almost immediately she reverted to the mild, curious Nessaja I had known all my life. "Tell me what you found."

I sat on the bench near the edge of the water, smelled the scent of plants and flowers and allowed the memories of my search to rise up from my long term memory archive. "I was in fact searching for our origins for a very long time. Old Earth was often referred, but I found out at least three dozen worlds exist that were once called Old Earth by humans, probably even more."

Nessaja nodded. "That's humans alright."

"But the origin, that first Old Earth, seemed to be lost in the archives. Our histories have not been perfectly preserved, Nessaja."

She shrugged. "You don't have to preserve everything. Memories are like former lovers, sometimes fun, sometimes dangerous, most times just annoying."

I understood her. Nessaja could trace her origins to one of the first of those three

dozen planets called Old Earth that I had found. That made her one of the oldest living humans in the memories of the Ships. "It meant I had to find the way back. That's why it took so long. The past million years humanity travelled further along the arms of the Milky Way, further and further from the source. The memories of the ancient Ships did deteriorate somewhat."

Nessaja smiled. "Yes, I remember my first Ship sometimes forgot stuff."

"The first year of my journey I travelled from Old Earth to Old Earth, like flying into your own history. Most have reverted to their natural, wild state and some are home to our descendants who wanted to remain."

"And my Old Earth?" Nessaja asked. "Did you see my house?"

I shook my head. "The planet had lost its technology at some time in the past. In that period a comet crashed into the seas, causing all life and buildings to be wiped from the surface."

"Oh," Nessaja said. She seemed sad. "That's too bad. My house inside Ship was designed after that house. One of my better memories."

"The universe is not very hospitable, we have learned that much. As I travelled further I found more evidence of these occurrences. Much disappears in a million year, if not everything we ever left behind. The entropy of civilizations is faster and more destructive than the natural entropy of the universe. So when I passed the earliest borders a long period of nothing happened. Two years at top speed, nothing. Until the radio signals."

"Descendants who regained technology?" Nessaja asked. Her eyes started to shine. "Or spacefaring aliens?" She mentioned the age old problem. In a universe so large, other spacefaring races had to exist. We just hadn't encountered them yet."

"Close. Chimpanzees. Or actually the evolved descendants of Chimpanzees."

Nessaja seemed surprised. "That is important news," she said. "We left the first Earth because we did not want to keep our existence tied to a single planet. Apparently they followed us."

"Yes, they were in fact looking for us, the race that had left Earth before then and had left it to them."

"You talked? Ship allowed it? What about the protocols?"

I nodded and smiled. "Yes, the protocols exist for contact with alien lifeforms. But Chimpanzees hail from Earth, like us. So no aliens."

Nessaja looked at me and pinched her eyes closed just a little. "How many hours did you have to discuss this with Ship?"

"Four days, to be exact."

Nessaja laughed. "It sounded too easy. What did you discuss with them?"

"Not too much. I asked them for directions. They wanted to worship me like a god. To them humans are godlike creatures and according to Ship many of their myths and legends are based on our history. Fortunately they were realistic enough to understand that we -it's weird to say it like this- are only human, not some all knowing super beings. We're only a few hundred thousand years ahead in technology."

"I think it's wonderful news," Nessaja said. "It feels a little like your kids are growing up, turning into responsible adults. And believe me, I know how that feels."

"I promised them I would send a delegation upon my return. That is already on its way to them. Otherwise it would take many thousands of years before they would even

get close.”

“They told you how to get to the original Old Earth?” Nessaja asked.

I shook my head. “They too had forgotten about it. All they could point me at were the planets and systems they had in their own history that they had visited. Apparently they made many of the same choices we did, back then. Our farewell was cordial.”

“I, for one, am happy for them,” Nessaja said. “I think we’ll have lots to discuss.”

“But there is more,” I told her. “After the Chimpanzees I travelled through empty space once again, not a trace of any civilizations, until we found more radio signals. Ship had trouble deciphering them, but in the end recognized dolphin speech.”

I sent Nessaja pictures of the habitats the dolphins used to discover space. Huge water globes, held in place by megastructures that placed their magnetic fields around the surface of their globes.

“Brilliant, did you contact them?”

“I considered it, but Ship warned me that our frame of reference was radically different from the whale kin. And it seems they hold some grudges towards us, so I decided to leave it to the experts.”

“I wonder why no one else ever considered going back in our tracks to see how our origins have evolved after our departure,” Nessaja said.

“I have had much time to think it over and this was indeed one of my thoughts.” I allowed my words to register. “I think it’s rooted deep in us, at least in a significant part of humanity, to look forward, to keep on going. If you’re like that, there’s no need to reflect or look back. And that gave me a lot of other questions. Quite philosophical, I’ll admit, but enlightening too.”

“Weren’t you lonely,” Nessaja asked. She remained a mother worried for her son, even if she had more than a thousand offspring.

I nodded. “In this part of space, human contact is possible. Distances make ordinary communication difficult, but we can work with it. In the Orion Arm of the Milky Way I was thirty thousand light years from home. Yes, I was lonely. Not simply lonely, but the lonely that feels like you’re the last of your kind.

“Poor boy, it’s good you’re back home,” Nessaja said and she smiled.

“Is it?” I asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Let me tell you what else I encountered.”

“There is more? I thought you would have reached Old Earth by now.”

“Not by a long shot. I was at least a thousand light years removed when I encountered ships. They did not send out signals and they were night black. Ship only recognized primitive power signatures and mostly organic components. When we approached they saw us. Their ships immediately displayed broad ranges of color and patterns.”

“Like certain squid,” Nessaja said.

“Exactly like squid. Their communication is mostly based on visual signals. Ship needed a few days to learn their language. I suspect I caused an uproar amongst them.”

Nessaja smiled. “Can you imagine what it would be like, meeting a highly advanced civilization? We could and can only dream of anything like that.”

“In their case it was slightly different. They grew up with the idea their gods and

demons had once left Earth and they are scared to death they might ever encounter them again. It does not matter to them they left Earth behind or that the predators who once hunted them are thousands of light years removed, that fear still guides them. And that got me thinking.”

“At least they knew the location of Old Earth, I presume?” Nessaja asked.

“Oh, definitely. They also warned about a destructive war that rendered Earth nearly uninhabitable.”

“That has happened before. Usually that was the immediate necessity to leave the planet and spread your race across the stars.”

I nodded and took a few pebbles from the beach sand. One by one they sailed in slow motion into the lake. “Something doesn’t add up, Nessaja. But you only see it with the proper perspective. We were always the pebbles, plunging into space somewhere, causing ripples, or better even, a wake. But where did those ripples touch. If they touched anything. Who saw the wake. If anyone noticed it at all?”

“That’s deep, Robate. How did you acquire such wisdom?” Nessaja asked.

“I’ve seen Old Earth. The source. The planet that started it all for humanity. An empty desert now, mostly dried up seas, sparse vegetation. Still the planet emanates a vitality that we, as humans, recognize and feel.”

“That must be a glorious feeling,” Nessaja said. She was beaming and I knew she was sincerely happy for me. Her children’s happiness had always been important for her. Yet more reason to ask her about her earliest memories.

“I have seen our last heirs there,” I told her. “The final species that will attempt to escape the gravity well and to inhabit the endless universe. They’ve grown, become more powerful and more intelligent. They launched their first satellite while I observed them. After them the planet will really be exhausted...”

Nessaja looked at me. “I don’t know what you’re feeling right now. Usually I can read you like an open book, but all you’re showing is confusion.”

I laughed. “Perhaps because I am confused. For the past ten years I’ve been contemplating the implications of cockroaches following in our footsteps. I think, I presume, I’ve come across something interesting. But if I’m correct, our existence may not be as special as we once thought. And it would imply that our goals, the once we decide for ourselves, are not ours.”

Nessaja sat down on the sand before me, wrapped her arms around her legs and looked up at me. “Tell me your deepest thoughts, child. Whatever they are, we’ll find the answers together.”

“My deepest thoughts in exchange for the earliest of your memories,” I said. “But you will have to know the questions Ship and I posed during our long journey back. We are both curious what the answers might be.”

“As you can see I’m all ears. You just said it, a month more or less, who cares?” Nessaja looked at me with patient eyes.

“How long has humanity been in space? Five hundred thousand years? A million? Maybe longer. In all those years we never encountered anyone. The blink of an eye on a cosmic scale, so we’re not surprised. But... no one? Still, in that cosmic blink of an eye Earth has launched us, the chimpanzees, dolphins and squid. And now cockroaches.”

“I will admit, that is special,” Nessaja said. “Perhaps we are somehow special, because



of our source?"

I shook my head. "We have found many habitable planets and we've colonized them. We have found life, intelligent life even. Just never intelligent enough to escape their planet. So why did we not encounter more intelligent, space faring species?"

"I cannot tell you what I don't know," Nessaja said. "What does this have to do with my earliest memories?"

"You were in the earliest colonization waves, managed entire fleets. You followed the Orion arm in the direction of the Sagittarius arm. Why that direction? Were you scared to cross the great void towards the Perseus arm? Was the direction of Centaurus too difficult? What reason did humanity have to go in this direction?"

Nessaja blinked a couple of times. Talking about the distant past made memories resurface from her long term memory archive. "I'm not sure if we, consciously, had good reasons. We just had a feeling this was the proper direction."

"Like the chimpanzees? The dolphins? The squid? And I think I'll be able to predict the direction the cockroaches will choose."

"Yes, but they're following in our wake."

"What wake? The chimpanzees on occasion find remnants of our civilization. By accident, if they're lucky. But at how many 'coincidental' finds is it still chance? Ship and I have tried to analyze that for the past ten years."

"Alright, that I can understand," Nessaja said. She nodded slowly. "What is your thinking then? What do you think is going on?"

"We never encountered aliens," I said. "Have we ever found remnants of a space faring civilization?"

For the first time ever Nessaja refrained from answering for almost a minute. The occasion was so rare I stared at her open mouthed.

"I had nearly forgotten," she stammered. "But now that you mention it, pieces of an ancient puzzle fall into place. We did find remnants. Minimal traces of an ancient, technologically advanced race. Millions of years old. It did not seem important then. After all, we were colonists, looking for new territory to inhabit. Those ancient buildings would just raise uncomfortable questions and delay our time tables."

I breathed deep. My mother's words confirmed suspicions Ship and I had harbored for years. "Occam's Razor. What are the odds that civilization had its origin on Earth? Thinking about our discussion just now?"

"That depends," Nessaja said. "Did any other races before or after us go in another direction? That we are not aware of?"

I shook my head. The thought occurred to me while orbiting Old Earth. "We checked. None of the chimpanzee, dolphin or squid records mention anything about other possible escapes from the gravity well. We scoured nearby star systems for traces, however minute. Nothing."

"In that case, it's not zero. Also not as good as zero, I think." Nessaja rubbed her fingers across her temples. "Indirectly that implies they were guided too. Or they sent their heirs in the right direction."

"But to what purpose?" I asked her. "Something is happening, we know that. Just not why." I got up and pushed off towards the outer hull that began at the edge of the park. At one of the port holes I looked out. The colorful helium and carbon bands of the gas

giant filled a large part of the view. A small moon hurtled by below us, dropping a fast moving shadow dot on the surface of the giant.

Nessaja stood next to me and said: "Who are we following, really? And how are we guided to go in this direction?"

"For that I needed access to your memories. I need to know why you made your choices when you directed fleets to specific solar systems. Some of your choices were not entirely logical," I explained.

Nessaja shook her head. "No, those decisions were made by the grand council."

I shrugged. "It's easier to influence a group of people than individuals."

"Do you really think that happened? Or does it still happen?"

"It's the most logical solution. Unless you have something that fits better?"

Nessaja shook her head and her blonde curls danced around her ears. "So, what's next?"

"Go the other way. I traveled to the source and back. Now I want to travel further along the Sagittaris Arm, in the wake of our predecessors, perhaps to find out why we are being guided along this path."

"But you don't need my permission for that, do you?" Nessaja asked.

I smiled. It was good to see my mother did not know everything, after all.

"Oddly enough all Ships refuse to take me in the right direction for more than a few light years, then they return. It's as if they're afraid to go on."

"Impossible, they're machines."

"Yes, with self preservation, mother," I said. "Afraid of making the wrong choice. We are being guided, they're not. So the odds of us doing the right thing are much, much higher. And we programmed that, directly into their cores." I smiled. "Makes you think, doesn't it?"

Nessaja nodded. "I understand, I think. So why not direct them to go where you want?"

"Well," I said, "there's the small issue that to override those core command structures, you need to be an adult. The only way to become an adult is to be declared adult by another adult. So either you declare me adult or give a direct order to follow my commands."

"It's inside us, do you see that?" Nessaja asked.

"What is?"

"The guiding and directing of our children," she said.

"Do you think that whoever or whatever is guiding us has the same intentions as we for our children?"

"I can only hope," Nessaja said.

"So, your permission, your blessing, your approval to do this?" I asked her.

She shook her head. "No, I won't grant you that."

I could hardly believe her. "You can't do that."

"My dearest boy, do you think I'll go without your presence for another twenty years? Of course not." Gravitation increased slightly, shutters closed and the light inside Ship subtly changed. I felt the engines kick in and the beginning of a slight acceleration.

Nessaja took my hand in her hands and gave me her most radiant smile. "This seems like the perfect way of spending time together, mother and son. It's been so long since

*we actually did anything together.”*

*In the end I just accepted. After all, who could refuse Nessaja when she set her mind to something?*

# Belgium

## Frank Roger School Trips

### 1. A Day At The Ocean

We had been travelling all day and the children were growing bored, even if they had access to a wide variety of educational and recreational software on their personal screens. When I announced we were about to arrive at our destination they all yelled and roared, as if we were going to a theme park. Children don't seem to realise the seriousness of the world's current state – logically enough perhaps. After all, they are but children.

As our school liner *Attenborough* started its descent to Fossil Reef Airport, I told the children to don their protective clothing and helped those who were struggling with their suits.

The touchdown was flawless, and the crews, both our liner's and the airport's, dealt with us swiftly and efficiently. It was clear they were used to working with groups of tourists in general and school trips in particular.

The children were transferred to a "dune bus", actually an outsized desert glider, and presently we sped through the shifting sands to our vantage point, the Ocean Panorama Observatory.

As soon as the children left the bus they rushed to the Observatory's entrance as if their lives depended on it. Oh, the natural enthusiasm these young kids can bring up!

When I had all of them lined up in front of the giant portholes, I asked:

"Who can tell me what we're seeing there down below?"

"Water," Catherine, one of my brightest pupils, said.

"Yes, it's water indeed. More precisely, it's the last bit of water to be found on the earth's surface. It's what's left of the Atlantic Ocean. Do you remember that name? We talked about it in class."

The children nodded.

"A long time ago most of the earth's surface was covered with water. But... what happened?"

Again it was Catherine who offered a reply. "The earth dried up."

"Exactly. After a series of climate changes most of the water evaporated and the earth dried up. This process has now almost reached its end. One day in the near future, the water we see down below will be gone too."

I noticed that most of the children had lost interest already, and were playing games or chasing each other. I decided against telling them that the Observatory's windows were porthole-shaped to remind visitors of the ships that used to sail the seas. It was clear that science was beyond them – no doubt they were too young to fully realise the extent of what they witnessed here. I can only hope they will return here at a more mature age – and that there'll still be some water left by then.

Tomorrow I'll ask the children to tell stories and make drawings based on what

they've seen and learned today, and I'm looking forward to receiving their material in my mailbox. At least a few of them should be impressed and come up with something interesting.

## 2. The Archaeological Expedition

The flight from Space Station Rossum, in an orbit around Mars, had taken us quite a while and my class of recently finished new models required a quick reboot.

By the time our voidcraft started its descent through the earth's atmosphere, the models were all on active mode and ready to process information. Even if they had only been fitted with basic programming, today's expedition might make a deep impression on them.

As we were nearing our destination I told the models to start scanning the surface below us, using their full sensor range.

After the first of a series of flybys I asked them what they had observed.

One model replied:

"The remnants of an ancient civilisation."

"That's correct. Which civilisation are we dealing with here?"

The same model answered: "Mankind, our Makers."

"Correct again. The ruins we just observed below us are the last trace of human civilisation on earth. Your programming should include sufficient information on the history of mankind and its passing, but personal perception of this archaeological site should allow you to distinguish between empirical information and basic programming.

Model 12, what have you added to your memory banks today?"

Model 12 replied:

"It is hard to fathom that a race of organic beings, risen to a level of sophistication allowing them to create first simple robots and ultimately true artificial intelligence, became extinct with hardly any traces left on its home planet."

"Didn't they leave an important legacy?" I asked.

"Certainly. They created us, thus paving the way for an even grander civilisation. Some dissidents claim, however, that artificial intelligence would have come into existence anyhow, even without the involvement of organic creatures."

"Did you verify that fact empirically, Model 12?"

"No, Instructor, that is merely a theory for which there is no hard evidence. Its scientific value is therefore limited."

"Correct, Model 12."

It was good to see that this new batch of models was able to make empirical observations, check them against the data in their memory banks and draw scientifically sound conclusions from them.

I congratulated the models, asked them to research and download more information about human civilisation, and report their findings to me. Then we headed back to Rossum. It was gratifying to see this school trip had proved so successful.

## 3. The End Of An Era

We are gathered here for a very special occasion, I thought to the swarm of "hatchlings" (as we refer to newly manufactured nanobots) surrounding me.

I sensed a feeling of apprehension bordering on mild fear in some of them, and understood why. I hastened to explain:

The space-time bubble that we're now occupying will shield us from the effects of the phenomenon we are about to witness. Our vantage point is quite perfect for our purposes.

I felt how the negative feelings dissipated, and continued.

What do we have here before us?

A variety of answers were directed at me, all roughly expressing the same idea:

The Solar System, of which Old Earth was once part, with the sun in an advanced phase of its existence.

This was an indication that basic memory modules had been transferred correctly. I chose to add some more specific data.

As the sun grew into a bloated red giant, it swallowed the planets forming the Solar System one by one. Old Earth was the third one to go. We are now about to witness the sun's next stage: its metamorphosis into a supernova, which will obliterate all traces of the Solar System. What does this mean for Old Earth from a historical viewpoint?

This time I received only a few replies:

Old Earth was the cradle of civilisation, the birthplace of mankind. Man created artificial intelligence, an intermediate species which in its turn led to the nanobot culture of which we are the culmination. With the disappearance of Old Earth, our origins were wiped out.

How should we view the supernova?

A red giant going supernova is a natural phenomenon. Old Earth was pulverised a long time ago, and the final destruction of the Solar System's remnants does not significantly change the situation.

I was satisfied with these general thoughts and invited the bots to watch the spectacle about to unfold.

A question came to me: Won't this be a long process? Will we only see a fragment?

Don't forget that we're in a space-time bubble. Inside it we will experience time differently. While ages pass outside, for us only a short time will elapse. As I said, our vantage point is perfect for our purposes. Now watch closely.

The red sun collapsed into a dazzling pinprick of light, pushing away excess material in all directions. The contrast between the dark red presence and the white glare of an almost tangible intensity was beyond description. The bots were awed by this majestic spectacle, but as I received their first thoughts their awe was apparently already waning. Here's an anthology:

This was impressive, even if this phenomenon has happened thousands of time in the history of the universe and will happen again countless times.

An awesome display, but ultimately the quiet will return. Old Earth and mankind are now but footnotes in history. As a matter of fact, mankind might as well have been mythical. It's of no importance anymore.

It was interesting to see the Solar System go up in a big flare, but I fail to grasp the importance of the event. So what if mankind originated from a planet that has once

existed, orbiting this star in its younger days? So what if mankind is indirectly responsible for our existence? Those details are lost in the mist of time, of interest only for historical reasons none of us care about. Let's concentrate on what really matters.

I will try to instil some sense of history in these bots, but I realise I'm fighting a losing battle. Logically enough, the new generations tend to look forward rather than backward, ignoring or even downright forgetting their origins and ancestors in the process. I know very well that I will have to go with the flow.

I thought at the bots that we would now take the space-time bubble back to our point of departure, news that they greeted with enthusiasm.

If only they could bring up the same enthusiasm for the values I wanted to hand them.

#### 4. A New Dawn

We explain to the new components of our Hive that we have retreated to non-space for two reasons.

Firstly, because this will grant us a vantage point from which to observe a view none have ever seen before.

Secondly, because occupying non-space will protect us from the otherwise lethal effects of the forthcoming event.

We offer the new components access to some vital information, which they save for further reference.

They learn that our Hive is the longest-living life-form in all of recorded history and the only one that might survive the end of the universe and witness the birth of a new one. In the remote past, as the expanding universe was stretching to its very limits, all extant types of artificial intelligence decided to merge into one single organism with a collective mind, the precursor of our Hive, so as to increase their chances at survival. Thanks to its far-ranging powers and its extreme resilience, this organism managed to stay alive indeed all through the universe's "recontraction". By now, having consolidated our existence as the Hive, we harbour high hopes towards surviving the next phase in the universe's evolution.

The new components, which are merely products of our Hive's constant self-renewal process, assimilated this information, thus precipitating their integration in the collective.

From our haven of non-space (in which time runs differently from how it is experienced in regular conditions) we then observed the death of the universe. As expansion had run its course, all existing matter was sucked back into a central point. It was a process that took ages, but which we were able to behold in a much shorter stretch of subjective time.

As all the universe's matter was finally concentrated into one high-density mass, the next Big Bang occurred, heralding the birth of a new universe. Matter was flung in all directions, ultimately to coalesce into galaxies and solar systems.

Safe within the confines of non-space, cut off from the main flow of time and the intricacies of cosmogony, our Hive observed how a new dawn unfolded. It will be fascinating to find out, and not only for our new components, if the new cycle that has

just begun will be comparable to the previous one.

Just imagine that one day, on a planet in the outskirts of one of those manifold galaxies, circumstances arise allowing carbon-based primitives to set in motion once again a chain of events whose outcome they cannot fathom, leading ultimately to the rise of an artificial intelligence mirroring our Hive's origins.

The very notion boggles our collective mind. We will observe how the new universe blossoms and inform new components regularly of the unique privilege our Hive has enjoyed by witnessing the old segue into the new.

Will we prove able to survive into the next cycle of expansion and recontraction and the subsequent Big Bang? Will we steadily grow immortal and triumphantly defeat the unending sequence of cosmological death and rebirth? Only time will tell.

Ernst-Eberhard Manski Korbball

„Das beschauliche Leben ist bald vorbei“, meinte Heike während des Dauerlaufs am Weserufer.

„Wieso?“, japste Ludger.

„Statt mit dem Pferdewagen durch die Dörfer unseres ländlichen Ostwestfalens zu tingeln, geht es ab der nächsten Saison in die Korbballhochburgen des Deutschen Bundes.“

„Bergrheinfeld, Braunschweig, Oerlinghausen ... so enorm ist der Unterschied nun auch wieder nicht“, lenkte Ludger ein, während sie die Fußgängerhängebrücke hinauf spurteten. „Wir spielen seit Jahren im Europapokal und bei der Weltmeisterschaft in Rotterdam waren wir auch.“

„Aber in der neuen Liga steht jedes zweite Wochenende eine längere Reise an.“ Heike bremste. „Ludger, das schlaucht.“

Beim Dehnen blickten sie zum östlichen Abendhimmel hinauf. Eine blasse Sternschnuppe erlosch in der Nähe des Zollhauses, in dem Heike wohnte.

„Obwohl ich mir manchmal wünsche, an galaktischen Meisterschaften teilzunehmen“, seufzte sie. „Auf einem Saturnmond gegen Außerirdische.“

„Du würdest einen Alien vermutlich nicht einmal erkennen, wenn er auf deinem großen Zeh aufsetzt“, flachste Ludger.

Heike wandte sich um und beobachtete einen Zeppelin, der über der Porta aufstieg. „Wusstest du, dass der Segelflugplatz in Vennebeck umbenannt werden soll?“

„Wie jetzt? In Mindener Flughafen?“

„Raumhafen Ostwestfalen.“

„Aber hier gibt es gar keine Raumschiffe.“

„Man will prophylaktisch einen Ort schaffen, wo Außerirdische landen können.“

„Wenn jemals ein Alien die Erde besuchen sollte, seilt der sich eher hier auf dem Überflutungsgebiet ab oder zieht seine Kreise in mystischen Kornfeldern“, ulkte Ludger.

„Wie soll die neue Liga eigentlich heißen?“

„Bundesliga.“

„Klingt lustig.“

„Nach dem Deutschen Bund. Zweigeteilt übrigens.“

„Und wo kommt Minden hin? Nord oder Süd? Oder etwa Ost oder West?“



„Über die Einteilung wird noch diskutiert. Jedenfalls spielen in jeder Staffel 16 Vereine, aus jedem Land der Meister.“

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Zu Hause eilte Heike zu ihrem privaten Trainingsplatz zwischen den Apfelbäumen, um vor dem Schlafengehen noch ein paar Korbleger zu üben. Unterwegs traf sie Hans und Ralf-Peter, die mit Laternen bewaffnet den Obstgarten durchkämmten.

„Sucht ihr etwas Bestimmtes, Opa?“

Hans blickte auf. „Peter meint, hier soll ein Geschoss eingeschlagen sein.“

„Ist ja irre.“

„Ja“, bestätigte ihr Vater. „Vielleicht eine Kanonenkugel aus Schaumburg-Lippe. Obwohl mir schleierhaft ist, weshalb Bückeburg uns angreifen sollte.“

„Muss ich jetzt aufpassen, wo ich hintrete?“

Ralf-Peter verzog keine Miene. „Halte einfach die Augen offen.“

An der Lichtung, auf der ihr Korb stand, fiel Heike sofort auf, dass am Pfahlsockel doppelt so viele Bälle lagen wie sonst. Sie probierte die neuen Bälle sofort aus. Die ledrige Oberfläche wirkte geschmeidig und vibrierte sanft. Beim Werfen spürte Heike, wie ihre Konzentration zunahm, und ihre Trefferquote erreichte nahezu den Höchstwert. Als ob der Ball selbst die Wurfrichtung während des Flugs korrigieren würde. Heike war begeistert: Mit solch intelligentem Material war ein Spitzenplatz in der neuen Bundesliga keine Utopie.

Als Heike sich eine gute Stunde später in ihr Zimmer im Dachgeschoss des Zollgebäudes zurückzog, war sie mit den neuen Bällen bereits so vertraut, dass sie einen von ihnen in die Schale auf ihrem Nachttisch legte.

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Kurz vor Mitternacht wurde Heike von einem Geräusch geweckt. Der Ball war auf den Boden geprallt und hüpfte auf das offene Fenster zu. Heike sprang auf, konnte aber nicht verhindern, dass er in den Obstgarten stürzte. Im Mondschein glaubte sie zu erkennen, wie das Leder in die Richtung ihres Trainingsplatzes verschwand. Ohne nachzudenken streifte sie ihr Trikot über und hastete die Treppe hinunter. Den Ball fand sie in einem von zwei verlassenen Ballonkörben. Als Heike hineingeklettert war, um das Leder herauszunehmen, hob der Korb ab, beschleunigte senkrecht und verließ nach wenigen Minuten die Stratosphäre. Erstaunlicherweise fror Heike nicht; der Korb schien von einer eigenen Luftschicht umhüllt zu sein.

Mit unermesslicher Geschwindigkeit raste Heike durch das All, landete auf dem Mars, spielte dort mit ihrem neuen Korball in einem bunt zusammengewürfelten Team gegen eine Mannschaft rot-grüner Teufel, jagte dann weiter zu mehreren größeren Asteroiden, wo sie einige Turniere absolvierte, düste anschließend zum Jupitermond Europa, trainierte auf dem Ring des Saturns, gewann ein Spiel in einem freischwebenden Stadion im Orbit des Uranus und eines auf dem Pluto und wachte nach einer gefühlt elfeinhalb Wochen dauernden Odyssee munter und zufrieden in ihrem Bett auf.

„Na, Peter, hast du gestern Abend noch etwas entdeckt?“, erkundigte sich Hans beim Frühstück.

„Nein“, brummte Heikes Vater. „Das war wohl eine Sinnestäuschung.“

„Und was willst du jetzt tun?“

„Nichts. Die Beziehungen zu Bückeburg sind momentan recht ungetrübt, da schützte ich kein Pulver ins Gebräu.“ Peter schlürfte einen Schluck Kaffee. „Vielleicht frage ich die Sternwarte, ob denen etwas aufgefallen ist.“

„Geht es immer noch um das Geschoss?“ Schwankend zwischen Erleichterung und Bedauern, ihre Reise anscheinend nur geträumt zu haben, schnappte Heike sich ein Hörnchen und ihre prallgefüllte Schultasche und rauschte hinaus. „Und vielen Dank für die Bälle!“

„Welche Bälle?“

Physiklehrer Gallus Leo Kupfernack hatte eine spannende Nacht im Planetarium verbracht. In wirrer Reihenfolge sprach er über Vennebeck, Außerirdische und Meteoriten, was in der Frage gipfelte: „Was würden Aliens tun, wenn sie die Erde besuchten?“

Bevor die Klasse schlaue Begriffe wie Invasion, Prospektion oder Terraforming murmeln konnte, schlug Ludger „eine Dampferfahrt auf dem Mitteländkanal“ vor, woraufhin der Korball belustigt aus Heikes Tasche quoll und ihr auf die Sandale prallte. Und dann klingelte es auch schon.

Nachdem das Mindener Tageblatt wenige Tage später über einen fliegenden Korb unbekanntem Ursprungs berichtete, der in mehreren französischen Ländern gesichtet wurde, wurden im Physikunterricht Vektorrechnungen und die Windschnittigkeit geflochtener Verkehrsmittel behandelt.

Als die Zeitung über einen Ballon schrieb, der sich in Luft auflöste, wenn er von heißblütigen iberischen Zöllnern beschossen wurde, faselte Kupfernack etwas von parallelen Universen und Übergängen in andere Welten, die nur einen quäntchennahen Gedankensprung entfernt seien.

Bald darauf errechnete ein Hobbyluftfahrer im Wissenschaftsteil die Strecke, die den Korb in zweieinhalb Monaten rund um den Globus führen würde. Die Schüler fieberten mit, besorgten sich frühmorgens am Kiosk das Tageblatt und registrierten mit wachsendem Erstaunen, dass der Korb sich brav an die Route hielt, die der anonyme Verfasser mit dem Kürzel GLK prognostiziert hatte.

Trotz ihrer Genauigkeit verkümmerten die Berechnungen im ostwestfälischen Lokalteil, was womöglich daran lag, dass der Physiklehrer Start und Ziel der Ballonfahrt jeweils im beschaulichen Minden geortet hatte.

Heike interessierte diese Gedankenspielerei kaum, da es ihr immer schwerer fiel, sich auf den Unterricht zu konzentrieren. Jede Nacht war sie im All unterwegs, spielte Korball auf den exotischsten Planeten, inzwischen sogar in benachbarten Sonnensystemen und Galaxien. Als ihr Ball eines Morgens durch das Klassenzimmer

kullerte und sie Kupfernack zornig aufforderte, endlich den physikalischen Hintergrund von Zeitschlaufen zu erläutern, fiel sogar Ludger auf, dass mit ihr etwas nicht in Ordnung war, und er lud sie nach dem Unterricht zu einem Wassertraubensaft in ihrer Lieblingspinte ein.

„Das ist alles enorm schlauchend“, beendete Heike erschöpft ihren Bericht und nippte an ihrem Glas, um alsdann in helle Begeisterung auszubrechen. „Aber diese Reisen sind keilreell. Warum kommst du nicht mal mit?“

„Wie denn?“

Heike reichte ihm einen der neuen Bälle. „Probiere es aus. Lege ihn neben dein Kopfkissen und achte darauf, wohin er rollt. Wenn es klappt, treffen wir uns heute Nacht beim Turnier auf dem Titan. Aber verirre dich nicht. Da draußen gibt es Welten, die kennen keine Korbballbundesliga.“

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Elfeinhalb Wochen später auf der Fußgängerbrücke sah Ludger wieder einen leuchtenden Stern herabfallen. „Wolltest du dir nicht etwas wünschen?“

Heike blickte ihn verträumt an. „Der Wunsch ist längst in Erfüllung gegangen.“

Ludger nickte. „Ja, das waren wirklich tolle Spiele gegen die Aliens.“

„Wobei ich mir allerdings nicht sicher bin, ob ich wirklich jeden Fremden als solchen erkannt habe.“

„Macht nichts. Aber diese neuen Bälle sind phantastisch. Mit denen haben wir jedes Spiel gewonnen.“

„Wir sind die Korbballmeister des Multiversums“, triumphierte Heike. „Jetzt müssen wir die Bälle nur noch irgendwie in die neuen Bundesligaspiele schmuggeln ...“

Als Heike ihren Trainingsplatz betrat, waren die neuen Bälle weg. Neben dem Korbständer hockten Hans, Ralf-Peter und Kupfernack und beleuchteten mit ihren Laternen einen flechtenartigen Abdruck auf dem Boden.

„Die beiden Körbe waren nur leblose Vehikel. Wenn Aliens im Spiel waren, müssen sie anders ausgesehen haben“, erklärte der Physiklehrer. „Aber warum haben sie keinen Kontakt aufgenommen?“

Heike betrachtete nachdenklich das fremdartige Muster, das im Mondlicht schimmerte. Über ihr raschelte es in der Baumkrone. Geistesgegenwärtig fing Heike den Ball auf, bevor er ihr auf den Zeh fallen konnte. „Haben sie doch.“

1.

## Die Autoren

*Yasser Abuelhassab*

*Science fiction writer, Editor in chief in (Science and Fiction Magazine), Egypt*

*Pavel Amnuel*

*was born in 1944 in Baku (ex. USSR). By profession he is astrophysicist, PhD, many years he researched last stages of stellar evolution - neutron stars and black holes. In 1968, in collaboration with O. Guseynov he predicted the existence of X-ray pulsars discovered a few years later in the American satellite UHURU. Composed by Amnuel et al "The Catalog of X-ray sources" (1978) was the most complete in the world. His first science fiction story was published in 1959 in a popular Soviet magazine "Technology - for Youth". The first author's collection of stories came out in Moscow in 1984. In 1990 he repatriated with his family to Israel, where he worked at Tel Aviv University, and later was editor in chief of newspapers and magazines "Time", "Aleph" and others. He is the author of the novels "Men of the Code" (1997), "Three-Universe" (2000), "Revenge in dominoes" (2007), and numerous science fiction and detective novels and short stories. He is winner of the Soviet and Russian awards for science fiction: "The Great Ring" for the greatest popularity among the readers (1982), "The bronze Icarus" (2009), awards of Soviet science fiction writers Ivan Efremov (2009) and Alexander Belyaev (2011, 2013) and Russia's main prize for science fiction "Aelita" (2012) - analogue of the American Prize Hugo.*

*Alexander Bachilo*

*wurde 1959 in Iskitim bei Nowosibirsk geboren. Nach Abschluss des Studiums am Elektrotechnischen Institut arbeitete er als Programmierer am Budker-Institut für Kernphysik in Nowosibirsk. Nach zwei Jahren Dienst als Offizier der sowjetischen Armee veröffentlichte er 1983 seine erste Erzählung in der Zeitung „Sibirische Jugend“. 1990 wurde er Mitglied des Schriftstellerverbands der UdSSR (heute Verband der Schriftsteller Russlands). Bachilo ist Autor der Bücher „Wartet auf die Ereignisse!“/ „Ereignisse abwarten!“ „ («Ждите событий»), „Der Fluch der Diawarden“ («Проклятие диавардов»), „Der unersetzliche Dieb“ («Незаменимый вор»), „Akademisch-Dämonisches Städtchen“ («Академонгородок») u. a. Alexander Bachilo ist auch Drehbuchautor populärer TV-Sendungen und Filme, u. a. der Mystery-Fernsehserie „Der Turm“ («Башня»). Er lebt mit seiner Familie in Moskau.*

*Boel Bermann*

*is a praised, dystopian author who's debut novel The New Children, set in the near future, was published in Sweden in the Fall 2013. She has contributed to the short story collections*

*Nya vägar: Tio nya utopier, Stockholms undergång, Waiting for the machines to fall*

asleep, Encounters, Kärlek i maskinernas tid, Maskinblod 3 och Maskinblod 2. The author has a background as a reporter at several large newspapers in Sweden and she's also a member of the Swedish writers collective Frukta, which blogs and produces a podcast of science-fiction, fantasy and horror short stories. Besides writing Boel also works at a games company. She previously studied journalism, criminology, social science, film science and social anthropology at Stockholm University. She always close the wardrobe before she goes to sleep to keep the monsters from escaping.

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Michael Blommaert

mostly writes in Dutch, with most of his work geared towards the LARP events that he helps organize. He occasionally participates in Dutch writing contests. He has recently started translating his work to English and has achieved some publications in the USA. He lives in The Netherlands, in Haarlem.

Arnold H. Bucher

Diverse Kurzgeschichtenveröffentlichungen seit 2005, dazu das Drehbuch für den SF-Thriller CARGO (2009). Weitere Drehbücher und ein Roman sind in Entwicklung: die Rollenspiel-Horrorkomödie RITUAL, die postapokalyptische BUNKERMELODIE, das düster-romantische TRAUMHERZ. Gelandet auf diesem Planeten ist er 1972 in Winterthur (Schweiz). Als Etappenhalt wurde er als Philosoph und Mathematiker lizenziert. Auf Filmproduktionen holt man ihn seit 2001 als Location Scout und Erster Regieassistent. Mehr: [www.ahab.ch](http://www.ahab.ch)

Arnold H. Bucher

Published many short stories since 2005. Wrote the script for the Swiss Sci-Fi-Thriller CARGO (2009). Several new scripts and a novel are in development: Roleplaying-Horror-Comedy RITUAL, post-apocalyptic BUNKER MELODY and Dark-Romance DREAM HEART.

He landed on this planet in 1972 in Winterthur (Switzerland). On his way he graduated in Philosophy and Mathematics and works since 2001 on film productions as a First Assistant Director and Location Scout. More: [www.ahab.ch](http://www.ahab.ch)

Carlos Bustos

Guadalajara, México, 1968

Narrador, editor y antólogo. Trabaja el cuento, novela y novela Juvenil. Ha sido editor de Ediciones Plenilunio desde 1994 hasta el 2008. Trabajó como columnista de la sección Ciudad Gótica en el periódico Siglo 21, consejero editorial de la revista literaria Trashumancia y co editor de la columna de cuento y narrativa del periódico Público Milenio. Fue director durante tres años del Premio Acento de Cuento Breve con el apoyo de La Feria Internacional del Libro de Guadalajara. Se ocupó de la columna llamada Mala Vida Mala, en el suplemento de cultura Guardaguas del periódico La Jornada, Aguascalientes [2011-2012]. Tiene más de veinte libros publicados, entre los que

destacan la novela *El Ilusionista* y el *Ojo del Unicornio*, *Soles Bajo la Piel*, *Antología Así se Acaba el Mundo* y *Antología de Seres de la Noche*. Ha colaborado en diversos diarios, revistas, publicaciones nacionales y también de España, Estados Unidos, Perú y Chile.

Reconocimientos: Premio Nacional de Literatura "Juan Rulfo" IV Concurso de Cuento (1997); VIII Premio Nacional de Novela "Jorge Ibarguengoitia" (2005); Premio Nacional de Cuento "Agustín Monsreal" (2005); Premio Nacional de Literatura "Gilberto Owen" (2009) y Premio Nacional de Narrativa Sonora "Gerardo Cornejo" (2012). Menciones Honoríficas en el Premio "Julio Verne" de relato de Ciencia Ficción (2005) y en el IV Premio Nacional Valladolid de Novela (2007); Finalista en el II Certamen Internacional de relatos "Editorial Círculo Rojo" (2010), Almería, España.

Publicaciones Recientes: *Ladrones del Crepúsculo* Grupo Anaya de Barcelona, España. *Fantásmica*, libro de relatos Editorial Axial, México. *La Espina del Mal* Editorial Terracota, México. *El Libro que Resucitaba a los Muertos*, Novela, Random House Mondadori, México.

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**Galit Dahan Carlibach**

was born in Sderot, Israel, in 1981. now lives in Jerusalem. She studied screenwriting and writing at the School of Film and Media 'M'aale'. Short stories, essays, articles, reviews of literature and poetry she had written were published in "Haaretz", "Panim", "Ma'ariv", "Moznayim", "Iton 77", "Lilith" etc.

Dahan Carlibach has published two novels: 'The Locked Garden' and 'On The Hedge', critically acclaimed and earned her a scholarship the National Library 'Pardes' program for young writers, and 2 fantasy book 'Mystia' which earned her an award ACUM and 'The Return Of Ten Times'. In 2014 she was awarded the Prime Minister's Prize.

**M. C. Carper**

nació en Buenos Aires. Cursó estudios de Ilustración en el Instituto Raggio y Dibujo de Historietas en la Asociación de Dibujantes de Argentina.

Sus primeros cuentos aparecieron en e-zines dedicados a la ciencia ficción en idioma español como *Alfa Eridiani*, *NM*, *miNatura*, *Korad*, *Planetas Prohibidos* y *Axxón*.

Ilustró libros como *Escultores de Hombres* de Claudio Landete Anaya y *DUENDE* de Ramón San

**Miguel Coca**

Como historietista participó en revistas de ciencia ficción como *Landzer*. Realizó la biografía gráfica de la banda australiana *AC/DC* con el guionista Machison para la Editorial Quarentena. Con el mismo guionista y editorial publicó *El Inner-Circle*, *los Maestros del Caos*, una historieta sobre los orígenes criminales del *Black Metal* en Noruega. El siguiente trabajo fue *MORTAL ZOMBIE*, una historieta de terror gore de gran repercusión entre los aficionados al comic. En la editorial argentina *DUENDES* colaboró en los libros de historietas del *Homenaje a la Guerra de Malvinas* y el *Especial* dedicado a los *Indios Tehuelches* con guión de Carlos Scherpa.

Un biopic de 300 páginas de la banda británica *Black Sabbath* sus integrantes: *LA BIBLIA NEGRA* del *ROCK*.

*TEEN Z, una novela gráfica corta sobre zombies con guión de Marcia Olivieri.*

*Actualmente realiza una tira semanal en The Web Comic Factory y presenta en DUENDES una serie de relatos fantásticos junto a diferentes guionistas mientras en trabaja en su personaje, Sálvat (www.Aurorabitzine.com).*

*Manfred Christiansen*

*er født i Sønderjylland i 1963, og boede dér indtil han flyttede til København i 1988. Han ville oprindeligt være ingeniør og gik også adskillige år på Teknikum, men han droppede ud og blev i stedet uddannet som grafisk designer. Siden 2007 har han med en vis regelmæssighed været at finde i forskellige antologier både med science fiction, horror og realisme. Til sin egen milde forbløffelse, regnes han med i den nye danske science fiction undergrunds hårde kerne. Udover at være forfatter har han også leveret illustrationer til adskillige af Science Fiction Cirklens udgivelser, til Fantastik-foreningens medlemsblad, Himmelskibet og til Fantasticon.*

*T. N. Collie*

*Born and raised in The Bahamas, I currently live in southern California penning fiction.*

*My short stories and poetry have appeared in On the Premises, Expanded Horizons, and Big Pulp.*

*I write dark speculative fiction under the pen name Amber Bierce.*

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*Magnus Dagon*

*Geboren 1981 in Madrid, schloss er das Studium der Mathematik mit einem Mastertitel in Quantenkryptographie ab; zuvor hatte er Architektur studiert.*

*Er schreibt in den Genres Science-Fiction, Fantasy- und Horror und hat zahlreiche Preise gewonnen, darunter 2006 den "Premio UPC", den SF-Preis der "Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya/BarcelonaTech" (Politechnische Universität von Katalonien/BarcelonaTech) mit der Kurzgeschichte "El informe Cronocorp" (bei Ediciones B erschienen), und 2009 das "IX Certamen de Narrativa Corta Villa de Torrecampo" (den*



Kurzgeschichtenwettbewerb der Stadt Torrecampo).

Außerdem ist er der Sänger und Songwriter der Band "Balamb Garden" <http://balambgardenmusic.blogspot.com/>. Sein neuestes Werk heißt "The Jammers" (<http://thejammerslibro.blogspot.com.es/>).

Fei Dao

(pen name of Jia Liyuan) is a PhD candidate in the Department of Chinese Language and Literature at Tsinghua University. He has published essays in Contemporary Writers Review, Southern Cultural Forum, and Dushu. His fiction includes the short story collections Chunzhen ji qi suo bianzaode [Innocence and What It Fabricates, 2011], Jiang gushi de jiqiren [The Story-telling Robot, 2012] and Zhongguo kehuan dapian [Chinese Sci-Fi Blockbuster, 2013]. His short story "Yige moshi de gushi" [A Story of the End of the World, 2006] was collected in ALIA (2011), an annual anthology of world sf stories. Translations into English include "The Demon's Head" (2012), which appeared in a special issue of Renditions on Chinese sf. His film script Qusi de manman lütu [A Long Journey to Death] won the second Young Scriptwriters' Support Programme award in 2009.

Eugeniusz Dębski

polski autor szeroko pojmowanej fantastyki. Od debiutu w 1984 roku dorobił się ponad 40 własnych książek; trzydzieści powieści, kilkanaście zbiorów opowiadań, antologie, przekłady zajmują na półce 178 cm (do założonej kiedyś długości - wzrostu autora brakuje 2 cm). Pisze zarówno w konwencji hard SF, jak i fantasy, udziela się na gruncie space opery, tworzy utwory sensacyjno-fantastyczne, niedawno skończył pisać z żoną Beatą thriller „23”.

Masową popularność przyniosły mu dwa cykle: 8 tomów przygód chandlerowskiego detektywa Owena Yeatesa z połowy XXI wieku oraz serial przygód rycerza-xameleona, wykonującego ekstremalnie trudne, śmiertelnie niebezpieczne i przerażająco różnorodne prace dla/za słabych tchórzliwych magnatów.

Ma na koncie zarówno powieści, jak i nowele, opowiadania, słuchowiska, short story, scenariusz gry komputerowej, przetłumaczył kilkadziesiąt książek z języka rosyjskiego. Utwory Dębskiego przełożone zostały na język rosyjski, węgierski, niemiecki, czeski. Aktualnie pracuje nad powieścią współczesną pod roboczym tytułem „Kogel-Nobel”.

Eugeniusz Dębski

is a Polish fantasy and science-fiction writer. Since his 1984 debut he wrote more than 40 books. 30 novels, several collections of short stories, anthologies and translations occupy 178 centimeters of his bookshelf (only 2 centimeters remain to reach a goal of his 180 centimeters of height). In addition to fantasy and science-fiction Dębski works in space opera and detective story genres. Recently, together with his wife Beata, he wrote a thriller entitled „23”.

He gained mass popularity in Poland with two series of novels: 8 volumes narrating the adventures of „Chandlerian” detective Owen Yeates from the mid-21st century and books centered around Xameleon - knight performing extremely difficult, deadly dangerous and frighteningly diverse tasks for his weak and cowardly lords.

*Dębski writes not only novels and short stories but also radio plays and computer games scenarios. He translated dozens of books from Russian and his works were translated into Russian, Hungarian, German and Czech. Currently he is working on a contemporary novel with the working title „Kogel-Nobel”.*

*Ronald Delgado*

*(1980), es Licenciado en Física, mención Física Computacional, de la Universidad Central de Venezuela; posteriormente especializado en Inteligencia Artificial. Sus obras como escritor de ciencia ficción y fantasía han aparecido en conocidas revistas electrónicas como Axxón (Argentina), NGC3660 (España), Alfa Eridiani (España), Qubit (Cuba), Revista NM (Argentina), Necronomicón (Venezuela), entre otras. Es autor de los libros de relatos "El Despertar de Meganet" (Alfa Eridiani, España 2008), "Réplica" (Fondo Editorial del Caribe, Venezuela 2011) y "La tierra del cielo sin sol" (ebook independiente, 2012). Participó en la "IV Semana de la Nueva Narrativa Urbana" (Caracas, Venezuela), así como en el "Taller de Expresión Literaria - Narrativa", de Monte Ávila Editores. En el 2010 resultó ganador del 1er Lugar del "2do Concurso de Relatos de Ciencia Ficción: La Cueva del Lobo" (Venezuela), mientras que en el 2011 resultó ganador del "VII Premio Andrómeda de Ficción Especulativa" (España), en la categoría Relato. ronald.delgado@gmail.com*

*Alberto Ruiz de Olano y Ruiz de Larrea  
Aretxabaleta, País Vasco, 1951*

*Doctorado en la Universidad de Toulouse (France) en Electronique Automatique (Junio 1977)*

*Hasta 2008 Director del Departamento de Electrónica en IKERLAN, Centro de Investigaciones Tecnológicas de MONDRAGON (País Vasco), hasta 2011 Miembro del 'Steering Board' de ARTEMIS, The European Embedded Computing Systems Initiative. Desde 2012 felizmente jubilado y 'scientific cultural free lance'. A lo largo de la actividad profesional ha publicado numerosos artículos sobre ciencia y tecnología de los microprocesadores en revistas tecnológicas, y ha definido y dirigido decenas de proyectos para el desarrollo de nuevos productos y soluciones que incorporan las funciones inteligentes que la electrónica digital hace posible desde hace 35 años.*

*Si bien la dedicación principal en su vida profesional está centrada en la ciencia y tecnología electrónica, siempre ha mantenido un gran interés por otros grandes temas de la cultura humana como son la filosofía, antropología, psicología, arte, economía y sociología. Ha participado activamente en el desarrollo del movimiento cooperativo en el País Vasco y ello le ha permitido desarrollar una cierta visión socio-económica de alternativas que pudieran ser de mucho interés para las próximas generaciones de este su pequeño país, que aspira a ser libre y universal al mismo tiempo.*

*Raelana Dsagan*

*(Carmen del Pino) nació en Málaga y es licenciada en Historia del Arte.*

*Ha participado en siete números de Calabazas en el Trastero y colabora en las antologías Clásicos y Zombis, 200 Baldosas al Infierno, Legendarium, (Per)Versiones: monstruos clásicos, fantasmas, espectros y apariciones y No eres Bienvenido. Es una de*

las autoras del libro-juego *Infección y de Perséfone*, una novela online por entregas ambientada en el Tecnoverso. *Hijos de Tayyll*, publicada en 2013, es su primera novela.

Fue ganadora del II Concurso de relatos Pasadizo y el Certamen Los Caídos y ha sido finalista de diversos certámenes. También obtuvo menciones honoríficas en el concurso de relato *Sagas Épicas* y en *Fabricantes de sueños 2008*.

Interesada también en el mundo audiovisual, ha realizado tres videoclips para el grupo *Balamb Garden* y trailers para *No Tocar* y *The Jammers*.

Podéis encontrar más información en su blog: <http://escritoenagua.blogspot.com/>

Lara Rose Eikamp

deutsch-amerikanische Staatsbürgerin, war schon immer eine bunte Mischung zweier Kulturen. Allerdings hat sie nicht vor bei zweien Halt zu machen. Mit ihrem Entschluss nach dem Abitur nach Norwegen zu ziehen, konnte sie noch eine weitere zu ihrem Erfahrungsrepertoire hinzufügen. Die Edda ist ein interessantes Hilfsmittel beim Spracherwerb. Als nächstes nimmt sie die Niederlande in Angriff, wo sie Psychologie studieren wird.

Bojan Ekselenski

Born: 29th June 1964

E-mail: [bojan.ekselenski@gmail.com](mailto:bojan.ekselenski@gmail.com)

I was born in Celje, Slovenia. After elementary school, I attended chemistry high school in Celje. I then served in Yugoslav army. Upon leaving the army, I began working at Cinkarna where I still am. Nowadays I also living, struggle and work in Celje.

I started writing very early. In the 1990's I started compiling the fantasy world of *Knights Wizards*. I had an idea of that eventually resulted in a long fantasy epic novel. I tried my best by thriving everything into studying what I might need. This included studying mythologies, religions, a more detailed study of the ancient and early medieval history of Europe, and the theory of particles and such like. I read a fat book of superstrings theory and such like.

In 2006, being sufficiently educated and well-read, I created a webpage on which I displayed glimpses of my upcoming first book. I decided that this saga will have 4 parts. Furthermore, I decided to have a totally unusual thing in Slovenia - a fantasy world with online support.

In 2007 they published my first book *Knights Wizards - Indigo children*. This was a "one man band" production and was my apprenticeship period. However, my entry on arena was accomplished. Whilst writing my second book, I placed a web portal on a modern platform and in early 2008 I came up with the idea of a fanzine for the novel *Knights Wizards*, thus adapting something that did not exist in Slovenia - a real fanzine. I called it "Jashubeg en Jered" that means News from Otherworld. Title came from the imaginary fairytale-language of my book.

I will never forget the reaction from SFF community in Slovenia. It was everything except gentle. I felt comfortable with its bizarreness and cannibalism. But who cared? I nuzzled forward the fanzine. During the next year the fanzine acquired ISSN number and was no longer just a fanzine of my fantasy world. Fanzine is now solitary promoter and messenger of Slovenian authors of speculative books. Then I meet up with Andrej

Ivanuša, Ruža Barić and Amedeja M. Ličen and in 2011 we established ZVEZDNI PRAH (STARDUST), Author's Society of Speculative Arts.

At same time I compiled a few stories and wrote another book *Knights Wizards - Indigo New World*. I decided that everything should be professionally done for this book. Cover was illustrated by Mark Jordan and we quickly agreed on things. I provided only basic guidance and he created a magnificent picture, which is seen as a work of art. Mark drew up the great inner headlines and gave me valuable advices when compiling a map of the Otherworld, which was professionally created. Proofing I left to mag. Zoran Pevec, a great editor, essayist, poet and an expert on the Slovenian language. In 2011 I went on a mission to find the publisher. I agreed with publishing house "PRO-ANDY" of my friend Andrej Ivanuša. He was also editor and created the book's print-design. My book was released in January 2012.

My third print book is a prequel to my saga. *Knights Wizards - Cave of Secrets* is an archaeological thriller mixed with fantasy and science fiction. My co-oworkers will be the same as for *Knights Wizards - Indigo new world*. In 2013 I was started with e book. This year I was published three books of my saga *Knights Wizards* and handbook *Workshop of speculative fiction*. In 2014 I publish two e books from my *Knights Wizards* saga, a redesigned first book *Knights Wizards - Indigo children - Knights Wizards: The rise of indigo childs* and also redesigned *Knights Wizards: The indigo new World*. During this year I publish another two e books—*Atlantis: The empire of Sun God* and poetry book - *The poetry of magic and mystic*. In year 2015 I publish another print book - *Atlantis: The empire of Sun God*, then e book *Theory Practice of e publishing* and *The stories form here and there*.

Of course these are not my sole literary pursuits. One story appeared in Croatia in *Eridan fanzin*, published by *Treći zmaj (Third Dragon) society*, Rijeka. I have written a many short stories and publishing in magazin *Joker*, *Življenje in tehnika*, *Vsesledje*, *Vpogledi* etc. I have been a member of of the *Society ZVEZDNI PRAH (STARDUST), Author's Society of Speculative Arts*, since its establishment. I am an active member of the *Literary Society of Celje*. I'm an active promoter of speculative arts.

I edit web portals:

[samozalozba.eu](http://samozalozba.eu) (my self publishing web page),

[vitezicarovniki.com](http://vitezicarovniki.com) (web page about my project *Knights Wizards*),

[zvezdni-prah.si](http://zvezdni-prah.si) (web page of *Stardust society*),

[Atlantida.center](http://Atlantida.center) (web page about my project *Atlantis*),

[pisatelj.net](http://pisatelj.net) (my writeing web page).

Pranav Ganapathiraju

I am a student in an undergraduate course on electronics and communication engineering. I go by the nickname "Old Man WindBreaker" on various websites. I have an interest in the natural sciences, and a passing interest in the other sciences. I like the works of Warren Ellis, the films "Primer" and "The Man from Earth", the anime "Tiger Bunny", the TV film series "Firefly" and "Serenity", and the heavy metal band Cynic, among other things.

Bettina Gapta

wurde am 15.05.85 als älteste von drei Schwestern in Siebenbürgen geboren. Die Familie lebte bis 1991 in einem idyllischen Dörfchen namens Probstdorf. Nach der Wende siedelten die meisten Siebenbürger Sachsen in die alte Heimat Deutschland zurück, so auch ihre Familie. Ohne zu wissen wo sie später landen würden ließen sie sich letztendlich in Simbach am Inn/Bayern nieder. Bettina lies sich zur Erzieherin ausbilden. Zur Zeit arbeitet sie in einem Heim, in der Kinder- und Jugendhilfe mit "... den besten Kids und dem besten Team der Welt". Sie lebt mit einem Freund und zwei Katzen in einer chaotischen WG. Hier findet sie viel Inspiration für ihre Geschichten.

Rudy Ch. Garcia's

noir detective story, *LAX Confidential* ('08) is included in Bilingual Press's *Latinos in Lotusland*, and his Southwest fantasy, *Memorabilia* (honorable mention in *Writers Digest* competition) appeared in Drollerie Press's *Needles and Bones* E-book anthology. His SF-fantasy flash fiction *A Grain of Life* is viewable at *AntiqueChildren.com* ('09), and a comedic fantasy-horror, *Weird Ronnie*, took first place in an *AlternateSpecies.com* competition in Britain. The magic realism story *Mr. Sumac*, published in AQC Books' *Kingdom Freaks and Other Divine Wonders*, 2012. His children's fable in Spanish, "El Viaje de Clarisa", was published in *Revista Iguana*, 12/12. The *Closet of Discarded Dreams*, an alternate-world epic, was published by *Damnation Books*, 9/2012.

Garcia considers himself a mestizo, half mexicano, half indio. Oral, family lore affirms a Yaqui and Tarahumara heritage, preceded by unknown tribal affiliations back to the Valley of Mexico.

He is a quasi-ex-member of the Northern Colorado Writers Workshop, holds a B.A. in writing from the University of Colo.-Denver and worked as a Denver-area bilingual elementary teacher. He is a founder-contributor to *LaBloga.blogspot.com*, a Chicano literary website.

Nelly Geraldine García-Rosas

(Ciudad de México, 1984) vive con su novio y tres gatos gordos en Calimaya, un pequeño pueblo cerca de un volcán extinto y no muy lejos de la Ciudad de México. Sus textos han sido publicados en antologías como *Future Lovecraft* (2011) y *Penumbria. Año I* (2013). Puede ser contactada a través de su sitio web [www.nellygeraldine.com](http://www.nellygeraldine.com)

Niels Gjerløff

Er wurde 1967 geboren und ist ein ausgesprochener Bücherwurm und Science Fiction Fan.

Seit Beginn ist er Mitglied der Fantastik-Gesellschaft 'Fantastik' und regelmäßiger Lektor und hin und wieder auch Beitragender für das Mitgliedsmagazin "The Sky Ship" [Das Himmelsschiff]. Eine Kurzgeschichte wurde in *The Sky Ship* veröffentlicht, mit der er an dem Speed Writing Wettbewerb für Kurzgeschichten auf dem Fantastikcon 2005 teilnahm. Er ist Teilzeitangestellter im IT-Bereich und Büroassistent am Institut für materielle Wissenschaften und Ingenieurswesen, der Abteilung für Mechanik an der technischen Universität von Dänemark. (DTU)

Lukász Herma

*Lives in Czech.*

*Vladimir Hernández Pacín*

*(La Habana, Cuba, 1966) reside en Barcelona desde 2000.*

*Valentin D. Ivanov*

*is a professional astronomer, with multiple publication in scientific journals. He has been writing speculative fiction, mainly but not exclusively in the hard-SF sub-genre. He has published in his native Bulgaria a collection of stories, written together with Kiril Dobrev. His article "A Statistical Study of Locus Online's Notable Books" appeared in "Strange Horizons", his stories were published in the educational SF anthology "Diamonds in the Sky" (Ed. M. Brotherton), and in the German fanzine "Internova". An essay of his appeared in the non-fictional anthology "Letters to Tiptree" (Eds. A. Krasnostein, A. Pierce).*

*Tatjana Jambrišak*

*Lives in Croatia.*

*Mike Jansen*

*Mike has published flash fiction, short stories and longer work in various anthologies and magazines in the Netherlands and Belgium, including Cerberus, Manifesto Bravado, Wonderwaan, Ator Mondis and Babel-SF and Verschijnsel anthologies such as Ragnarok and Zwarte Zielen (Black Souls).*

*He has won awards for best new author and best author in the King Kong Award in 1991 and 1992 respectively as well as an honorable mention for a submission to the Australian Altair Magazine launch competition in 1998. In 2012 Mike won awards in the SaBi Thor story contest, the Literary Prize for the Baarn Cultural Festival and the prestigious Dutch Fantastels award for best short story. In September 2013 he joined the Horror Writers Association (HWA).*

*More recently he has published in various English language ezines and anthologies, among which several publications with JWKfiction.com, Encounters Magazine and others. A full list is on Mike's site: <http://www.meznir.com>*

*You can also find him on Goodreads, Facebook and Twitter.*

*Mike's debut novel, 'The Failing God,' is available, in English, from JWK Fiction, as well as his first anthology, "Ophelia in my arms"*

*Janka Javorka*

*Mein lang gehegter Wunsch war es schon immer eine eigene Science-Fiction-Bücherei zu besitzen und in einem Leuchtturm zu wohnen. Weder das eine noch das andere ging bis zum heutigen Tag in Erfüllung, aber der Literatur bin ich dennoch treu geblieben. Und so schmücken mein Bücherregal etliche Werke von verschiedensten Autoren und ich selbst bin ein Stammgast in unserer lokalen Bibliothek, in Nitra, der Stadt im Südwesten der Slowakei.*

*Die Sprache ist nicht nur mein Job sondern auch Hobby und deswegen spiele ich mit den Wörtern fast ununterbrochen, suche den richtigen Augenblick, richtigen Ausdruck,*

richtigen Code. Obendrein bin ich ein leidenschaftlicher Informationssammler und hatte das Glück, dass es eine meiner Geschichten im Jahr 2012 bis ins Finale des slowakischen Phantastik-Literaturwettbewerbes Fantázia schaffte.

Xia Jia

a chinese SF author.

KG Johansson

Swedish writer KG Johansson was born in the fifties, grew up with the music of the Beatles and became a rock musician. After thirty years of teaching at a music college he quit to play and write full-time. He has written a number of opera librettos, a few film scripts and one stage play, as well as about 50 music books, twenty books for kids and young adults, and about fifteen novels. He has won the SF prize "Spectacular Prize" for best Swedish SF novel three times: in 2010 for Googolplex, in 2011 for The Chimaira and in 2013 for The Conscience Maker. Also, he has won a number of short story contests, including the one for Mix publishing company in 2013, where he took first prize among 600 entries with his story Before The Sky Falls.

Stig W. Jørgensen

(born 1968) is a Danish translator, academic and occasional writer. He holds a PhD in Computational Linguistics and worked for more than a decade for the Copenhagen Business School as a researcher and administrator. Stig left academia in 2007 to become a full-time translator and consultant. As a consultant, he has worked for, among others, the Danish Language Council, and he is the translator of more than fifty books in many genres, fiction as well as non-fiction. In the field of science fiction, fantasy and horror, he has translated works by e.g. James Frey, Charlaine Harris, Lainy Taylor, Kelley Armstrong, Kami Garcia Margaret Stohl, Saci Lloyd, William Nicholson and Darren Shan.

An avid science-fiction reader since childhood, Stig W. Jørgensen has written about science fiction and fantasy since the 1980's. Some of his writings on science fiction and related subjects are collected in his books Det virtuelle cocktailparty [The Virtual Cocktail Party], 2010, and Ekkorummet [Echo Chamber/Echo Space]. Over the years, Stig has also written a number of short stories.

Oskar Källner

is a trained theologian and computer scientists. He is as fascinated by folk tales and mythology as by astrophysics. In his writing, he often mixes speculative ideas with fast action and existential issues. He is so far published with two fantasy books and numerous short stories, both SF and horror. In spring 2013 he won the honorary prize in the great SF short story contest hosted by the Swedish SF-bookshop and Mix Publishing. In spring 2014, he won first prize in "The Future Story" a SF short story contest hosted by Duo Dito Publishing. Oskar also likes to play video games and watch Japanese anime. Other favourites are Game of Thrones and The Walking Dead. For more information about Oskar and his writing, visit his blog at: <http://munin.kallner.com/>

Martín Muñoz Kaiser

*Escritor Chileno: Diseñador de la Universidad de Valparaíso, hasta el 2006 trabaja como guionista junto al cineasta Alejandro Valdovinos. El 2012 presenta en la FILSA "El martillo de Pillán", una épica mitológica mapuche de corte fantástico. El 2013 publica cuentos en los números 1 y 2 de la revista chilota "Ominous Tales" y junto a Sergio Amira, escribe y publica "WBK Asesinos". El 2014 presenta en la FIL Guadalajara "Evento Z, zombis en Valparaíso" donde participa, junto a la comisión de escritores seleccionados por el Consejo Nacional de la Cultura, en diversas entrevista y en la mesa Nuevos Medios y Panorama Literario en Chile, el 2015 es invitado a la FIL Puerto Montt y la FIL Viña del Mar, publica "El Sátiro" y la antología de cuentos "Pornología". Participa en diversas ferias, conversatorios y revistas online, sus textos han sido publicados en España e Italia y traducidos al italiano y al alemán.*

*Andreas Kapandreu*

*was born in 1972 in Nicosia (Cyprus), where he currently lives. He works as a librarian at the University of Cyprus and he writes fantasy, horror and science fiction stories. Kapandreu published two literature books in Greek: 1. "Το τρομακτικό μυστικό του Αϊνστάιν: αλλόκοτες ιστορίες" ["Einstein's scary secret: bizarre stories"] (2010) and 2. Ο γιος της Μάγισσας" ["The son of the Witch"] (2012). His book "Einstein's scary secret: bizarre stories" is also available in English as an e-book.*

*Kapandreu's stories appears in several collected works and magazines. <http://andreaskandreu.blogspot.com>*

*Akiko Kawabata*

*wohnt in Japan und seit 2006 arbeitet sie als freiberufliche Übersetzerin von Deutsch und Englisch ins Japanische. Während des Aufenthaltes in den USA als interne Übersetzerin um 1999 machte sie 'creative writing' Kurse an einer Universität und einigen Buchhandlungen. Sie hat zwei Märchen von Hermann Hesse übersetzt (Teil von dem neuen gesammelten Werke Hermann Hesses in Japan, die von Rinsen Verlag, Kyoto veröffentlicht wurden) und jetzt hat sie einige eBooks auf Deutsch und Englisch bei Amazon Kindle.*

*Achmed Khammas*

*Geboren 1952 in Berlin, die Eltern sind Dipl.-Wirtschaftsingenieure. Bis 1970 Schule in Berlin und Damaskus, mit arabischen Abitur. 1969 eröffnete er den ersten Schallplattenladen in Damaskus. Ab 1971 freier wissenschaftlicher Mitarbeiter der TU Berlin. 1977 eigenes Ingenieurbüro in Damaskus, nebenberuflich Dolmetscher. Später Vertriebsleiter, Mitarbeiter an Zeitschriften, beteiligt an einer Band. Achmed Khammas ist in vielen Berufen und Berufungen tätig, seine vollständige Biographie auf: [www.khammas.de/vita](http://www.khammas.de/vita)*

*James Ward Kirk*

*is the owner of James Ward Kirk Publishing ([jwkfiction.com](http://jwkfiction.com)). He has multiple short story publications. He is currently working on a novella and a novel. [jameswardkirk@gmail.com](mailto:jameswardkirk@gmail.com)*



*Sven Klöpping*

*wuchs in Nordrhein-Westfalen auf. Er arbeitete als Werbetexter in verschiedenen Agenturen. In Frankfurt arbeitete er als Juniortexter und begann Science-Fiction zu schreiben. 2001 erschien sein erstes Buch (MegaFusion, LifeFiction, G. Meyer's Taschenbuch Verlag). Mit Gründung des SF-Magazins Nova konnte er seine Erzählungen einem etwas größeren Publikum präsentieren. Er schreibt zur Zeit intensiv SF und Lyrik. Er lebt im Schwarzwald und ist Mitglied von LIT Hessen, SFCD, EDFC.*

*Kenneth Krabat*

*age: past half-life, residence: krabat.menneske.dk, krabat@menneske.dk, occupation: desperate and ever hopeful, interests: me and you make three. Also: Time Travel, public poetry, long showers and round things. I have written and published for 30 years, mostly poetry, but in the past 10 years also scifi short stories.*

*Dennis M. Lane*

*is a Rhysling Award (2013 Short poem - "Blind Obedience", 2013 Long Poem - "Grandfather") and Dwarf Stars Award (2013 "Replacement") nominated poet and writer of science fiction short stories and novels.*

*He was born in the monochrome days of the early sixties, deep in the industrial heartland of England. In 1986 he travelled to rural Nigeria as a volunteer teacher and this led to a long career working in international development, which continues to this day. He has lived in seven countries across Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific, each country making its own impact upon him. He has finally settled in South Africa where he has now lived for almost ten years.*

*Dennis M. Lane's writing ranges from poetry, which covers a variety of themes from the personal to the political, and are written in a range of styles and forms; through short stories; to longer forms. His first poetry collection "8 Million Stories" was published in November 2010. A collection of science fiction short stories, poetry and flash fiction, "The Poring Dark", was published in September 2012. His first novel "Talatu", a Young Adult Science Fiction tale, was published in March 2013.*

*His second novel was published in August 2013. "The King's Jewel", the first of The Helix Key Series, is a Young Adult novel best described as Quantum Leap meets Assassin's Creed with a backbone of Stargate; and is populated by his own ancestors (going back as far as the time of Christ!).*

*Outside of his writing; Dennis presents a monthly Film Review on the Hugo award winning StarShipSofa podcast, writes articles for the Limebird Writers site, cooks, plays the harmonica and spends far too much time watching football.*

*Samples of his work (both written and audio) can be found at <http://dennislanebooks.com>*

*Oxana Langbeen*

*born in the outskirts of Marsio in Zabrilia. She shortly after moved to the picturesque Uif in Western Breezeland in The Netherlands. That is where she obtained her preference for her kind of lovingly-positive prose, which she usually refers to as objects.*

*She takes her earthly existence on a day to day basis, just in the way it comes, greatly*

enjoying every day granted. Meanwhile she tries to avoid certainties whenever they materialize, since she regards them to be deceptive.

Frank Lauenroth

Jahrgang 63, schreibt Science Fiction und Thriller.

Sein Roman »Boston Run« dominiert seit Jahren die Verkaufscharts für das zugegeben sehr schlanke Subgenre eines Marathon-Thrillers. Für die Hörbuchfassung konnte zudem Johannes Steck, einer der anerkannt besten, deutschsprachigen Hörbuch-Interpreten gewonnen werden. 2012 erschien die Fortsetzung »New York Run«.

Seitdem widmet er sich ausschließlich der SF.

Seine SF-Novelle »K'tarr!« wurde 2013 sowohl für den Deutschen Science-Fiction-Preis als auch für den Deutschen Phantastik Preis nominiert.

Patrick Leis

from Denmark is dividing his line of work into 3 fields: Writing, illustrating and bodypaint. He have won world championship in bodypaint, painted more then 200 book covers and have had published almost 30 novels and a number of short story's. He manly writes horror and science fiction, but has made some books about travelling as well. His largest writing-project is the Necrodemic-saga, a zombie/dystopia in five volumes. He has twice been nominated for best Danish horror novel and have previously had a short story translated to English as well as had one of his books translated to Swedish. Read more on his homepage: [www.patrickleishorror.dk](http://www.patrickleishorror.dk)

Jerson Lizarazo

1992 in Bogota, Kolumbien geboren. Gewinner des Ersten Jahreswettbewerbs für SF-Kurzgeschichten der Zeitschrift „Alfa Eridiani“. Finalist des VI. Nationalen Kurzgeschichtenwettbewerbs. Veröffentlichungen in der Zeitschrift Ergoletrías der „Universidad del Tolima“ und in der kolumbianischen SF-Zeitschrift „Cosmocápsula“. Seine Erzählung „El chapucear de las gotas“ (etwa „Das Tropfen-Geklopf“) war Teil der offiziellen Auswahl des „Uy! Festival del Miedo“ (Uy! Festival der Angst) 2012.

María Eijo López ‘Nullien’

(Santiago de Compostela). She has published short stories on different websites such as Ociozero or the miNatura magazine. She was selected for the anthology “Aenigma Veneris” (Albis Off). Usually she writes steampunk themed stories, and with them she placed second on the “I Concurso Literario de Relatos Cortos Steampunk y Retrofuturistas”, and won the Concurso de Relato Mundo Steampunk: “El Mapa del Cielo”. She also has stories published in anthologies such as Ilusionaria III, Planes B (1 and Gaslamp), Vórtice I Certamen and Contos Estraños (3 and 5).

Maarten Luikhoven

has written for many years, but work matters often kept him from finishing stories. In recent times he has made time to finish some of his old writings, but he also produces new work. In 2011 he managed a 9th position in the great Fantasy writing competition of the city of Brugge in Belgium (out of 237) and a 7th spot in the Trek Sagae

competition (out of 30) plus several publications. He hopes for some more accolades in the near future in the Paul Harland prize, Fantastels or Trek Sagae. His work is often experimental but he has a love for weirdness and hard core science fiction. Maarten is one of the writers in the Hilversum Writer's Weekend that is held once every three months, together with Mike Jansen, Michael Blommaert and Edward van Egmond.

*Lucie Lukacovicova*

graduated in librarianship and cultural anthropology at Charles University in Prague, Czech Republic. There she also lives, teaches, translates and writes. She won the Karel Capek Award twice (2001, 2007), published over one hundred short-stories and four novels: „Vladci casu“ (The Masters of Time), „Stanice Armida“ (Station Armida) and „Detektivni kancelar Sirius“ (Private Investigators' Agency Sirius). She enjoys working in team with other authors, especially her sister Petra; together they wrote a historical fantasy novel „Cesta Rude tanecnice“ (Voyage of the Red Dancer).

Her fantasy steampunk novel “Spark of Thought” will be published in English by Less Than Three Press, available on: <https://www.lessthanthreepress.com/excerpt-spark-of-thought>. Lucie likes travelling, dancing and learning foreign languages. If she would be transported into a SF or fantasy story, she would love to be „the scholarly character“, who deciphers ancient manuscripts and remembers all the perks of alien cultures.

*Antonia Malpica,*

Hobbyschriftsteller, lebt an der spanischen Mittelmeerküste und schreibt seit mehreren Jahrzehnten hauptsächlich zum eigenen Vergnügen Kurzgeschichten zu Themen, auf die er gerade Lust hat, in allen möglichen Genres: Sci-fi, Horror, Erotik, Fantasy, Thriller, Erzählungen für Kinder. Allerdings möchte er nicht ausschließen, dass er eines Tages, vielleicht in diesem, vielleicht auch erst im nächsten Leben, einen Roman verfassen wird.

*Antonio Malpica*

escritor aficionado que vive a orillas del Mediterraneo español y que escribe solo por pura diversión desde hace ya varias décadas. Escribe cuentos cortos de cualquier tema que en cada ocasión le apetezca: Sci-fi, Terror, Erotismo, Fantasía, Thriller, Infantil. Eso sí, no descarta escribir algún día una novela, quizás en esta vida o si no en la siguiente...

*Ernst-Eberhard Manski*

ist Historiker, Skandinavist und Bankkaufmann und lebt seit über 30 Jahren in Belgien. Der gebürtige Ostwestfale ist verheiratet und hat zwei Töchter. „Korbball“ spielt in der Welt seiner Kurzgeschichte „Das Klassentreffen der Weserwinzer“ („Molekularmusik“, Wurdack-Verlag), die als beste deutsche Science-Fiction-Erzählung des Jahres 2009 mit dem Kurd-Laßwitz-Preis ausgezeichnet wurde.

*Mario Daniel Martín*

was born in Salta, Argentina. As a creative writer, Daniel has won international and national literary prizes. He published four poetry books, two theatre books and two books of short stories, and written the scripts for three films, two radio plays and five theatre plays, published and produced in Argentina and Spain. As an academic author,

he has published a monograph on the Spanish-speaking community in Australia and articles in academic journals. He teaches Spanish in the School of Language Studies at The Australian National University in Canberra.

*Mario Daniel Martín*

nació en Salta, Argentina. Mario Daniel ha publicado tres libros de poesía, dos de teatro, y dos de cuento, y ha escrito los guiones para tres películas, dos radioteatros y cuatro obras teatrales producidas y representadas en Argentina y España. Asimismo, ha sido distinguido con premios literarios nacionales e internacionales. En el ámbito académico, ha publicado una monografía sobre la comunidad de habla hispana en Australia y artículos en revistas científicas. Mario Daniel actualmente enseña español en la Universidad Nacional de Australia en Canberra.

*Achim Mehnert*

wurde 1961 in Köln geboren. Der Fußballfan und Musikliebhaber ist gelernter Industriekaufmann und seit 2003 als freiberuflicher Autor tätig, überwiegend im Bereich der Phantastischen Literatur. Bis heute veröffentlichte er über 150 Romane und zahlreiche Kurzgeschichten.

*William Meikle*

I am a Scottish writer, living in Canada with fifteen novels published in the genre press and over 250 short story credits in thirteen countries. My work has appeared in a number of professional anthologies and I have recent short story sales to NATURE Futures, Penumbra and Daily Science Fiction.

*Remco Meisner*

(Amsterdam, 1959) has published short stories in various anthologies and magazines and is the author of fourteen non fiction-books. Married, two (adult) children. Teaches IT and business strategies at the University of Applied Sciences Leiden.

*Abhishek Kumar Mishra*

Geologist in NHPC, Amateur writer, blogger, Interested in heritage awareness and science popularization, various Hindi science fiction stories and science articles published in 'Vigyan Pragati', 'Aha! Jindagi', 'Vigyan Katha', 'Elektroniki aapke liye' and different science websites like 'Kalkion', 'Science Bloggers Association of India' etc. Life Member of Indian Association for Science Fiction Studies

Contact: [abhi.dhr@gmail.com](mailto:abhi.dhr@gmail.com), [ourdharohar.blogspot.com](http://ourdharohar.blogspot.com),

Dr. Arvind Mishra has been actively involved in science communication since 3 decades through print and electronic media and lately via digital and social media including blogging and micro blogging. Having done his doctorate in Fish Genetics from University of Allahabad in 1982 he realized that a country like India needed more emphasis in communicating science to masses. He has devised innovative methodology to impart scientific knowledge to masses as well as to class rooms through science fiction written in vernacular. He writes blogs - Science Fiction in India (<http://indiascifiarvind.blogspot.in/>) and Sciblog (<http://indianscifiarvind.blogspot.in/>)

and has published three Sf anthologies, one for children. Currently he works under state government of Uttar Pradesh and engaged in extension of fisheries in rural sector

*Klaus Æ. Mogensen*

has been writing science fiction and fantasy short stories for decades and has had one novel, *Dimensionspiraterne*, published in Danish. His stories have been translated into numerous languages. Klaus works as a senior futurist at the Copenhagen Institute for Futures Studies and is science editor and writer for the internationally acclaimed SCENARIO Magazine.

*Kristine Ong Muslim*

is the author of several books of fiction and poetry: *Age of Blight* (Unnamed Press, 2016), *Butterfly Dream* (Snuggly Books, 2016), *A Roomful of Machines* (ELJ Publications, 2015), *Grim Series* (Popcorn Press, 2012), *We Bury the Landscape* (Queen's Ferry Press, 2012), as well as *Black Arcadia* and *Lifeboat*, two poetry collections from university presses in the Philippines. Widely published in magazines and anthologies, she grew up and continues to live in rural southern Philippines.

*G.S.Unnikrishnan Nair*

is a Graduate in Agriculture and Post Graduate in Journalism, working as Assistant Director in Agriculture Department, Govt. of Kerala, and South India. He has published more than 2000 popular science articles and 40 books over the past 3 decades. G.S.Unnikrishnan writes Science in different genres including Science Fiction. He has scripted and directed over 100 popular science documentaries. Won 4 National and 6 State Awards for communicating Science through print as well as Electronic media. This includes National Science Communication Award for Science popularization among children, Bronze Beaver Award in National Science film festival organized by Vigyan Prasar, Indian Medical Association Electronic media Award and State Science Literature and Children's Literature Awards.

Email - [vanchiyurunni@gmail.com](mailto:vanchiyurunni@gmail.com), [unnikrishnanbhu@gmail.com](mailto:unnikrishnanbhu@gmail.com)

*Julie Novakova*

was born in 1991 in Prague, the Czech Republic. She works as a writer and a biologist. So far, she has published three novels, more than twenty short stories in Czech and one story in English (*The Brass City*, which appeared in *Penny Dread Tales Vol. Three: In Darkness Clockwork Shine*). Julie's first published novel was *The Crime on The Poseidon City* (*Zločin na Poseidon City*) in May 2009, a detective SF about a murder on a future marine city. In spring 2011, her novels *Never Trust Anything* (*Nikdy nevěř ničemu*) and *A Silent Planet* (*Tichá planeta*) were published. The first one is a crime story set in France where a Czech citizen inherited a house and a restaurant, the second one is a hard SF about exploration of an extrasolar planet with life that differs from life on Earth in many surprising ways. Her short stories appeared in Czech speculative fiction magazines (*Ikarie*, *XB-1* and *Pevnost*) and anthologies, and she achieved several medal positions in Czech speculative fiction awards – in *Ikaros*, *The Karel Čapek Prize (CKČ)* and *Vidoucí*. She is currently working on a hard SF trilogy and most recently joined the team of authors of

the biggest Czech SF adventure series „JFK“ (The Adventures of John Francis Kovář). Her personal website is <https://sites.google.com/site/julienovakova/english-version>.

Patricia K. Olivera

(Montevideo - Uruguay). Técnica en Corrección de Estilo en lengua española y estudiante de las licenciaturas en Lingüística y Letras en la Universidad de la República (Udelar). Ha participado en destacadas revistas literarias internacionales y es coeditora en Palabras, revista literaria uruguaya de formato digital. Sus historias abordan lo fantástico, el terror y la ciencia ficción. Blog: De ciencia ficción by Patricia K. Olivera (<http://pkolivera.blogspot.com.uy>).

Patricia K. Olivera

(Montevideo - Uruguay). Style correction technique in Spanish language and student of the degrees in Linguistics and Literature in Republic's University (Udelar). She has participated in important international literary journals and is coeditor in Words, uruguayan literary magazine in digital format. Her stories deal with fantasy, horror and science fiction. Blog: Science fiction by Patricia K. Olivera (<http://pkolivera.blogspot.com.uy>).

Konstantine Paradias

is a Greek science fiction and fantasy writer. His short stories have been published in Aphelion Magazine, EveryDayFiction.Com and Garbled Transmissions.com and Open hearts Publishing's Petulant Parables Fairy Tales anthology.

Makis Panorios

is a Greek actor, writer and editor. He was born in the island of Kefalonia in 1935. His professional activities include acting (for the Greek National Theatre, radio and TV), illustrating book covers, editing (anthologies and collections of stories) and writing novels, stories and criticism. His major contribution to the literature of the Fantastic is the six-volume anthology, The Hellenic Fantastic Short Story (includes Greek writers from 1087-2012). Among the awards he has received are: the international Karel award in 1993 (for his promotion of SF and literature of the fantastic), the Greek award, Golden Ikaromenippos in 1995 (for his short story, "Actor"), and the Lifetime Achievement Honor in 2006 given by the SF Club of Athens (for his endless efforts to disseminate works of SF in Greece).

Mihaela Marija Perkovic

Lives in Croatia.c

Maria Petrou/Stone

was born, and lives, in Athens, Greece. She studied design, restoration and arts at Vacalo School, one of the foremost Art Schools of Greece. She is member of ALEF (Athens' Science Fiction's Club), EEPF (Greek Society for the Protection of Nature), author and translator. She had many adventures roaming all over Greece more than 20 years, as a field's researcher of Greek flora. She wrote, under the name Maria Petrou, the first

*complete field guide about wild Greek orchid flora, 'Orchids of Greece' [with photographs by the acclaimed wild life's photographer Nikos Petrou,] which was published in 2010 in Greek, and 2011 in English. She has written articles about Greek flora for the newspaper 'Kathimerini', and the magazines 'Georama' and 'Nature' (EEPF's magazine). Under the pen name Maria Stone, she wrote an 'adult fairy tales' book, 'The Failed Princess and Other Stories with Bad Ending' published in 2010. Some of her short stories were presented in ALEF's literary workshops. [She devours passionately horror books and collects pumpkins of any kind and material.]*

*Vladimir Puzii*

*Born in Kiev, Ukraine, on the 1st of October 1978. At school he was really fond of biology, worked at the city zoo. There he started writing short stories and one of his first novels. Graduated from the Institute of Journalism, Kiev National Taras Shevchenko University in 2002 and earned a master's degree in writing skills and publishing.*

*Vladimir Puzii started writing fiction in 1995 at the age of 17, being published for the first time in 1998. That's when he has chosen a pen-name – Arenev. Now the author is well known by his numerous short stories in magazines, almanacs and for his novels (17 books and more than 150 publications in periodicals).*

*Under his real name Puzii is a famous reviewer, on a regular basis publishing critical reviews for the recent books in main Ukrainian and Russian fiction magazines.*

*Genres:*

*Fantasy – Epic fantasy – Adult and young adult fiction – Fiction for children – Mystique – Sci-fi – Fiction humorous stories*

*Featured Awards*

*The Best Young Writer of the Europe at International convent Eurocon (Plovdiv, Bulgaria, 2004);*

*International convent of fiction writers STAR BRIDGE (2001, 2005);*

*Alexander Belayev prize (2008);*

*International Ukrainian-German O. Gonchar Award (2001)*

*Independent Fiction Award 'Debut' (Russia) in Fantasy nomination (2003).*

*"Die Kleine Nordklinge" for the best short story published in Germany in Russian (2003, 2011).*

*Nominated for "Activation of the Word" Award for the novel "All Adam's Race" (Russian «Все племя Адамово») in 2011.*

*Carlos Rangel.*

*Mechatronics engineer. He likes to read tales and poetry.*

*Albert valls rovirá alias menut*

*menut is a strange guy that when he feels enlightened, or when muses throw crumbs to his mind, he does not doubt on running to the computer and increase the list of ideas he has yet to exploit. And those stupidities may not be so bad, because he has already won an Ictineu, and Ovelles Elèctriques (and a second place!), a second place in MisaMa and and ARC-Catarsi. He has stories in the Catarsi and La Lluna en un Cove magazines, and Otros Mundos publishing has asked him twice for a story (no, not the same story twice - two stories for two books). Or maybe he is a bad writer, but pays well enough.*

Flemming Rasch

I'm a science fiction fan who also write science fiction short stories. My fiction is a mix of many short satirical and humorous stories and a few longer, more character-driven stories with classical sf themes. I also write some fantasy and occasionally horror. My fan activities includes conrunning, editing and publishing anthologies, translating, reviewing fantastic fiction and blogging about science fiction on [flasch.dk](http://flasch.dk).

Frank Roger

was born in 1957 in Ghent, Belgium.

His first story appeared in 1975. Since then his stories appear in an increasing number of languages in all sorts of magazines and anthologies, and since 2000, story collections are published, also in various languages. Apart from fiction, he also produces collages and graphic work in a surrealist and satirical tradition. They have appeared in various magazines and books. His work is a blend of genres and styles that can best be described as "frankrogerism", an approach of which he is the main representative.

By now he has a few hundred short stories to his credit, published in more than 35 languages. In 2012 a story collection in English ("The Burning Woman and Other Stories") was published by Evertype ([www.evertype.com](http://www.evertype.com) ). Find out more at [www.frankroger.be](http://www.frankroger.be)

Albert Valls Rovira

(in Catalan people has one name and two surnames) was born in 1974, but I, /menu/t, grew up in the late 2007, the result of Albert deciding that he had grown tired of writing silly things, sparsely, and only for himself.

So I, menut, removed him and took his place. So far, no one has noticed. I began writing seriously, taking courses, and plotting how to fill the bookstores with fantasy and sci-fi stories (which, in Catalan and for someone who has to work eight hours a day and sleep ten more, it is quite difficult to achieve). So far, I have just been able to create Catarsi (<http://www.catarsi.cat>), a non-profit, non-professional sci-fi, fantasy, and horror magazine (some of my co-conspirators are against the use of the word "fanzine"), and I tricked the editors of the (now defunct) fanzine MiasMa and of the magazine La Lluna en un Cove to publish some of my stories. I have also been able to push some stories into Catarsi itself, but I did not need to threaten anyone.

My trickery goes even beyond: I won an Ovelles Elèctriques prize, and the 2011 Ictineu prize (<http://sites.google.com/site/premiictineu>) for the best original short story written in Catalan; I also have been finalist in various contests four times. I have also been asked to participate in a forthcoming project, but it is a secret so I cannot tell.

Other than writing fiction, working, and sleeping, I spend my time practicing photography, in a left-wing party and working to help people threatened of eviction in my hometown. And I eat, of course. But not people.

Antonio Sachs

(Murcia, 1974) Cursó estudios de Filosofía y Letras en la Universidad de Murcia.

Incansable lector, y gran admirador de la novela gótica, descubrió su vocación



*literaria a los veintiocho años.*

*Coautor de varias antologías, ha compaginado el oficio de artesano alfarero con su pasión por la escritura, el estudio del mito del vampiro y las películas de Rob Zombie.*

*Drácula: Año Cero, obra que ha sido prologada por Dacre Stoker y publicada recientemente por la prestigiosa editorial gaditana Cazador de Ratas, es su primera incursión en el género histórico, donde se atreve a redefinir los orígenes del mítico voivoda.*

*Durante este pasado año 2015 ha participado en las jornadas literarias de la Semana Gótico de Madrid y el Festival Ñ. En la actualidad prepara una novela de terror kafkiano.*

*Obra publicada:*

*- Esperar la noche, relato incluido en Los crímenes de la rue Morgue y más cuentos inquietantes (Ediciones Rubeo, 2014).*

*- Miénteme, que te creo, relato incluido en la antología Venus de noche (Ediciones Rubeo, 2014).*

*- La sed del flautista, relato incluido en la antología Perversidades, cuentos al filo (Ediciones Rubeo, 2015).*

*- Drácula. Año cero (Cazador de Ratas Editorial, 2015).*

*www.facebook.com/antonio.sachs. @ntonioSachs*

*José Antonio S. Sánchez*

*(Antonio Sachs) nació el 3 de marzo de 1974, en Murcia.*

*Ha cursado estudios de Filosofía y Letras en la Universidad de Murcia, y desde entonces hasta la fecha ha compaginado el arte de la escritura con el oficio de artesano alfarero.*

*En octubre de 2013 ha publicado su primera novela, "DellaMorte", con la editorial Iniciativa Mercurio (próximamente Libralia) bajo el seudónimo Antonio Sachs.*

*Actualmente se halla inmerso en un importante proyecto literario que verá la luz con la editorial Libralia durante el año 2014.*

*Federico Schaffler González*

*(Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, México, 1959).*

*Creador Emérito del Estado de Tamaulipas (2011), Becario del Centro Mexicano de Escritores (1991) y Doctor en Políticas Públicas (2014).*

*Presidente fundador de la Asociación Mexicana de Ciencia Ficción y Fantasía, AMCyF (1992 a 1995, reelecto 2000-2002). Coordinador del Taller Literario Terra Ignota (1990-2003) y del Premio Internacional Terra Ignota (en 2000 y 2001). Editor y Director de Umbrales, Literatura fantástica Mexicana (1992-2000, 49 ediciones). Ganador de dos premios nacionales de cuento de ciencia ficción, el Kalpa, y el Charrobot.*

*De 1991 a la fecha ha sido conferencista en el Festival Internacional Cervantino, la Feria Internacional del Libro de Guadalajara, el Coloquio Internacional de Literatura Fantástica, el Festival Internacional Tamaulipas, la Feria Internacional del Palacio de Minería, el Festival de la Frontera Norte y la Feria Internacional del Libro de Monterrey, entre otras.*

*Ingresó en 1976 al periodismo, a los 17 años, y a la academia en 1983, mismo año en que publicó su primer cuento. Ha publicado 33 libros: 9 Antologías de cuento de*

ciencia ficción, 10 colecciones personales de cuento y 14 libros de crónica, historia o ensayo. Ha sido traducido al inglés, al portugués y al francés. Fue Director de Fomento Cultural del Estado de Tamaulipas y tres veces servidor público municipal en las áreas de comunicación social, educación, cultura y desarrollo humano.

*Michael Schmidt*

*spottet gerne und ob seine Geschichten dabei die Grenzen des guten Geschmacks übertreten oder nicht, liegt im Sinne des Betrachters. Wer dies selbst überprüfen will, mag zu Teutonic Future greifen, sollte aber immer angeschnallt bleiben. Mehr über ihn findet sich auf [www.defms.de](http://www.defms.de)*

*Alex Shvartsman*

*I'm a member of SFWA. My short stories recently appeared in Nature, Daily Science Fiction, Nowa Fantastyka, and many other magazines and anthologies. I was born in the Ukraine but live and write in the United States (which will probably make the competition for a spot in your book that much harder, won't it).*

*Mark Slade*

*has appeared in anthologies Diabolic tales III, We walk invisible and other publications. He is co editor of Nightmare illustrated magazine. 2013 saw the release of his book A six gun and the queen of light published by Horrified Press. 2014 Sunbury press will release his second book and a third will come from Death throes. He lives in williamsburg, Va with his wife and daughter.*

*Petra Slováková*

*born in 1987 in Ostrava, is a Czech artist and author. She made her debut with short stories in the science fiction and fantasy genre and won several prestigious literary awards. Her publications entail two books, a collection of poems and a poetry book. In 2015, her novel The Daemon of East End was published. This book stands out for being the first Czech steampunk novel. Steampunk is also the main focus of her non-literary production, which ranges from handmade jewellery and costumes to paintings.*

*Han Song*

*I was born in 1965, and is a sci-fi writer and a journalist in China. I have won eight times the Galaxy Award and Xinyun Award, the Chinese versions of Hugo and Nebula awards. I have published more than 10 sci-fi novels in Chinese, including Red Star over USA, Subway, High-speed Rail, Universe Graveyard.*

*Anton Stiffel*

*Lives in Slovakia*

*Zuzana Stožická*

*live in Slovakia and I write short stories, mostly in science-fiction genre, published in magazines, anthologies and collections in Slovak, Czech, Polish and Esperanto.*

*Carlos Suchowolski*

*Kohn nació el 16 de enero de 1948, en Argentina y desde 1976 vive en España. Publicó relatos en periódicos de su país de origen, siendo premiado en 1968 en el concurso del diario "Mendoza" con Marco Denevi de jurado. En 1988, obtuvo una mención en el concurso internacional que organizó Editorial Ultramar con el cuento "Comer con el pico y batir las alas hasta que haya máquinas en el cielo" que fue publicado junto con los demás finalistas. Colaboró con diversas revistas impresas y electrónicas de España, Argentina, Perú, México, Bélgica, Italia, Francia y traducido al holandés, al búlgaro, al italiano, al francés y al alemán. Fue seleccionado en tres ocasiones por la Sociedad Española de Ciencia Ficción para integrar sus colecciones anuales "Visiones" y "Fabricantes de sueños" (dos en 2004 y la tercera en 2007) que recogen lo mejor publicado del género en el año (tres relatos de la colección posterior "Tiempos del futuro"). En 2007, Editorial Mandrágora editó su novela "Una nueva conciencia" que fue reeditada como e-book en 2013. Fue finalista en el concurso internacional "Khan de Oro" de Sofía y participó en la antología que publicó en 2009. Ha completado dos colecciones de relatos, la primera enmarcada en el género de la ciencia ficción en un sentido amplio publicada también como libro electrónico bajo el título de "Once tiempos de futuro" y la segunda en una línea de narrativa fantástica no-tecnológica; una antología de microrrelatos, una nueva novela que está en fase de corrección. Trabaja también en nuevos relatos, una novela corta de fantasía infantil/juvenil y un ensayo.*

*Tanya Tynjälä*

*is a science fiction and fantasy writer, specialised in children and young adults. She was born in Peru and currently resides in Finland.*

*She studied at the Escuela Normal de Monterrico in Lima, Peru, and later on pursued her Master's degree in French as a Foreign Language at the Stendhal University, Grenoble 3 in France. At present, she is finishing her doctorate in French language and literature at the University of Helsinki.*

*She has published with the Colombian editor NORMA La ciudad de los nictálopes (2003 – 10 editions), Cuentos de la princesa Malva (2008 – 2 editions), and Lectora de sueños (2012). She has also published the short story and poetry book SUM with Editorial Micrópolis (Lima, 2012). Her books are used as reading material in some Latin American countries as Peru, Ecuador, Chile and Colombia. Her short story La conspiración (The conspiracy), translated into French, has been included in the text book: Texto 4ème sec. (Editions Érasme. 2012, Namur – Belgium). Her writings have been included in various international anthologies, magazines and e-zines. She has been partially translated into Finish, French, English, Bulgarian and Hebrew. She also writes a travel blog: Piedra que corre sí que coje moho. She is the editor in chef of the Spanish language blogs in Amazing Stories. She has won several international awards like the Francisco Garzón Céspedes in 2007.*

*DJ Tyrer*

*is the person behind Atlantean Publishing and has had work included in numerous magazines and anthologies, most recently Undead of Winter (Mystery and Horror LLC),*

both volumes of *Ugly Babies* (JWK Fiction) and *Tigershark* ezine, and has upcoming work in several more, such as *Steampunk Cthulhu* (Chaosium) and *Monster Hunter: Doomsday* (Emby Press).

DJ Tyrer's website is at <http://djtyrer.blogspot.co.uk/> The Atlantean Publishing website is at <http://atlanteanpublishing.blogspot.co.uk/>

### Paul van Leeuwenkamp

(Den Haag, 1 april 1955) publiceerde verhalen en gedichten in tijdschriften (Appel, *Fantastische Vertelingen*, *SF Gids*, *Cerberus*, *Ator Mondis*, *Lift*, *Holland SF*, *SF Terra*, *Ballustrada*, *WonderWaan*, *Oase*, *Schreef* ...) en verzamelbundels (*Zwarte Sterren 1*, 2005; *Daarom boekstaaf ik vandaag*, 2009; *Dichter, uit de hemel gevallen meteoriet*, 2011). Ook schreef hij vele recensies en korte essays over SF en fantasy en poëzie, ondermeer voor tijdschriften als *De Leeswolf*, *Ballustrada*, *Holland SF*, *Concept* en *Meander*. In *Gust van Brussel: veelzijdig auteur* (2004) verscheen een lange essay over *Gust van Brussel*.

Paul was redacteur van het tijdschrift *Schreef*, en is sinds enkele jaren vaste medewerker bij het literaire tijdschrift *Ballustrada* en redactielid bij *Holland SF*.

Zijn gedichten, onder meer bekroond met de poëzieprijs van Sint-Truiden, werden verzameld in *Brede gebaren* (1992), *Als een huis* (1996) en *Krabbels op de krant* (2004). Een aantal verhalen werd gebundeld in *Plasmadromen* (Verschijnsel, 2007) en *De schaal van offerande* (2011, eBook).

In 2012 verscheen bij Stichting *Fantastische Vertellingen* een dubbelDVD met een door Jeroen Kuypers (Max Moragie) afgenomen interview (Weivretni Paul van Leeuwenkamp). Voor die stichting stelde hij in 2013 samen met Remco Meisner de verhalenbundel *Ganymedes 13* samen, een bloemlezing met fantastische verhalen van Nederlandstalige auteurs. In dat jaar kreeg hij voor zijn voor zijn bijdragen aan de Nederlandstalige fantastische (genre)literatuur de *Bemoste Beeld-prijs*.

In januari 2014 verscheen in de *Rare Boekjes*-reeks *Voor de geboorte*, het eerste deel van *De boeken van tijd van leven*.

Paul werkt in de ICT als ontwerper en informatieanalist, en woont hij met vrouw en twee dochters in Utrecht.

### Vladimir Vasquez

(Barquisimeto, Venezuela) Escritor y bloguero. Se inició en la escritura en los años 90. Publicó su primera colección de historias en "Erídano 7" en el año 2004. Ese mismo año aparece su relato "El Final del Juego" en la desaparecida revista mexicana "800".

En Octubre de 2005 crea el blog *La Cueva del Lobo*, un espacio personal, pero que fue evolucionando para convertirse en una revista dedicada a la Ciencia Ficción en todos sus formatos, literatura, cine, videojuegos, comics, etc. En Julio de 2009 este blog estrena el *Primer Concurso de Relatos de Ciencia Ficción y Fantasía*. Este concurso se realizó continuamente hasta el año 2014. En Diciembre de 2012 aparece en el blog el primer llamado al *Desafío del Nexus*, un concurso mensual que pretendía darle cabida a una variedad de temas mayor, pero no tuvo demasiado éxito, y a mediados de 2015 fue discontinuado.

A principios de 2014 da comienzo a una novela serializada en el mismo blog, llamada

"Los Cielos de Júpiter" que se publicaba tres veces a la semana y finalizó en Diciembre de aquel mismo año. Posteriormente después de una extensa reedición esta novela fue publicada en Amazon en julio de 2015.

Vladimir Vasquez

(Barquisimeto, Venezuela) Writer and blogger. starts writing during the 90's. Publishes his first collection of short stories in the magazine "Eridano 7" in the Year 2004. That same year his story "El Final del Juego" (Game's End) is published in the now disappeared mexican magazine "800".

On October 2005 he creates the blog "La Cueva del Lobo" a personal space that starts to evolve to become a full electronic magazine devoted to Science Fiction in all its formats, literacy, movies, videogames, comics, etc. In July 2009 the blog opens the First Contest of Stories of Science Fiction and Fantasy. This contest is repeated continuously until 2014. In December 2012 the blog issues the first call to "Nexus Challenge" a monthly contest that sought to accommodate a greater variety of subjects, but was not too successful, and by mid-2015 it was discontinued.

In early 2014 starts a serialized novel in the same blog, called "Los Cielos de Júpiter" (Jupiter's Heavens) which was published three times a week and ended in December of that year. Later after an extensive reedition the novel was published in July 2015 in Amazon.

Antonio Mora Vélez, Kolumbien.

Anwalt, Dozent und Universitätsangestellter in verschiedenen leitenden Positionen. Kolumnist, Dichter und Autor von Kurzgeschichten, Romanen und Essays. Geboren in Barranquilla am 14. Juli 1942, lebt er seit seiner Jugend in Montería. Er ist verheiratet und hat drei Kinder.

Folgende literarische Gruppen hat er mitgegründet: El Túnel, deren erster Vorsitzender er war, ferner Arte Sinú und El Bocachico Letrado. Ebenfalls mitbegründet hat er die nationale Schriftstellergewerkschaft und das Nationalparlament der kolumbianischen Schriftsteller, dessen erster Ehrenpräsident er wurde. Er gilt als einer der Vorreiter und inzwischen als Klassiker der kolumbianischen Science-Fiction und ist in seinem Land der meistpublizierte Schriftsteller dieses Genres und auch derjenige, der in den meisten internationalen Anthologien Aufnahme fand.

Antonio Mora Vélez wurde mehrfach für sein literarisches Schaffen ausgezeichnet und gilt als Wegbereiter der kolumbianischen Science-Fiction.

Antonio Mora Vélez. Colombia.

Abogado, docente y directivo universitario, columnista de prensa, poeta, cuentista, novelista y ensayista. Nació en Barranquilla el 14 de julio de 1942 pero vive desde su adolescencia en Montería donde reside actualmente. Es casado y tiene tres hijos.

Ha sido cofundador de los grupos literarios: El Túnel – del cual fue su primer presidente–, Arte Sinú y El Bocachico Letrado; de la Unión Nacional de Escritores, y del Parlamento Nacional de Escritores Colombianos, del cual fue su primer presidente honorario. Es considerado uno de los precursores y un clásico de la ciencia-ficción colombiana. El escritor del género que más libros de ciencia-ficción ha publicado y que

más veces ha sido antologado internacionalmente.

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*Sascha Vennemann*

*Jahrgang 1981, begann seine schriftstellerische Karriere im Jahre 2008 mit dem Schreiben von Heftromanen für die Serie STERNENFAUST und ist heute im Autorenteam von MADDRAX. Zu beiden Serien erschienen bisher insgesamt drei Hardcover bzw. Taschenbücher von ihm im Zaubermond Verlag. Ebenso erschienen Kurzgeschichten von ihm in diversen Anthologien. Im August 2013 startete er mit "EON - Das letzte Zeitalter" seine eigene fantastische eBook- und Taschenbuchserie.*

*Der Diplom-Soziologe ist freiberuflicher Autor, Lektor und Journalist, u.a. für das "VIRUS Magazine", das "GEEK!-Magazin" und eine Tageszeitung. Außerdem versucht er sich als Sprecher in diversen Podcast-Formaten.*

*Sascha Vennemann lebt und arbeitet in Göttingen.*

*Deborah Walker*

*grew up in the most English town in the country, but she soon high-tailed it down to London, where she now lives with her partner, Chris, and her two young children. Find Deborah in the British Museum trawling the past for future inspiration or on her blog: <http://deborahwalkersbibliography.blogspot.com/> Her stories have appeared in Nature's Futures, Cosmos and Daily Science Fiction.*

*Sylvia Spruck Wrigley*

*is an aviation and fantasy writer (but never both at the same time). Born in Heidelberg, she spent her childhood in California and now splits her time between southeast Wales and Andalucia, two coastal regions with almost nothing in common. You can find out more about her at <http://www.intrigue.co.uk/>*

*Handi Yawan*

*Born and living in Bandung, Indonesia December 25th, 1966. Since childhood I like the Startrek TV film series, and read books; Thousand Leagues Under the Sea and other works written by Jules Verne; , H.G. Wells especially; Time machine, Hobbit by JRR Tolkien, I have read several books of Winnetou by Karl May. Etc.*

*And I like music. Of course, YES is my favorite band. Currently working as a writer and comic artists is the author of the short story to novel compilation released by the Indonesian Community Startrek, 2009 titled of "Guest from Venus" also Editor and Author at the studio of comics: Handalmaker Penerbitkosong Publisher, Indonesia who has published several comics released for market local.*

*A.R.Yngve*

*was born in 1969 in Sweden. Before he started writing fiction in the 1990s, he wrote and drew comic strips for Swedish magazines.*

*His novels and short stories have since been published in Swedish, English and Chinese, and he has written a fantasy series for Norwegian radio (see <http://http://www.youtube.com/user/MagiensArv>).*

*He is also an illustrator and has done book covers for his own and other authors' books. Yngve now lives in Norway with his wife and child.*

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