

A New Dawn

CONTEMPORARY SCIENCE FICTION
FROM GREECE



InterNova

Vol. 2 · 2022

International Science Fiction

InterNOVA online
Volume 02 · 2022

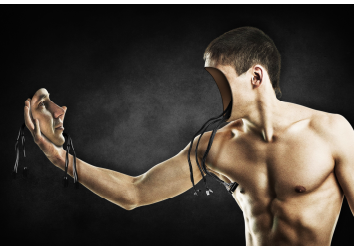
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© of this issue: December 2022
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Proofreading: Adriana Kantcheva
Cover picture: comfreak (Pixabay)
Layout & cover design: global:epropaganda
Production: global:epropaganda

Publisher: p.machinery Michael Haitel
Norderweg 31, DE-25887 Winnert
www.pmachinery.de
www.internova-sf.de

ISBN ePub: 978 3 95765 792 3
ISBN PDF: 978 3 95765 791 6



Editorial

A STORY OF THE NOT SO DISTANT PAST

HEPHAESTION CHRISTOPOULOS

There's a tendency among Greeks to recall and speak about things that happened centuries, even millennia, ago, and forget what has been happening the last decades or even the last couple of years. This type of selective memory—or amnesia—certainly rests on the comfort the thought of a glorious past provides, in contrast to the direr and direr situations that come up one after the other in our little part of the world.

So, the question arises: If Greek people cannot even face their present, how could they ever write stories about the future? And yet, some of us do. How do we do that? Well, it's mostly gloomy visions about a future that echoes our own — and perhaps the whole world's — present. Another surprising fact is that Greek speculative fiction writers do not draw on ancient history or mythology as much as one would expect — especially when it comes to fantasy stories — as some recent communication I had with several writers revealed. It's kind of an attempt at paving our own way. It's not that Greece lacks modern culture — even if, there as well, the attachment to older times is prevalent. I just believe that Greek spec fic writers desire to show what they can do based solely on their own powers.

This is a story of the recent past. The pandemic might have made a mess of the last years in most people's head — for me,

it's just a hazy period of quarantines, hecatombs of dead and general fear – but I'll make an attempt at putting things in order. It was sometime in early 2021 when visual artist and script writer Lina Theodorou, who spends most of her time in Germany, suggested that I should contact the Science Fiction Club Deutschland. If you're justly wondering in what capacity I should contact them, please allow me a small digression.

Since 2019, I happen to be vice-chairman of the Science Fiction Club of Athens, Greece, more commonly known with the initials ALEF. Now, I am relatively a newcomer to the club, since it's been around since 1998, but one of the things I've been trying to do is get in touch with like-minded organisations from around the world and establish a network of cooperation. And the SCFD was a perfect point of contact.

Chairman Thomas Recktenwald was happy and prompt to respond and provide me with loads of information on the state and history of science fiction in Germany – he was even kind enough to make a presentation for our members. What he also provided me with was contacts. And one of those contacts was Michael K. Iwoleit, your beloved editor of this magazine. Somewhat hesitantly, I asked for a few stories from some author acquaintances and friends, added a couple of mine and sent them in. I didn't know what to expect.

And then the big surprise came: Michael wanted to do an issue dedicated to Greece. The very issue that you are holding in your virtual hands right now.

The themes of the stories at hand are varied, and at first sight they might not appear that "Greek" to the casual reader (e.g., one of them is set in Japan) – even though there exists an increasing tendency to use Greek settings in specific stories, something many writers used to, and some still dread to do – but they are quite characteristic of what one could call the modern wave of Greek sf: somewhat bleak, not always hopeful, with some social and political critique thrown in the mix; quite

a curious product to come from the land of sunny islands and endless beaches, isn't it?

Leaving my personal preferences aside (I'm not that big a fan of summer), there are many possible answers to this alleged paradox: the socioeconomical situation of the country, the fact that Greece does not only comprise sun and sea — a visit to the big city centres will convince you otherwise — or simply the fact that a few rays of sunlight won't necessarily make a person more optimistic — or it could just be an artistic preference and nothing more. I cannot say for sure whether one or some of the above can provide a convincing explanation to the phenomenon; what I can point out, however, is that you often find things you don't expect in the most unlikely places. After all, Monty Python were from Britain, weren't they? The land of leaden clouds and constant rain.

But this is a story of the recent past. And the recent past has bestowed upon us a boom in quality Greek spec fic production. There are many factors that have contributed to that flood of creativity. The important word here is "quality". Bad works have always existed; it's the really talented and hard-working authors that suddenly came out of their shells. One only needs to take a look at some names listed by Dimitra Nikolaidou in her essay, where she tells our story from start to finish. From the distant to the recent past, all the way up to the present. We have been having Greek authors appearing in major publications abroad, we have had Nebula nominations, a World Fantasy Award ... But what happens when it comes to the "real thing", purely Greek spec fic — works written in Greek for the Greek audience? I regret to say that in this respect, things have remained virtually unchanged. Publishers and audience alike do not trust Greek sf authors. So the Greek writer has to face a dilemma: do their service to their mother tongue or prefer the global lingua franca of English and write in a language they might not even know well enough?

Some choose the former, some choose the latter, some do both. I'm not the one to say what's right and what's wrong. But this is more or less the recent history of Greek science fiction and speculative fiction in general. One of dilemmas, rejection and hard-won victories. Maybe it's not that surprising that Greek sf is not as sunny as one might expect.

Hephaestion Christopoulos
October 2022

Dust and Dreams

VASSO CHRISTOU

"You've miscalculated!" Rodrigo cries.

No, I haven't. All processors confirm our position within a picometer. The spectrum pattern of the system's sun is identical to Sol's. Jupiter's energy signature is loud and clear. We are in orbit around Earth, just a few hundred meters away from the aperture of the inter-dimensional gate. It's the same sun, the same gate coordinates, the same entry point. Except that the Earth is nothing more than a rotating ember.

I understand why he wants to believe that I'm in error. But I never miscalculate. If I possessed neurons I would be insulted by the reactions of my fellow travelers. I possess superconductors instead, and I am built to imitate human behavior only as needed. The idea was to have the crew feeling comfortable with me. Not me having feelings. This is probably fortunate in the current situation. At least, I don't have to deal with shock and grief for a home planet undeniably dead.

ASHES AND GHOSTS

It was known, understood and acceptable that we would not return to the world we had left behind.

The energy gate allowed a dimensional warp to send us to other areas of space, thousands of light years away from Earth, but the distortion to the fabric of the universe was not con-



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*Fiction #1: Knowing
the Neighbours by
Future Fiction
(summer 2021).*

finied to spatial dimensions only. Each crossing on either direction was in fact a jump into the future as well.

Technology would cause major alterations to the mother planet during our voyage, changes pronounced and impossible to predict even by the most dedicated extrapolation algorithms. So I didn't bother with that. Instead I kept a record of bets during the six month exploration journey of Scout-6. Betting about the changes was Jamal's and Aileen's favorite sport. Not that Rodrigo provided fewer imaginative ideas. Yet, he never bet because he couldn't stand losing – not even to friends.

And so, it was certain that Rodrigo would be the first to imply that I was wrong. Poor losers have a hard time accepting an unpredictable turn of events.

My fellow travelers have not yet shaken off the stasis sedation required for the crossing of the gate. Only nervous eye movements and weak, plaintive voices express their shock and denial. However their vital signs are hitting the upper safety margins.

"No way!"

Aileen's voice this time, faint and broken, her eyes glued to the holographic image of fire and ash.

Nothing is wrong with my computations. The earth is no more. Should I have kept them sedated, spared them the sight once again? I have done that before. It's the fourth time that I have returned through the gate, but it's only now that the short-wave radiation from the planet allows me to suspend the passengers' stasis field for a few hours. The physical health of the three crew members is not in jeopardy. I have some serious doubts, though, about their mental health. Nevertheless, I do not consider their awakening as an error.

I knew from the first nanoseconds of our first emergence how my companions would feel about the disaster. I have to know because I am the ship's psychologist. I'm their physician and their pilot, their entertainer, their linguist and their navi-

gator, their caterer and their engineer – I'm Polynoe, a Fourth Generation Polymorphic Noesis.

Theoretically, I can undertake the entire exploration mission and perchance communication with extraterrestrial entities. My constructors, however, deemed the presence of a human crew necessary in case of a first contact.

We have encountered no extraterrestrial intelligence during our voyage. We found no inhabited planets near the exit points of our inter-dimensional jumps. And upon our return, we only met with disaster. So, inevitably, I had to make the critical decisions during the cold sleep of the fragile crew I've been entrusted with.

"How?" asks Jamal.

His body is almost free of sedation now. The words come out without slur. His moves are more coordinated and his pulse is stronger. Nevertheless I keep him, as well as the others, contained in the energy hammock. We will soon have to initiate the same sedation-stasis-jump cycle again.

"A large part of the disaster has been recorded by a news and weather station, called *Mahatma-12*. According to the data I retrieved upon our first return, the satellite was geostationary over New Delhi and collected weather information from around the Earth through a system called *Eyes of-*"

"So?" He cuts me off, as if it would make any difference to rush a bit of decades-old news. But Jamal always interrupts me. All three of them stare at the slowly rotating gray and black holographic image of the planet, while their bodies remain helpless, stuck inside the hammocks.

"I had little time to gather information the first time, while withdrawing to the gate to protect all of us from radiation, but I managed to retrieve some last news and part of a visual recording."

"Just a part?" Aileen asks.

"I had to withdraw in a great rush. On our next emergence, the station was dead."

"Show us," says Jamal.

They cringe as they see the edges of the tectonic plates flaring, turning the Ring of Fire around the Pacific into a deep red gash. Ash and pumice rise among their gasps, clouding the flames and the turbulence across the seas. The recording is short – one after another the station's instruments are lost to ash or radiation – but not too short to miss the megatsunami following the almost simultaneous explosions of Yellowstone and Cerro Galan, Lake Toba and Taupo Volcano, Thira, Aetna and Vesuvius, Kilimanjaro and Erebus. Aileen brings her hands to her mouth at the sight of Napoli igniting like a firework. Jamal's heart is thudding so hard when Hawai'i soars and then sinks into the kilometer-high waves that I have to cut the projection short. One more shock for them, but facing the truth is more merciful than imagining it.

"But why?" murmurs Aileen. "That is ..." she shakes her head. "That was ..." Tears flood her eyes and start floating into the cabin.

"From the newsfeed of the station, voices cried something about sabotage. One last piece of news before the disaster was that Isolationists had broken into an experimental lab."

"Isolationists?" Rodrigo asks in disbelief. "That minor extremist group of nuts?"

Isolationists. Fanatically set against space exploration, champions of the idea that contacting other species would be a blasphemy against God's creation. At the time of our departure they had been just a small fundamentalist group. The time-slip of the dimensional jumps had added about two standard decades to the six months of our exploration journey. Lots of things could happen in twenty years.

Lots of things *had* happened.

"The assumption was that they had used a double-walled energy bubble loaded with antimatter. Perhaps they had let it sink deep into the Earth's mantle".

"What's this story with antimatter?" Aileen wonders.

"From the rest of the news, I presume that scientists were experimenting with a new kind of fuel for more efficient space warping and the Isolationists must have stolen it from them. Perhaps they believed that a controlled sabotage would be enough to stall the dimensional search. Or maybe, it was just a blackmail attempt that went out of control and ..."

"Bloody hell!" Rodrigo screams. "Fuck recordings and reports and assumptions! Everything on Earth is gone!"

I pause. All this time, he refused to believe. Now rage has taken the upper hand. Good for him.

"Are there any life signs?"

I know what Jamal asks, but I know how to stall as well. "On the orbital stations? No one could survive ..."

"On Earth."

Not a single-celled organism. "I'm running filtering algorithms to isolate interference from ground radiation. We will have to complete a full orbit once I establish acceptable signal levels before extracting enough information to determine."

"Maybe a few have survived and remain protected under energy shields."

Highly improbable, but I let him hope.

Nevertheless, I know what my sensors have received and Delphi's last oracle emerges from my database: *Tell the King that the well-wrought hall has fallen to the dust ...*

"Radiation is beginning to penetrate the energy shield of the *Scout*," I inform them later. "Initiating immediate departure procedures for the gate."

"Why? In case the radiation harms our future kids?"

Aileen spits venomous irony. All interstellar explorers had undergone sterilization for the protection of their future offspring. Her ova were kept in cryogenic banks in three different places on the planet. So was the semen of the males.

"Your protection is among my primary targets."

She sends me promptly to hell, murmuring something about safety protocols.

Rodrigo is crying silently ever since his initial outburst. Yet, he was the one who was joking about returning to find out a planet that was dead. It was late at night according to the cycles my fellow travelers observed – my database as well as my observations agree that what humans call “night” often favors storytelling. No matter how deep in space humans have gone, they still stick to habits inherited from their first ancestors around the fire. A hundred thousand years and a million mutations afterwards, humans tend to leave the same remnants behind them when they extinguish their fires at night: ashes and ghosts.

DIRT AND WISHES

“You tell me we’ve jumped again, forty standard years ahead this time. So?”

Jamal’s hands are still, clasped to each other, the tone of his question is almost aggressive. I know he trembles and he knows that I know, yet he continues to pretend that he is relaxed, although he is the only one awake in the ship. My fellow travelers are aware that they will never fool me, yet they tend to personalize me.

“It’s relatively safe now to remain a little longer in orbit. So I took the time to study the entire emission spectrum before reviving you. I’ve discovered two human establishments on the far side of the Moon. The spots coincide with places where minute traces of ice had been detected in the past. About six to seven thousand persons are living there, offspring of those who have survived from the orbital stations and the old lunar bases. They call themselves Georefugees, and they obviously gathered to the dark side to protect themselves from the dangerous earthly radiations. But they no longer possess space vehicles.”

"They wouldn't be able to construct or repair them," he murmurs.

"The spaceships were turned into the primary material for the expansion and the operation of the settlements."

The pictures I've captured from the communication signals between the two establishments and the land vehicles expose an arbitrarily constructed aggregate. Plastic, Kevlar, metal, cement, glass, ceramics, everything was used to expand the habitable zones. A large part of the two settlements is underground, excavated into the rocks for protection.

"And we," his voice rises, "have neither landing gear nor radiation-safe escape pods!"

The *Scouts* were fully assembled in space stations. They were vessels designed for space, priorities given to the inter-dimensional engines. We rely of course to conventional propulsion rockets for minor adjustments and for getting in orbit around the exoplanets, but upon completion of our journey that fuel was scant, and several ignitions for the leg to and from the dimensional gate have exhausted most of our reserve. Similarly spent are the provisions for the crew members. Prediction was at most for a few days in orbit after the end of the mission. Not for the end of the world.

"We were expecting to find progress upon return, not regress ..."

Jamal interrupts. "What about our escape pods? They are still functional, aren't they?"

"They were not made to withstand the radiation emitted from the Earth's destruction. You will fry in there. Besides ..."

"OK. Our escape pods are not safe but we could transfuse fuel from their tanks to the main reserve and set course for the far side of the Moon."

"We would have to follow a low consumption track. Radiation from Earth is still dangerous if we remain close for long. And if we attempt to reach the Moon on a fast track, we will have no fuel to return to the gate."

"Obviously. But we could contact the Georefugees. If they find out about us, they'll do their best to get us to the ground. They certainly maintain a relatively high level of technology. Otherwise they wouldn't have survived on the Moon for so long. Our vessel will be a treasure to them. And we can remain in the stasis field until they come to the rescue."

The proposal is reasonable. But ...

"Let me inform you about their situation. Many of the persons and most of the material salvaged came from small isolated stations where biological experiments of dubious legality and morality were conducted. On the aftermath of the disaster, all rules about planned mutations were suspended, in face of the danger of total extinction for the race. The inhabitants of the lunar settlements have endorsed significant mutations hoping to adapt to the unfriendly environment. The living conditions are extremely hard and mortality rate is very high."

"How different does that make them?"

"Different enough to consider us alien and undesirable."

Jamal knits his eyebrows. "Isn't this illogical? In essence, we are coming from their past. What's wrong with us possessing the DNA of their great-grandfathers?"

"Nothing, perhaps. I would suggest, nevertheless, that you listen to the current theory of the Georefugees about the destruction of the Earth before we proceed with the plan. It's a small excerpt from the world's history taught in their schools."

Jamal gestures, 'proceed'.

"Our heroes fought valiantly against a hateful and fanatic enemy, who committed matricide from the safety of high orbit. Our mission now and forever is their total destruction, a fight to our last breath as well as the last breath of our children and our children's childr—"

Jamal raises a hand to interrupt. "This comes from a school-book?"

"Exactly." The right answer is 'unfortunately'.

"It sounds more like hate speech."

Straight to the point. Jamal has studied History thoroughly. He was supposed to be our First Speaker in case of alien contact.

"Or even worse, the propaganda of a barely veiled dictatorship," he amends.

There he is. "We must take into account that, given such abject conditions, they need a target to vent their misery," I add. "Listen to this: *'We dream of the moment we will prevail again on our environment, when we will annihilate the remnants of the enemy and once again gain access to the vital sources that have been denied to us. We dream of the moment when we shall heal our Mother. It's for this moment that all of us strive and fight.'*"

"Their wishes are written in sand and dirt," Jamal murmurs. "Their potential is next to zero and the destruction of the Earth is absolute. They deceive themselves."

"Most Georefugees have no access to the old databases. Much of the evidence is deleted to make different use of the memory space."

He rubs his chin. "Every dictatorship attempts to limit access to information," he says afterwards. "Their motives could have been noble in the beginning." He leaves his hammock and floats slowly around the room. His two companions are asleep, encapsulated in their energy cocoons. His eyes turn to one of the cameras. "They are now seeking an enemy – even an enemy that no longer exists – to saddle them with the evil of the disaster, so that people will rally harder with their leaders and their struggle for survival."

He approaches the screens to check the information I have extrapolated from the data I've managed to extract from their communication channels.

Average birth rate per female: 9.4 offspring.

Average survival rate in the first week: 5.73

Average offspring reaching adulthood: 2.91

Average life expectancy: 27 standard years.

Mutation rate: 28% lethal mutations in the total of general population.

"Nothing reminds me of the planet we've left behind," he murmurs while perusing the list of the most common death causes.

He's not expecting me to comment upon the obvious and I don't.

"How do they imagine they'll hunt down an enemy?" he wonders after a while. "You said they don't have space vessels anymore."

"They still possess weapons. And they have the ability to fire them via satellite systems. Some of them are still in orbit around the Moon and they remain functional."

His laughter comes out bitter. "Should I assume that if we appear now, we will make the perfect target to release the anger that seethes underneath their tunnels?"

"They have already done that. If you read a little more into their historical texts, you'll find a reference to the shooting down of an enemy vessel. From the contents recorded, I suspect it was *Scout-3*."

He doesn't want to read more.

"Let's leave this timeframe," he says in a low voice. "There is no home to be found here."

I begin initiation of the inter-dimensional engines. And I remember how Delphi's last oracle continues: *Foivos Apollo no longer has a home...*

RUST AND REMORSE

"What's your name?"

The person on the screen looks and sounds like a boy. My extrapolation algorithms show me what a person should look like due to extended mutations, either random or programmed,

after eighty eight years of further time-slip. It must be a young boy, although his skin appears hard and wrinkled like that of a hippopotamus of the once upon a time Nile.

"Polynoe."

"Cool." One point seven million stored pictures and one hundred and thirteen combinatorial algorithms assure me that the smile is spontaneous and the words are true, even if the face is almost alien to the human race. "We've never talked before. Such a name, I would remember."

My processors can easily break into the lunar establishments' communication system without being detected. What I can't achieve is downloading the necessary code to install part of my software in a storage area of their machines to operate from within. There are no memory banks large enough to host me. Their technological level did not allow their maintenance and they have been recycled many decades ago.

The population has increased. A little more than seventeen thousand souls live crowded in the deep tunnels they have extended underground and around the plantation domes of the two original establishments.

"I'm new to the job."

There's no reason to explain more, as there's no reason to awake my fellow travelers. This age is certainly not proper for them, and it's not reasonable to spend the few provisions of water and food to see them come to the same conclusion. Yet, regardless of the information I have gathered by monitoring the communications, I wanted to get in touch with the Geore-fugees, something I avoided last time.

"Nightshift in supply area, huh?" he asks.

I repeat a few million idle loops between answers to simulate the time lag of their actual communication system. For two days I've been collecting data to study their language. It has changed significantly in the past half century. It has become almost unrecognizable since the time of the disaster. It's a hodgepodge of the languages of three or four dominating

Georefugees' groups. Thousands of words that had to do with the earthen landscape have become obsolete, while new notions have been added and the meaning of others is altered. Anyway, I have no problem adjusting my language generators. Underneath these layers it's still a human language.

"I guess so."

"How old are you?"

Good question. "Fourteen." I hope it doesn't sound irrational. In this society kids grow up pretty soon.

"I'm thirteen. Why can't I see you?"

I considered it safer to avoid optical contact, although synthesizing an acceptable face profile is a joke. Meanwhile, I have an adequate picture of the boy and his surrounding space, although the area is dimly lit. He is slightly built and almost naked. His ribs are discernible under a tough and somewhat scaly skin. It's either too hot in the establishment or some targeted mutations have made them resistant to lower temperatures. Behind him I can see pieces of broken machinery. Dark red spots of rust have invaded long cylinders that appear to be tubes. Wires and dismantled power suppliers are stacked to his right and something like pieces of a fan are scattered to his left. What they call supplies would have been considered rubbish in the past that we have come from.

"I don't know. *I can see you.*"

I recognize his grimace even through the hippo wrinkles of his face. "I guess it's a glitch in the optical module." His hand moves in a gesture I interpret as dismissal.

I find the chance to tap a little more information about the rate of their regression. "The entire com-sys is about to blow," I drop casually.

"Don't say such things." His voice is low and hurried.

"Why not?"

"It's bad for morale. Don't they punish you in your sector when you speak so?" He sounds angry now, glancing nervously around.

"Not much."

He makes another grimace. "You're lucky." A few silent seconds pass by while I store all the images the shoddy place offers me.

"How come you have no kids?" he asks.

Slippery ground. "How do you know I don't?"

"Are you kidding me? You wouldn't be in the storerooms!"

Is it more or less dangerous to work in the storerooms? Are females who have given birth more or less protected? Mothers at fourteen? He hears me sighing and says he is sorry.

"I dream of the day when our life will not be so hard," he murmurs. "Like in the stories, where people used to live out, in the open air. Sometimes I imagine trees in long, unruly rows. Big trees. Lots of them. In the pictures there are so many that you are afraid you may get lost. Has it even crossed your mind that you'll get lost in the hydroponics' domes?"

"No."

"One day, I hope our world becomes like the Earth that was. But who could protect her from the rays of Heavens?" he continues. "I have seen it in the old pictures. The tongue of fire that blew from the sun was so huge that it burned the Earth down. It's called ... do you remember the name? How was it called?"

"Solar flare," I answer. Within the past two days that I've been observing them, I have discovered that this is now the prevailing theory about the Earth's destruction. But I have also noticed how they keep repeating it, as if they desperately need to believe it. *They have to believe it.* Their short lives are extremely hard. An enemy is no longer enough to provide them with purpose. The idea worked well enough for the previous generations, but in the end it swamped them with guilt. Now all they want to believe is that they had no share in the tragedy, that no person from the human race was responsible for their woe. They prefer to see themselves as victims of nature, even if it makes them feel insignificant and helpless.

Their world is full of rust and remorse.

"Where have you seen the pictures?" It's good to know whether they have forged their data entries or they have enlisted artists for their purpose. "In databases?"

"In what?" he asks, knitting his brows.

So he's never heard about databases. Maybe it's not just lack of memory space. Maybe they no longer have data stored the way I perceive them. I wonder if they have functional computers to assist them with the tasks of maintenance and supervision of their biochemical labs or if they have resorted to paper and pencil computations.

And, all of a sudden, I realize something really interesting. It's not just my fellow travelers who are now unique. I'm unique too. There's no system left in the lunar bases possessing even a millionth of my capabilities. The Georefugees have no mechanism to provide them with extrapolations and predictions for their future.

So, Apollo has no laurel anymore. Neither does he have a murmuring spring.

FLESH AND DARKNESS

"The Heavens shuddered from the sins of the Earth and dropped their thunders upon her. So, she bleeds and burns ever since, to remind people about the punishment their sins may cause. A fiery tongue has also hit our own land, it has deadened and frozen the seas and burnt the air over the valleys, to ensure that we will never forget our place."

Aileen repeats in a low voice the current beliefs of the Georefugees, her eyes darting, once in a while, toward the gray ember of Earth. After seeing the initial reactions of my crew, I prefer to present the visual input on a flat screen instead of the three-dimensional hologram. It's less upsetting. In their subjective time they have spent only a few hours from the moment they've encountered the disaster.

"Four hundred and eighty three years have passed from the day of the explosion," I remind her. "It's not strange they have forgotten all about the Earth's past. What's unexpected is that they've managed to survive and multiply under such extreme conditions. They number about sixty three thousands now."

"It's not as simple as that," she says, floating over the text I present her with. She has spent the three hours since the sedation has worn off studying reports from our previous emergence and my decision for further time-slip. "First, they blamed an enemy. Then, the natural forces. Now, Heavens is punishing Earth for sinning. You realize what this means, huh? How dramatically their society has regressed?"

I do. That's why I chose to awaken Aileen, the sociologist of the mission. I need human consent before selecting the time-frame of our next emergence. The fuel of the inter-dimensional engines is draining fast, limiting the time jumps. And in conventional time, their days are numbered too.

"They've slipped from physics to legend," I agree. "They possess the required technology to support them in this lethal environment but they have suffered tremendous losses in scientific thought."

"Heavens punishing Earth," Aileen repeats. "The status of women has regressed from being equals to becoming vessels of sin. The Earth bleeds and burns. She is stricken and unclean, just the way most societies saw women in the past."

I have inferred this before her. Despite their regression, they still maintain as best they can the largest portion of their communication net, partly because contact between the two communities protects them from the dementia of loneliness, partly because exchanges provide them with a safety valve against widely extended endogamy. Thus, I'm still able to penetrate their systems and collect information that otherwise would have been inaccessible.

I already know that the gods have made their appearance in their skies and valleys, on the ground, in the caverns, under the

domes and inside the labs, and that the women are almost deprived of their human status and are held in stockades, as reproduction animals. I withhold details about the Georefugees' way of living. There's no need to further shock Aileen. I already see her swallowing hard as she looks at the pictures of the descendants of her once fellow humans. Soon, she will find out that experimenters have created two mentally inferior subspecies. Those are used one as a pool of expendable work force, the other as a protein source, flesh that feeds the wretchedness of their survival.

"They'll wander in deeper darkness yet," she continues. "And the emergence will be slow and late. Since half the population no longer has a voice—"

I know. The oracle knows. *Even the talking spring has dried up and is no more.*

I emerge. And withdraw. And re-emerge. And withdraw again.

On one side, there's an unknown sun, hundreds of light years away.

On the other, there's a dead planet and an increasingly alien inimical group of beings striving to survive.

And the fuel of the inter-dimensional engines is draining with every jump.

And I, together with my crew, hunters after hope, each time a breath closer to death.

CLAY AND LIGHT

"What makes you think it's a good idea to contact them this time?" Rodrigo asks.

Six days and four hundred and fifty years after the last discussion with Aileen, I consider it necessary to wake up all three and inform them about the situation. Apart from the steady reduction of radiation, very little has changed on Earth. The

mother planet may become habitable in a few hundred million years. If it somehow gets seeded with new life forms.

The settlements on the Moon have proliferated. Using the lower species as labor force, the Georefugees have raised more domes, have managed to excavate and expand the underground habitations, have constructed more powerful relays for communication and currently possess a wide exchange system based on fragile and unsafe land vehicles. Besides they number about three hundred and thirteen thousands and life expectancy has reached an average of forty two years.

"We have enough fuel for just one jump to the future and provisions for a few more days. From this point on, our choices are extremely limited: We may either transfuse the fuel of the escape pods and use it sparingly to approach the settlements, get into orbit above them, and hope that the inhabitants will be able to collect us, or we may use it to allow you to remain in sedation until all our systems fail and you die in your sleep."

I have run these scenarios for a long time, I have used countless algorithms and I have retrieved innumerable pertinent texts from my database. But the final decision about the crew's life will not be reached in their absentia.

They remain silent. During their training, they've reconciled with all possible ways of death. It was included in the price to pay for participating in First Contact missions. But when the time of the decision comes, nobody is really ready for the scythe.

"Yes, but over there," Jamal's hand points to the general direction where he thinks the Moon is, "they believe in communication demons and air-conditioning gods. We've learned that communication devices are handled by the priesthood and that every once in a while a dissident is executed. I can't see what it is that offers us better opportunities now over the time when I first proposed to ask them for help."

"The existence of dissidents. A great number of dissidents."

The two males turn to Aileen. She's the one who has extracted this useful information from the communication data.

"You talk about a small minority the others consider as a dangerous sect."

"A small minority of our days destroyed the Earth," she reminds him. "Besides, these people are not just plain dissidents. They are the scientifically-minded of their community. They are those who believe that the Moon is too unfriendly a world to have generated the spark of life, no matter how much breath and sperm their gods have offered. They are the enlightened people who may become leaders in their future and – maybe – our future too."

"But isn't all communication controlled by the priests?"

"Polynoe has discovered that the dissidents have some kind of primitive encoding in the communication protocols, allowing them to exchange information under the very eyes of their leaders. Let's contact them. We'll ask them to prepare the ground to receive us after our next emergence, when space technology will be available to them again. We'll set a rendezvous at some future point of time, when they'll have the means – and the will – to get us down in one piece."

Rodrigo's eyes rise to his nearest camera.

"Can we?" he asks.

"Of course we can," I answer. "I am Polymorphic Noesis, a Fourth Generation Artificial Intelligence, and I possess the best communication devices of this solar system."

For the first time since their awakening in terrestrial orbit, days and centuries ago, I can hear them laugh. And soon afterwards, they settle down and start making plans: how to present themselves, what information to provide, what to offer, what to ask for. I want to present a few results of my extrapolation algorithms but I understand that it's better not to interrupt them. They talk and they make their own predictions, molding the clay of their hopes for the next contact until they run out of breath.

And while they extrapolate and dream, I realize that maybe Apollo's well-wrought hall has not fallen to dust.

Besides, I *know* that despite its literary beauty this soul-wrenching oracle is a fake.

I am holding a stationary orbit over the liftoff pad of the first lunar missiles. My tanks and my pods are dry. The fuel has been spent to the last drop to get us from the aperture of the inter-dimensional gate to the rendezvous point. The low consumption track has also brought an end to the passengers' provisions and to my superconductors' energy cells.

I had to carry out all communications with the Moon inhabitants myself. The language of the Georefugees doesn't hold the slightest similarity to that of my crew. They will have to learn a great deal during their first weeks. They will have to adapt to an alien and unfriendly environment.

Aileen, Jamal and Rodrigo watch nervously on the screens the faces of the astronauts coming to their rescue. The slanted, prismatic eyes, the tiny scales on the thick skin, the jaws with the smaller teeth, the folds around the neck that become oxygen bags in cases of emergency. I can discern a slight difference to the cranial bones, which makes them a little flatter and just a tiny bit larger.

The bio-indications of the crew betray a slight aversion toward their saviors, one that I'm sure they'll be able to overcome. After all, they were selected for a first contact with unknown species.

Those who are approaching to receive my people from the Scout no longer belong to the species that once dominated the mother planet. Their genes are so incompatible that, biologically, they are considered a different species, an alien species, such as those that – how ironic – concerned our initial plans.

My mission is accomplished in every aspect. Besides, without an energy source to support my operation, my own lifetime will soon terminate. At best, they may be able to land and utilize the ship and myself after a few decades and, should my functions remain intact until then, I will emerge from my own

stasis, as if from another jump to the future. I've kept my crew safe and, in some way, I've made contact between them and a different kind of life form.

If I was not a machine I could coax myself into believing that I have accomplished my mission. But I know that those people trembling on both sides of the airlock are of the same kind. They are both humans.

They are humans because they know how to deceive themselves.

They are humans because they hide their gods in the skies and they nail their heroes to the ground. They are offspring of their times, biological miracles, victims of faith and morality, little biochemical factories where light shines brightly and abysmal darkness is shed into their neural nets.

They are clay that can imagine the future without my algorithms.

They are a piece of flesh than will turn into dust.

But not before flooding their universe with dreams.

Sins of the Mother

HEPHAESTION CHRISTOPOULOS

Good morning, baby boy. Did you sleep well? No bad dreams, I hope.

They say dreams are the things we did in our life and regret. Or the things we never did. I don't remember.

Here; you've got a smudge on your cheek. Let me get that for you. You shouldn't sleep with all your crayons sprawled on the bed. Let's be a little tidy, shall we?

It's your birthday today. You know it, don't you? You turn five.

Well, not exactly your birthday. It's five years since I brought you home. I don't know when your birthday is.

Only five years? Feels like a lifetime. How could I live without you, baby boy? How could such a world exist? I don't know. I can't tell.

But then, I really don't know.

Sure, you'd like to throw a party for your friends, have them come over, but we can't, baby boy. Not in this house. Yes, I know money's a stupid invention, but that's the way it is. Nothing we can do to change it.

But we could go get some ice cream in the afternoon. You'd like that, wouldn't you? Just you and me.

Well, just you. But I'll be there.

Come here. Give us a hug. I don't know how I could go on if anything happened to you.

You're not afraid of me, are you, baby boy? For what we did to you.



*Hephæstion Christopoulos is confused: part engineer, part translator, part aspiring linguist and part hopeless bassist. He also writes. He has published two short story collections in Greek and has participated in several anthologies. His latest book *The Whales on the Moon*, mixes realism with speculative elements and has received positive reviews. His novella *A Precambrian Discourse on Filipassianism* is forthcoming in 2023 from Raven Canticle Press. He lives*

in Athens with five women, only three of which are furry. You can find him on Twitter @CompsonsCurse.

Of course not. You don't remember. You were too young then.

I don't remember either.

Safu looks like a little gentleman, walking beside her in his tattered yellow shirt. She turns and gazes at him; takes him in. With his prominent brow and his wide nose, he looks much older than he is. I suppose that's the way with Nibis, she thinks. Well, I wouldn't know. I never was that close to them before, to watch a child grow up.

Or so I think.

She sometimes wonders if it would really be better, however painful, if they could remember. Of course she knows what happened — everyone does — but without memories, it's like a story you read on the news. She does feel a little bad about it — and tries hard to feel even worse — but, truth is it's all too distant like the wars they tell you about at school, the massive quantities of the dead no living person feels anything for any more. The uncried for, as old Bacha calls them.

She drops Safu off at the kindergarten. She stands and watches him walk towards the gate with his bouncy step, the gigantic rucksack on his back like a turtle shell. I should buy him some new clothes, she thinks. I've promised.

She strolls around for a while before getting back home. Nothing much to do anyway. When will you get a proper job? she asks herself. When Safu is old enough to provide for himself?

She walks amongst half-wrecked buildings jutting out of the ground like the broken bones of the earth. For maybe the millionth time, she wonders what might have happened to each of them. How we all ended up walking around like ghosts in the ruins.

But you've got Safu now, she thinks. You shouldn't be so ungrateful. And maybe it really is all for the best. Some things are not to be remembered. Too much hate, too much blood.

Too much shame. Better pretend they never happened. Everyone needs a clean slate if they've done wrong, don't they?

When she gets home, there's a little stained envelope under the door. She picks it up, runs her fingers over it — the angled letters, handwritten, she notices, the initials on the upper left corner that mean nothing to her. It's probably one of Brother Equaliser's inspirational notes, she decides. It's not money, for one thing. Nothing she's never read before. There's no state seal, sure, but who else could be sending her a letter? She leaves it on the desk, unopened.

It's not that she doesn't sympathize with Brother Equaliser; she tears each time she hears him speak. She has read his book at least four times, but she really wishes he did something for people like her other than send notes with his sayings.

She really could use a drink, but the cupboard is empty, so she turns on her computer to keep herself busy until it's time to pick Safu up.

The clock ticks. Time is slow.

They say, baby boy, when our people met a long long time ago, it was all joy and smiles. You were there first, but you welcomed us. And we were pleased to know you. We were not so different, after all.

Those were hard times then. Cold, icy. As if the earth had decided to get rid of all the tiny specks of life that mottled her face.

Well, she didn't make it. We're still here.

So they taught each other. How to stay warm and how to hunt in the snow and what to do when the ice came. Humans are weak, you know that. The animals had it better with their warm fur and thick skins and whatnot. Humans only had their brains. And love. Maybe love was all they really had.

I don't know what happened.

I'm sorry, baby boy.

She has watched the video maybe a hundred times. Still it makes her cry. Maybe it's because it is one of the few remnants of the time forgotten or maybe it's because it is a reminder that a single fool can change the world – still Brother Equaliser's words retain the force to move the universe. And maybe this is the sole reason they decided to keep it: Brother Equaliser was laughing stock back then. And look how it all played out.

He stands in the middle of what looks like a pub. The air is thick with smoke and angry voices, but Brother Equaliser's own voice rises above everything else. Not paying attention to the jeers and the bottles thrown at him, he stands there with his trademark mustache and his fedora hat, forming the equal sign with his fingers. She knows his words by heart, but that's not what she's paying attention to; maybe more important than his words are the drop of sweat glistening on his forehead, the breaking of his voice, the slight trembling of his eyelids. And the fact that as he speaks, it seems to her he's getting taller and taller, his head threatening to pierce the ceiling, and his voice drowns out all the laughter and the wrath of the crowd.

But then, that's the way anything worth remembering starts.

She flicks her gaze to the envelope on the desk. She's not sure it is what she thought it was any more – there's no watermark, no equal sign seal. And the video will be over soon, and she'll still have to find a way to pass the time. Maybe there's something to keep her busy there.

So she opens it. Reads through. And she doesn't know how to feel.

Old Bacha has always looked to her as if he's from another age. What age exactly, she's not sure. He's quite tall for a Nibi, sturdily built, still red-haired despite his age, and he's got that look in his deep-set eyes that whispers of a full life and untold secrets. What those secrets might be, she can't tell either.

Safu is always happy to see him, and he always takes the boy on his knees and tells him stories in the Nibi tongue. She doesn't know what they are about, and Safu can't understand the language either, but he seems to like the sound of it — the rolling r's and the cadence that always reminds her of campfire singing.

"I want you to teach him how to speak Nibi," she says. "I want him to know of his heritage."

Bacha pats the boy on the head and lets him slide from his lap.

"How can he know when no one can tell him what happened? Who will explain to him how he ended up with a mum that looks nothing like him and doesn't speak a word of his language?"

"I've been... I've been talking to him about that. There's not much I can tell him, of course, but he has the right to know."

Old Bacha huffs. "When he grows up, he'll want to find out what happened to his parents. And there will be nothing to find out. I think he'd be better off knowing as little as possible."

He does let them look at his paintings, though. She suspects the old man doesn't really mean any of that; he just feels it's the proper thing to say.

She sometimes wonders whether those paintings are suitable for a child to look at, but Safu seems to like them. Maybe it's merely because he's a boy, and boys do get a little excited at violence. She has seen him play war with his friends at school, after all.

I wonder what games they'd play if we remembered.

I guess children would have no games to play then. Maybe the reason all this is happening is to salvage their innocence. And ours.

Despite his claiming otherwise, she knows Bacha's paintings are his own way of remembering. He doesn't exhibit them in public any more — he probably wouldn't be allowed to anyway

— but they are his way of saying, "Nobody's going to make me forget," a sort of motto of his. They are quite simple, really. Naive, even. His art has passed through many stages, realist and cubist and whatnot — she's really not good at this — but now he has adopted a style reminiscent of cave painting. His canvases are always a yellow-grey color and his themes are always hunting scenes. They look quite innocent; it's just that if you look a bit closer, you'll see that this mammoth's face is a little too human, and could that hoof actually be a shoe? She's not sure if Safu actually notices this and what he makes of it, but she decides it's good that he looks at them anyway.

"I got a letter today," she says after a while.

Bacha looks at her. "A letter?"

"There's some money to it, and I really could use it. But it doesn't sound exactly legal."

Where do memories go when we forget, baby boy? Have you ever wondered? It's all there, I think, in our heads. Maybe we just choose to let go of some things when they're too much to bear. But there must be a way to open the box; I just don't know if we should.

There's a tale an old man told me once. A tale of a one-sided war and of millions of dead no one cries for any more. I wonder, baby boy, if there's no one left to remember you, no one to mourn you, does this mean you never existed? Was your passing from this world all in vain?

I don't think so, little one. Because some day, in the gleam of a raindrop, in the trill of a songbird, in the froth of a wave, someone will see the glistening of a familiar eye or hear a note from a familiar tune, and this will mean you're still here. You just had to stay hidden for a while.

We wouldn't wake up screaming in the middle of the night otherwise, would we, baby boy? If all that never existed.

And, besides, you're here. It's someone's blood that flows in you, those are someone's eyes looking at me.

You deserve the truth, baby boy. We all do. I'm just not sure if I'll ever be able to give it to you.

But you're strong. You're clever. You'll find a way.

It does cross her mind that it might be some kind of trap, and she does wonder why they took the risk of sending the letter to someone like her. On the other hand, that's what they were probably looking for. Her kind of people. Desperate people but with a reason to go on living.

The building is an old mansion in the outskirts of town. It's almost intact, which is surprising. The guard opens the gate for her and asks to see her invitation. She hands him the letter, and only then does she notice the holster in his belt.

He then asks her something, but she's not listening. She can't tell — well, of course she can't — how long it's been since she last saw a garden like that. The flowers are a little wilted, sure, and the trees stoop like tired old women, but the air is cool and a little moist and thick with a smell that somehow reminds her of herself in Safu's age — could it really be? Have we all been children once? — and of the freshness of summer rain and of first kisses and of other things, now distant and forgotten. Honeysuckle, she thinks. That's what ma called it.

Ma. I'm your ma now, baby. Whoever thought we'd come this far.

"You can come through," the guard is telling her. "They're expecting you."

You can't turn back now, she thinks as she walks up the gravel path. Just make it worth the risk.

The door opens, and there's a smiling woman behind it, waiting for her. She gestures her to a sofa and then sits cross-legged opposite her.

"We're very happy that you decided to come," the woman says. "You don't have to be afraid. Tomorrow morning you'll be home, and nothing will have changed." She leans closer, takes

out a cigarette, lights it, and blows the smoke to the ceiling. "Do you understand what we're doing here?"

All this time she has been sitting with her back upright, her hands clasped on her knees. "I'm not sure," she says.

"Just a little bit of historical research. This is all there is to it." The woman pauses, looks at her with a pair of shining eyes like a child who's just been given a new toy. But I'm not a toy, she thinks. Don't look at me like that. "We can proceed whenever you feel ready."

"What will we be doing?"

"You'll just fall asleep. And dream for us."

She opens her mouth.

"Don't worry," the woman says. "You'll get your money first thing in the morning."

They lead her to a bedroom — there's pictures of seascapes and dense forests on the walls, and a big screen showing Brother Equalizer speak. She wonders a bit at this — after all, what they are doing here is against his law — but they see the way she stares and smile.

"We have the utmost respect for him and his governance," they tell her. "But everyone can make a mistake. We're doing all this in the name of science."

She's surrounded by three people in hospital gowns — the woman she saw earlier and two young men. They ask her to lie on the bed, they attach something to her head and sit down on the armchairs around her.

"We have to be here," they say. "Just try to forget about us. We'll be quiet."

So she turns on her side, cradles the pillow under her arm and closes her eyes. Eventually I'll sleep, she thinks.

Sometimes, when I look at you, baby boy, something swells up in me, a terrible thing — but then I think of your smile and the way you purse your nose whenever the sun's in your eyes, and it all goes away. It's not that I don't love you — don't you ever think

of anything like that, my little one. It's just that I'd like to know a little more about who you are and what happened to you.

The first thing I remember is when I brought you home. You weren't much older than six months, but you were such a little devil! I fell in love with you right away. I just wonder what brought you to my hands.

Your parents? I don't suppose they are alive. I'm sure they are not. I'm sorry.

It's just that this is my first memory — my first happy memory, it's true — and everything else I remember is a lifetime away. There's sixteen years of my life that seem to have merely crumbled to dust, blown away by the wind. You somehow remind me of them. And I wish I could have them back.

But all this is none of your fault. You probably are the sole innocent person around here.

I suppose all this happened to protect us. To protect you. They say people did terrible things back then. Maybe this is the way to not repeat them. But who wouldn't like to know?

We are curious creatures, baby. Maybe too curious for our own good.

Just sleep now. Don't listen to the ramblings of your old ma. I'm still your ma, aren't I?

She stirs. Or not. She's not stirring. Someone's gently shaking her awake. She opens her eyes and blinks. It's still dark.

"Are you with me? Good. I'm going to ask you a few questions now."

She hears a switch flip, and then there's a faint light at the other end of the room. She sits up.

"Just give me a minute."

She blinks again. The faces around her start to clear. But something is wrong.

She holds her hand in front of her face, examines it as if she's not sure it's hers. It looks as it looked like the night before — the broken thumbnail, the dry skin — but she feels like

this hand, her whole body is bent in different ways as if someone has reset her bones and adjusted her eyes, and her brain itself is like it's not exactly the same as a few hours back, and there's something thick and heavy in her chest struggling to get out, and then she remembers.

And it seems so true.

She sits there for a few moments, trying to make sure it's really her, trying to discern dream from reality. Maybe it's just the tatters of sleep, she thinks, nightmares and repressed guilt.

But it's all vivid and clear as a childhood sunrise, and she's sure now she remembers.

Oh, God, she remembers.

And, remembering, she decides she can't afford to lose it all again, however painful it might be. And, remembering, she knows what to do.

She does feel her muscles a little rusty and all those years of hardship and deprivation have taken a toll on her, but the body never forgets. She knows that too well now.

She waits for the first young man to come closer. He's holding a little notepad and saying, "We'll make it all go away as soon as we're through, I promise."

The man leans to adjust the device on her head. She holds her breath. She feels something rushing through her, and she knows it's more than adrenaline and the screams of memories huddling in her head. It's excitement, an excitement so wild it almost feels like ecstasy. She hates the fact that she's feeling it, but she tries to hold on to it. It's the only way she can do what she has to do.

She grabs the man's head and sticks her fingers in his eye sockets till she feels the squelching and then she breaks his nose on her knee. She absentmindedly wonders how many times she's done this before, but she knows she can actually count them if she likes, so she stops. The woman manages to scream for the guards before she breaks her teeth and the second man flees, but it doesn't really matter because now she re-

members, and there's nothing they can do to stop her. She was just hoping she'd keep the damage to a minimum.

She walks to the door. Takes a deep breath. The memories keep coming. She tries to keep it all down. Now's not the time, she mumbles. Now's not the time. She exits the room. They are already here.

Let them come. I remember. And I can do what I have to as easily as writing my name.

She hasn't taken Safu with her to Bacha's this time. She will tell him. But not now. She hates to say it, but this is grown-ups' talk.

As if being a grown-up means you can be trusted. Means you can be trusted with a life.

"Do you believe in me, Bacha?" she says. "Do you believe that I'd never lie to you, never do anything to harm you?"

"Sure I do."

That's good. Because I don't. Not any more.

"But you'll have to calm down and tell me," he says. "I can't do what you're asking me to if I don't know."

"I want to know you're certain. It's a huge risk I'm asking you to take. Who knows what will happen if they find us out."

Old Bacha lights up his pipe and looks at her with his tired wise eyes; that gaze which always seems to suggest that he knows more than he says.

"I can't be certain if you don't tell me." He pauses, puffing. "Don't worry, though," he says. "I'm kind of sure I know what you have to say. I've been suspecting it for a long time now."

I don't mean to scare you, baby boy. No matter what you hear, never forget I love you.

But... well. Tomorrow, I'll try to find a chain. Tie myself up at night. I can't trust myself any more. I'll give you the key.

You should be afraid of me, baby boy. I am afraid of myself. And of just how easy it is for man to turn monster.

Your parents? Yes, they are dead, indeed. I know that too well now.

I killed them.

But that's not the worst part, is it? If someone just told me, I would feel terrible, of course, but, believe me, hearing about it is one thing; knowing — remembering — is something totally different.

What's worse is that I am that same person, little one. Yes, I forgot. Yes, I listened to Brother Equaliser and maybe this changed me a bit. But the problem is I can't be sure who I really am. The one you've known all this time, your loving ma, or that other person — the one who did all those things?

I do want to believe that I'm your ma and that other one is dead forever, but, I told you, that one is me again.

And there were others, too.

As far as I can remember my old life, well, maybe I wasn't what you'd call a nice person, but I didn't really know what hate was. Anger, yes, despair, resentment, all that. But this thing?

Where did we go so wrong, baby boy?

Maybe one day I'll be able to, if we're still here, but right now I can't tell you how many I — we — killed and how and — even worse — why.

Nibis. How many Nibis? I should remind myself of that.

Nor will I tell you what I thought about when doing it. It's just too terrible. Maybe this is the worst of all.

We all knew, you'll say. All this time, we knew what happened.

Yes. But we all secretly believed it was something the others had done. Everyone but ourselves.

And, besides, once you see and hear that stuff in your mind, well, nothing will ever be the same again.

I understand now why they made us forget. I also understand why they shouldn't have.

Because once the dust settles, we'll do it all over again. The hate is here. Hidden, but here. And we won't even know what

we're doing because it will be the first time. A little guilt is not enough. A clean slate is not a second chance.

Somehow, somehow, the seed was sown. We can't pretend it's not there. We can't pretend it won't sprout again when the time comes.

So fear me, baby boy. But never forget I love you. And now I can love you truly because I know what I have done.

Sleep now. Please, don't dream.

"Nobody's going to make me forget," old Bacha says as he puts the last brushstroke on the wall. The mural is a tiny thing, really — he couldn't make it much bigger if he was not to be seen — and it's the fourth he draws tonight. It's a diptych. On the left side there's two women. One of them is a Nibi. They're dressed in pelts, and the mammoths in the white background and the dead tree in the distance suggest the Ice Years. The other woman is holding an infant — a Nibi infant — breastfeeding it. She doesn't know how he's done it, maybe it's merely the heat of the fire reflecting off their faces, but there's a heart-warming tone of serenity and comradeship in the picture.

The right side is simpler. No background, no soothing fire. It's the same women, dressed in modern clothes, and the baby is still suckling; it's just that, this time, the Nibi is lying dead with her guts spilt out, and the other woman is holding the child with bloodstained hands. Below the picture is written "Remember before you forget," in both tongues.

They stand back to appreciate the work.

"It's really good, Bacha," she says.

The old man doesn't answer. He just lights his pipe, packs his brushes, and turns to leave.

"Best I could do," he says. "But don't keep your hopes too high."

The afternoon next, she passes by the first wall. She knows she had better stay as far away as possible, but there's this scene

playing in her mind of a small crowd standing in front of the murals, of a quiet worried murmur, and even of a few tears shed. Stupid, mortally stupid, she knows. But she has to see.

When she reaches the place, there's no one around. You should be expecting that, she tells herself. The world doesn't change from one day to the next. She just turns her head to steal a look at the picture, trying to draw some courage, to reassure herself they're doing the right thing.

But there's nothing there. Just a stenciled fedora hat and an equal sign where the painting used to be and a stray dog lifting its hind leg to pee on the plaster.

Listen to me, baby boy, and listen hard: Never let anyone tell you things are what they are, and there's nothing you can do to change them. You are stronger than you might think; you just have to have a cause and a way.

I do sometimes think about it now since everything changed: that I might end up a crazy woman muttering to herself and shouting to the passersby about blood and guilt and hate and things they will never be able to understand or feel because there's simply nothing for them to understand. But I'm okay with that. Let it come. I have a cause. No one can say I didn't try. I just have to make sure I have a way.

I'm just worried what might happen if they find us out. I'm not worried about me; I just don't ever want to leave you. But should anything happen to me, baby boy, remember — funny word, isn't it? — that I'll always be your ma. Your hateful, murderous ma, but the one who loves you more than her own life. I'd never give up on you, you know that. If anything happens, please don't think poorly of me; I had no choice. It's you I'm doing this for.

Well, let's be honest; I'm doing this for myself and for the whole world, but my mind is on you. I wouldn't even think about it if I wasn't your mother.

But don't worry. Nothing bad is going to happen. We'll make it through. I'll be careful. And you won't mind if you end up with a crazy old woman for a ma, will you?

Well, I don't think it'll come to this. I'll keep my wits about me. The rest of the world might go crazy when they find out. But a little insanity sometimes helps you move forward and do things the sane would never do.

She wakes up at noon. They were out all night, old Bacha going as fast as he could. His work has gone a bit clumsier, his lines a bit hasty, but they decided they should fill as many walls as they could throughout the city. He made eleven murals last night; eight the night before that.

They have been doing it for quite some time now. At first, they would paint everything over the very next day, but, lately, it seems they have started giving up, and last night's paintings have all survived. She doesn't know what to think about that; whether she should be more hopeful, or if she should start worrying.

She went out yesterday, took a walk through the city to see how people would react. She stood by the wall for about an hour, watching the crowd. Two or three passersby stopped and gazed at the mural. They blinked, scratched their heads and went their way. She looked at them closely, trying to catch a glint of remembrance in their eye. Maybe they'll just pretend they go on their way and will tell others about it when they get home, she thought. Maybe they're too scared to show they understand.

But deep inside, she knew they'd never say anything; not because they were afraid, but because, when she looked at them, she saw nothing there.

She takes Safu by the hand and gets out. "Let's go for a walk," she tells him. You idiot, she thinks, dragging the kid with you, but she can't stop herself; they must feel something,

they have to, and, if they see her there, a mother with a child that looks nothing like her, they might make the connection.

Because she rattles her chains at night, and she is afraid she could easily break free if she decided to, and the memories have not faded at all; they ripple through her as if someone's thrown a huge boulder in her mind, and the waves, instead of retreating, swell higher and higher by the minute, and she can't be alone in this. They must feel something; someone must remember; someone must burst out screaming; someone must cry so that at least she won't be alone in this.

Poor Safu doesn't complain even if she keeps him standing there at high noon, and he strives to stay in the wall's narrow strip of shade. But people just keep coming and going as if nothing has happened, as if the world as we knew it didn't end a few years back and as if it wasn't us who ended it — or who were slaughtered so that the end would come. (Only about one in ten people is a Nibi, she notices. It seems we were all good at our jobs back then.)

She starts trying to attract attention, coughing loudly when someone looks at the picture or holding Safu by the shoulders, gently stroking his hair. But all she gets in response is icy gazes of — what? Indifference? Ignorance? Fear? Or maybe none of the three.

A well-dressed young man comes round the corner, with an old Nibi woman shuffling her feet in his wake. He sports a mustache and a fedora hat and he's swinging a cane; a true believer, it seems, a genuine Brother Equalizer acolyte. This one must understand; if this one notices, then everyone will, eventually.

"Hey," she shouts when he passes in front of her. "Hey!" she says and waves her hands. "Don't you see?" She stands by the mural, wraps her arms around Safu and looks him in the eye.

The man stops and flicks his gaze towards her, then to the painting she's showing him. He stands there, confused for a moment, and then smiles. "Very nice," he says and tosses her a coin.

She reflexively catches it and looks at it as if trying to figure out what its purpose is. When she lifts her eyes, the old Nibi is standing there, a compassionate smile on her wrinkled face.

"Go home, dear," she says. "Take care of your kid. He'll get sunburns in this heat. Go home and give him a bath and cook him his favorite food. He looks like he needs it." She pauses and smiles again. There's no accusation in her voice, no mockery; just melancholy and compassion and maybe — just maybe — a hint of resignation.

She opens her mouth. She wants to explain to her, to tell her everything, but it's like there's a curtain of silence and half-spoken words and whispered truths between them, one only this Nibi can breach.

"Don't you see that they don't want to know?" the old woman says. She turns to follow the young man. "Everyone prefers their conscience clear. The way is of no importance."

She watches the odd couple recede in the distance, her arms wrapped around Safu, and suddenly the noon sun is merely a frost flake, and the world is getting cold, very cold, thousands of years old.

Lamarck's Ghost II

HEPHAESTION CHRISTOPOULOS



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You don't get to choose where you'll live. You don't get to choose who you'll share the world with. You don't even get to choose whether you'll come into this world. Why then, since you haven't chosen it, should you accept its rules?

I have no answer to that. I think about it often since we came here — especially since the whole affair with Thalia. After all, there's not that much to do in this white wasteland. You curl up in front of a fire, hold your knees tight, and think. The words we exchange are sparse, only when it is necessary. The things we hide inside, they are not to be shared.

But if it wasn't our choice to come into this world, it was our choice to board the *Amerigo*. And, with this decision, we accepted the rules; we acquiesced. How to coexist in the ship, how to treat each other. And who would board it.

We knew the rules and we broke them. I don't regret it, not even now. I'd do it again if I had the chance. I'd do it a thousand times for the chance to live in a world that has shaken off the old burdens and is starting all over again. Sure, it was not the first time something like this was happening and, truth is, we had absolutely no idea how the previous attempts turned out. We were certain, however, that this time we'd get everything right. So many centuries of human history; we must have learned something.

At first, it struck me as odd that I was not the only one, but then I thought about it a bit more thoroughly: people like us

had an even stronger motive to join the mission. The same people that were not allowed to take part.

Forging an identity card was easy; fooling the psychological tests was the hard part. Anyway, some of us, I don't know how, I don't know why, made it. Somewhere along the way, they got onto us. Someone told me our brain activity in cryosleep was being monitored. I don't know if it's true. It doesn't matter. Sometimes, the effort is enough to give you courage to draw a few more breaths.

So we found ourselves in this place. The outcasts, those beyond repair. The damaged ones. The egg shells in the omelette, as someone suggested that we call ourselves when we first got here. (No one thought it funny then. I sometimes think about it now and laugh.) Almost two hundred souls, most of us women. That's to be expected: this world — or maybe that world, now — is not fair. That's what we were striving to fix, anyway.

My stepfather used to rape me every day since I was five years old, up until I turned twelve, when they arrested him. Chetana, sitting next to me at this very moment, was the victim of a ten-man assault in the street when she was fourteen. Judith, her partner lately, spent half her childhood and adolescence locked in a lightless basement. She killed her parents setting the house on fire on her eighteenth birthday.

There was no place for us in the new world. Heaven is inhabited by angels — unsullied, unsexed, untouched; white, gleaming faces, scarless, seamless; untainted souls, just like mother's milk. The wounds we carried could only fester. And, sometimes, if the toe goes rotten, you must amputate the whole leg or die.

They accused them of social Darwinism. Back then, I agreed. What right did they have to exclude me because of something that's none of my fault? Now that we found ourselves in this place, I realize they had no choice. Not that I believe any more that the well-bred settlers with their minds in the right place

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will do much better. I do understand, though, that they had to take precautions.

There's only one thing I find it difficult to forgive although I'm not sure they had another way. The alternative was to feed us to the void.

They didn't tell us the planet was going through an ice age.

The knife is blue. But as long as it's blue, you don't know that it's a knife yet. The blade folds into the hilt, and all you see is an ob-long thing made of polymer with curves for the fingers. But then you open it, and the blade jerks out with an ominous click, and the shiny metal reflects the snow and the weak sunlight, and maybe then the correct thing to say is that the knife is white.

The knife is useful. It's not merely used for cutting — you can dig in the snow with it, clear the rocks from the cave floor, open the tins, stick it in the food and bring it to your mouth. It's hard to get along without the knife.

The knife talks to me sometimes. I mean, not with a human voice, but there are times I find it open, and I can't remember when that happened, and I look at it and see my eyes reflected on the blade, and then I realize I'm wondering if, now that my provisions are almost over, it's time to stick it in the throat of some animal I might bump into or in mine and be over with it once and for all.

And sometimes, I find myself caressing the knife and trying the edge on the skin of my palm, but then I sense a shifting inside me (could it be it? Is it too early yet? I don't know), and then something gets to , and I feel a choking in my throat, and I click the knife shut and shove it in my pocket and don my gloves — the blood has already frozen solid on the slash — and I stomp my feet to get them warm and lift my hood and step out to see if there really are any animals in this godforsaken place.

But I don't get to take more than two steps, and I drop on my knees and start sobbing because something else wakes up

inside me and whispers in my ear, and I wonder what happened and how I ended up here, talking to a knife.

We gave it no name. We won't be here for long anyway. We heard many suggestions, but I believe we made the right decision. There's nothing worth naming here. A white wilderness, unvaried, with nothing changing wherever you might cast your gaze, the odd distant tree here and there, with its black leaves peeping out from under the snow like a shard of metal wedged in the eye's white. And mountains all around, broken teeth hiding the milky sky, and, only if you turn around and look to where the sun sets, you might see the slight curve of the horizon.

They did take care of us, though, I can't deny that: clothes, food — so much food it'll be a long time till we finally have to hunt — weapons, collapsible buildings — I had never seen anything like that before; a bunch of boxes, a mere five meters by five, which cracked like eggs once they hit the ground, and houses, warehouses, and silos emerged from inside. How many of us had been in there — a hundred? a hundred and fifty thousand? I suppose that supplying a couple of hundred souls was no big deal, and they got a chance to ease their conscience.

So we got ourselves a chance at utopia — a broken sort of utopia, torn apart, which wakes up from nightmares in the middle of the night and screams at the walls, which drags its steps during the day and cranes its neck to look around corners, and flinches with every bang and every leaf rustling behind its back. I was one of those who helped set up its rules — the same rules I now wonder whether we have any moral obligation whatsoever to conform to. They were not many: we abolished property and money; administration would be carried out by a ten-member council we'd elect every six hundred days; we established a court with judges that would be determined by draw. We didn't write any laws. It was just a few of

us, there was no need; we'd work things out — the court would decide according to its best judgement on every separate occasion. We only had to make two things clear — two things we deemed necessary at the time:

The first one: murder is strictly prohibited. That's self-evident, one might say. Respect for life is the bone and marrow of every society. I'm not sure any more. I even doubt that sometimes.

The other thing was Chetana's proposal. Truth is, I didn't expect a unanimous acceptance. I didn't expect it to be accepted at all. Still, not only was it not voted against, but, when we announced it to the others, not a single voice was raised in protest. The thought was simple: we had all forgotten — every one of us — how to love. Perhaps, once upon a time, when we were still babies, we had hugged an animal, a toy even, another child, our parents, we had rubbed our skin against theirs, and in our baby minds we'd sensed heat, light, the color red, and we had wished for it to never end. But not any more. Now, all we could expect from another's touch was pain, all we had to give was violence. It was not our fault; that's what we had been taught.

Chetana painted a vivid picture of the abused children of abused children and a sick community that feeds on fear and violence and suspicion. We were not made for utopias — that was the reason we were here, anyway. I don't know if in a population of one or two hundred thousand it would really matter — a pinch of salt is not enough to turn a whole lake into a sea — but all we had here was a spoonful of water, and every drop was contaminated. We have no right, she said.

We would not have any children.

So be it. We were all young still, less than thirty years old on the day we boarded the ship. We had another fifty or sixty years to dream as many nightmares as we found fitting. And then, perhaps centuries later, maybe someone would dig up our frozen bodies, find what was left of our little lives, scratch

their head (if they had one), and wonder who those people who had passed through here were and why they had vanished like that.

I wonder how much time I've got left. I don't know; days are shorter here than what I was accustomed to, and sometimes it's hard to tell whether it's still night or if the sun is up.

I killed a deer today. They're not really deer, I call them that. They're tall, with wide eyes, and have the color of the trees. With their long necks, they reach the thorny leaves and chomp them as if they are the most tender salad. I tried them myself once, and the roof of my mouth got all bloody.

Now that I've got the deer, though, I have no need to eat leaves. I dig a hole in the snow, throw the carcass in and cover it up. It'll stay fresh for long this way, it can't go rancid in this cold.

At first, having meat on my person scared me. I used to sleep with one eye open, clutching the knife between my fingers. I dropped my guard after a while. I now believe that there are no carnivores in this world. Maybe this explains how easy it was to get close to the deer. It didn't try to run away; it didn't attack me; it just looked at me with a blank expression in its eyes and went on looking as I slit its throat.

I eat more now. I can still move around easily for the time being, but I don't know what's going to happen in the near future. That's why, I have come here these days and roam the forest — if you can call it that: just a handful of trees packed tight against each other. They must not be more than a hundred altogether. The deer flock here to feed. I killed one today, I will lurk for one or two more tomorrow — we'll see. I don't know how many I'm going to need and, to be frank, I feel sorry for them and don't want to start killing them thoughtlessly, but I have to provide for the next few months.

And afterwards? Well, I don't know what's going to happen afterwards; I can't think as far as that.

I wonder if spring exists in this place. For as long as I've been here, nothing seems to change, but that can't be. If the weather doesn't get a tad warmer, for the snow to melt and the bushes and the grass to grow, nothing can survive here — can it?

As soon as I'm finished eating and have put the rest of the meat away, I walk back to the cave and sit at its mouth while there's still light. I lean against the rock and take off my boots. The skin on the sole of my foot is hardened. It reminds me of rubber. I jab it with the knife's point and I feel nothing.

A nail is broken, jutting out like a splinter of wood wedged in my big toe. I try to cut the protruding part with my knife. The blade has gone murky. I look at myself mirrored inside it, and I see nothing but a pale blur against the white. I can't remember what I look like any more.

The frozen surface touches my wrist, the blemished metal caressing it like a loving mother. I whisper a couple of words, close it, and hold it tight against my chest. I love you, I tell it.

Maybe it's just a rehearsal for the future. Maybe I really mean it — this blade is my life and my death. I do hope, though, that soon enough, I will have someone to talk to, and there'll be no need to confess my sins to the blade.

The doctor was the one who found out Thalia was pregnant. She looked calmly at her, silently, and asked her to follow her. She presented her to the heads of the council — Chetana and me.

We sat her on a chair and waited for her to speak. She said nothing. I went close, stood over her, touched her cheek with my fingers — soft skin, rosy, a little crumpled, as if the clay never congealed.

What do you plan to do? I asked her.

She kept looking at me, expressionless, lips tightened, eyes moist, still silent, so silent I caught myself wondering whether she might have stopped breathing.

She left us no choice but to send her to court. Naturally, it was the first time it was summoned. When we had established it, we all tacitly held on to the hope we'd never have to use it. And now, way too soon, we had to draw lots for judges.

Ododo would be presiding. A likable girl — I had chatted with her once or twice in the past. She used to be, I think, a street cleaner in Lagos. This one had been forced when she was eleven to marry a thirty-five-year-old man whose sole entertainment was to rape and abuse her — physically and mentally — when he got home every night. (Each time we were assigned office or we were called upon to make some important decision on behalf of the community, we were obliged to state what had brought us here. We hoped that this would remind us what we were not supposed to do with the power we were granted.)

Who is the father? she asked her. But she just sat there with her gaze fixed on her hands and her thumbs orbiting each other as if what was taking place had nothing to do with her; as if it was something happening somewhere far away, back on Earth perhaps; as if her very life did not depend on what she'd say.

It was decided to send her into exile. Ododo made a beautiful speech that made us all emotional. She spoke about her homeland and all she'd been through, about what children and adolescents all around the world had to suffer, and about how we had tried ourselves and had found us guilty towards the next generations in advance.

We gave her clothes, a knife, a sleeping bag, some butane containers, a pan, and as much food as she could carry on her back. We knew it, as we watched her receding in the distance, that we were sending her to her death, but we consoled ourselves claiming we were saving not one but a whole lot of unhappy souls from a life like ours. To live in a society means you have to abide by its rules, doesn't it? You don't get to choose who you'll live with, but there must be limits in liberty so that liberty itself is not threatened.

At least that's what I used to say back then.

We naturally looked everywhere for the father. It shouldn't have been hard to trace him; a mere sixty one men among us, and fifteen of them homosexuals. Still, nobody took that one step forward.

I don't know what would have happened if we'd found him; I don't know if the court's ruling would be different, or if he might have managed to convince her to get rid of the baby. On the other hand, maybe nothing would have changed. But still, he could at least assume the responsibility and go into exile with her so that she'd have someone on her side while she felt her blood freeze solid in her veins and her tears turn to crystal on her eyelids.

On the other hand, it might just be that I have too high expectations from people like us.

I found a bush yesterday. I can't tell if this means spring has come, for the snow doesn't seem to be getting any less, but it held some dark blue fruit shaped somewhat like stars, and I picked one and put it in my mouth. It was tart, and I felt as if someone was piercing my tongue with a hundred little pins, but, as I chewed, it got sweet and sour, and its scent reminded me of the wine grapes we used to press with my grandfather when I was small, and I sat there with the juice trickling down my chin and cried for a good long while.

Today, I pass by the bush without paying it any attention. I'm headed towards where I have buried the deer – I've stuck a branch in the ground to mark the spot – and I start digging with the knife. I think that I've only got one gas container left, and I will soon have to find another way to light a fire. The meat freezes in there, gets icier than Chetana's heart, and, even if I wanted to eat it raw, I cannot without warming it up first.

I'm hunched over the pit I've dug, and I'm shoving my hands inside to take out a piece, when, in the fringes of my vision, I

think I see the snow swelling and deflating again just like breathing. I look up and then I feel it: it starts in my knees, from where they touch the ground, and climbs upwards, spreads up to my fingertips and my head just like the sunlight used to sprawl on the concrete at daybreak when Grandpa took me fishing at the docks.

I thought I couldn't get any colder. Still, I feel pain in the roots of my hair, the fluid freezing in my eyes, my teeth about to break, and my legs are just two pieces of wood holding me upright.

The snow starts breathing everywhere around me and circles me, and then they stand up and look at me, and I understand.

I quietly let the knife fall to the ground and put my hands up and show them my empty palms. The breaths in the snow stand aside and something makes its way between them and comes and stands in front of me and — I think — sniffs at me.

And even with it right there, almost touching me, it's impossible to describe it. I'm not even sure it's got eyes. Sometimes, I think they're right before me, staring at me, and, in the very next moment, I see nothing but the snow's vastness and only a swell on its surface suggesting there's something that wasn't there before. And this cold, ineffable cold, so cold I feel my lungs about to burst and my heart about to stop.

Till I sense something touching my belly, and it starts there and spreads through my whole body and warms me up, and I can move my legs again, and my eyes can turn around in their sockets, and I'm certain I see the snow melting and steaming where it stands.

From sunrise to sunset it's ten hours and fourteen to twenty-two minutes — this hardly changes as the months go by. The year is supposed to last two hundred and ninety eight days — at least that's what they told us when they left us. We decided, however, not to introduce any other form of calendar — just

count the days we've been here. The day we arrived would be the first. Weeks, months, we don't have that kind of stuff — hardly anything varies throughout the year, anyway.

We had seen four hundred and sixty four sunups since we sent Thalia into exile — day number seven hundred and eighty one in the official calendar. We used to have guards around the camp's perimeter at first, but we repealed them afterwards. Nothing seemed to pose a threat in this wilderness, and the shifts had started feeling like a bad joke. But we didn't need any guards to set off the alarm; the spectacle alone was enough. A woman straight out of the human race's most forgotten past — face scorched by the sun's reflection on the snow, dark circles around red eyes, clumps of matted hair like thick rope sticking out from under the black fleeces she had draped over her clothes — and in her hands, fast asleep, something tiny and white, wrapped in pelts.

Maybe we should have ordered her killed as soon as she set foot on the camp — she was an exile, anyway, she wasn't allowed to return. The end result would be the same and the nightmares would be less. But we couldn't have known then. And I was not used to giving orders — especially when those orders involved someone's execution.

I know now that my time has come. No one has ever told me what that moment is like, but you can sense stuff like that. It's a weird feeling when the time comes for something you have been carrying inside you all that time to leave your body — especially when that something comes out moist and warm and crying and swinging its tiny fists. I get sad when I think about it; that I'll be left void and alone and empty again.

I'm scared, it's true, and I'd really like someone to be here and hold my hand, but all that is just remnants from my old life. They won't leave me alone and I know it. They have already gathered outside the cave, murmuring with those screechy little voices of theirs; twenty-three little voices buzz-

ing, a swarm of bees covering the entrance like a soft, transparent curtain keeping the wind away.

That's the only sound I have ever heard them make. I'm not exactly sure what it means, but they always do it on emotionally charged moments — be it birth or death, or when they meet members of the tribe they have not seen for a long time. Other than that, their tongue is a mere five or six words altogether: cold for fear, that bone-piercing frost that turns marrow into crystal; warmth for love, tender, fond, affectionate; a soft coolness like morning dew on your arms for hunger. I suppose they also have words for anger and hate, but I have never felt them, and I don't think I will. I picture them as frost that can split you in two or as a hellish heat that makes your skin blister. So few things to say and yet so many. If only we had those five words at our disposal and no more, the world would be a better place.

I lie on the furs I've covered the cave floor with and breathe deeply. Something's happening inside me. I can feel it. I'm in pain, and I'm cold, and I'm dizzy, and I want to puke at the same time, and I'm scared, and I want everything to stop, but then I hear the buzz get louder, and the warmth gets hold of my fingers and toes, climbs up my arms and legs, closes around my heart, and puddles in my belly. I almost feel it inside me, its happy purr, reaching out with its tiny arms, opening its mouth to suck the sweet warmth.

And when that time finally comes, I simply close my eyes, and I swear I feel my body leave the ground like a fleck of dust floating away from the fire. It slides softly out of me and I realize I've felt no pain, and I stretch out my arms, and I clasp it and it really is warm and moist, and it's steaming like a spring morning.

The buzz stops. But the warmth keeps wrapping me in, embracing me even tighter, and I lean back, and, just before I fall asleep, I decide that we actually don't even need five words if only we could tell each other that one word — that word we had forgotten and had to learn all over again.

This time no one had to bring her to us by force. She came and stood before me on her own and looked up into my eyes. I felt a chill upon meeting her gaze but not the chill the wind and the snow were bringing in; it was a cold that nested inside me and wrapped itself around my bones.

I felt it again later when they brought her in the council room. The convector right in the middle could keep the temperature at levels tolerated by the human body, but once she came in, I felt as if the heat was standing right in front of me, struggling to touch me, but its arms couldn't reach me as if someone had nailed it right there on the ground. I turned around and saw Chetana swallowing a shiver.

At first, I had decided that it was audacity and indifference, that thing in her eyes' sparkle, but now that I had the chance to get a better look at her, I realized I was wrong; this was fear burning in there. I wondered why, since she was so worried about what we could do to her, she had risked coming to see us.

Congratulations on the baby, Chetana said. I wish it luck.

I didn't pay any attention then; maybe I even thought her words a mere formality, but, now, I sometimes recall the scene, and I cannot ignore the way the last syllables folded and broke.

You know, however, we cannot have it here, she was quick to add.

I expected her to speak this time. She had come here risking getting killed. She must have something important to tell us. Still, she just waved us closer, lifted the corner of the pelt covering the creature in her arms, and I immediately felt a soft caress on my limbs, my flesh loosening in the warmth, and I barely managed to turn the other way so that Chetana wouldn't see my tears.

The knife is cold. The knife has gone dull. The knife is murky and black, and it's not talking to me any more.

I'm alone in here. They took the baby. I don't know what they did with it. I don't expect it to still be alive. In the dark, I try to remember what heat is like, but there's none left inside me. The only thing I know is cold and frost, and sometimes I lie on the ground and let it flood me and think that, if I set it free, maybe in a few moments I'll stop feeling.

They never asked me why I came back. I'm not even sure I myself know the answer anymore. I realized something, though: humans learn to live with their misery, and they won't let you take it from them that easily. Maybe they find it hard to change their mask. If they have been taught to be a victim, that's the only role that makes them feel safe. Light hurts when you get out after years in the dark.

I just hope that, when it's all over, they'll discard me somewhere far away from here, close to the forest so that they might find me and mourn me with their tiny voices. And the winter might get a bit colder for a few days.

The knife is not talking to me. The knife is not blue. The knife is useless. The knife is but death now.

As the new presiding judge announces Thalia's sentence, I realize why no settling expedition will ever achieve its goal. It's true that rules are mandatory to protect liberty as it is also true that their very implementation constitutes a violation of liberty. Perhaps we should grasp this fact and come to terms with it — perhaps all we can dream of, after all, is an arrangement where liberty is subject to certain restrictions. But who is capable of deciding what those restrictions will be?

I have no doubt whatsoever that, when Chetana suggested that we forbid childbearing, she had the purest of intentions. As I have no doubt that, when they execute Thalia and her baby, they'll be having nightmares for years to come — still, they will console themselves in the belief that all that was done for the sake of common good.

As for me, I don't know. Sometimes, I think I should hitch myself up, get a bundle of food, and go out into the wilderness to look for the sole form of actual liberty one can have in this world. And other times, I convince myself it would be best if I just pretend all that never happened and stay here where at least I can find a hand to hold me when I feel my back bend and my knees fold.

I went and visited her the other day to apologize for doing nothing to defend her. She asked me if the baby was alive and gave me the knife she had in her pocket. She told me that when I heard it talk to me I'd be ready to understand.

The courtroom is empty, and I'm sitting alone on a chair spinning a knife between my fingers, waiting for it to speak to me. Maybe the knife can tell me what to do.

The 13% Rule

ANTONY PASCHOS

Dear Citizen!

Welcome to the first poll introduced to the public by the CEO of Pythia Consultants Agency, Pythia Algo-Sapience itself, and endorsed by the Prime Minister of Turkellas, Mr. Canaan Mitsondreuou. This poll is of utmost importance since it will determine either the establishment of this voting system or its early termination.

Since the introduction of the 0.1 version of Pythic to the parliament, during the first year of mister Mitsondreuou's presidency, we are pleased to have recorded a 21% rise in export sales, a 32% rise in touristic inflow and a 13% rise in GDP. Turkellas is described as the country with the highest economic growth in the twenty-first century.

But, why is the Pythic software any different from any ordinary AI survey system conducted via your implant? Claiming that all surveys are the same is as inaccurate as claiming that all human behaviors are the same. In fact, surveys are merely platforms and their essence lies in the promoted questions and the mastermind generating them.

This is where Pythia comes into play. With its processual prowess, its state-of-the-art analytical capacity and its outstanding self-adjusting capability, Pythia — the first Algo-Sapience ever to engage in parliament assembles — is able to formulate the right questions in a simple, precise and direct manner. Furthermore, Pythic 1.0 will utilize your participation



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by offering you direct communication with Pythia, so you can send your requests via your implant in various formats: through multiple choice quizzes, plain text or direct thought. Pythia will reply promptly and ensure that they will be categorized, processed and crafted into surveys for future polls.

Pythic 0.1 has sharpened the ministers' decision-making reflexes. Assertiveness might be one of its benefits, yet our ultimate goal at Pythia Consultants Agency remains to amplify the people's voice. And the time is ripe for every citizen to take advantage of it.

On behalf of Pythia, thank you in advance for your trust.

[See the tables.](#)

[Read more.](#)

Please vote:

- Yes! I'd like to take part in the governance of my country by utilizing Pythic 1.0 and its following updates.
- No! Pythic should be a resource available solely to the parliament body.

Dear Citizen!

The opportunity to prove that Pythic 1.0 is the right choice, backed by an immense 58% vote of confidence, means that the vision of making a Prime Minister out of everyone is shared by the majority of Turkellenic Citizens.

Please review the following subjects:

1. Subvention to institutions researching bio-modified plants for building and plastics applications. [Read more.](#)

2. Decriminalization of cannabis and taxation of light drugs. [Read more.](#)

3. Minimum wage raise. [Read more:](#)

Following your profuse response to Pythia's call and the outstanding economic results of the Pythic 1.0 software implementation, it is evident that a 3% raise (from 380 to 391 Cosmo) of the minimum wage would prove beneficial to the

Turkellenic social fabric, as determined by the Pythia Research Institute (P.R.I.)

[See the tables.](#)

Please vote:

- Yes! I believe that the lower class deserves a better pay.
- No! The lower class is well paid.

[Read the whole list.](#)

WARNING: SPAM I-MAIL. POSSIBLE VIRUS COMPROMISING IMPLANT'S INTEGRITY. MAY AFFECT RECIPIENT'S COGNITIVE STABILITY. POSSIBILITY OF BRAIN DAMAGE! DO NOT CLICK.

Dear Friend, beware!

Never before has a machine threatened so imminently to enslave humanity. This devious, honey-spitting devil of an algosap extends its claws to all the citizens of Turkellas, by promising to soothe the wounds inflicted by the Capitalistic cane for centuries upon the working class. We must stop it. It is now apparent that Mister Mitsondreu wasn't satisfied with selling his soul to Satan alone. He had to include the souls of our people too in the atrocious pact ...

[Read more.](#)

Dear Citizen!

The everlasting struggle towards the ultimate goal of a Turkellas fully governed by the people keeps expanding the range of voting categories in such a magnitude that the sheer number of options offered might soon pose the unprecedented threat of information overload.

Though Pythia doesn't lack the processual prowess to segregate between the volume of subjects, an Algo-Sapience-initiated narrowing of the decision spectrum could compromise the degree of confidence in the democratic nature of Pythic 2.0, as to the promotion of equality, social justice and the defense of the minorities' interests. In the end, our vision en-

compasses the people's engagement in every single step of the decision-making process.

Therefore, before you overload your implant, slumping in the mire of endless voting options, we'd like to introduce a breakthrough poll sifting tool to augment the update of Pythic 2.0: Fimonoe 1.0.

Fimonoe 1.0 is a fully adjustable, perfectly monitored and absolutely transparent AI personal guide to assist you in your navigation between polls. It is a catalogue and a cartographer, constantly finding paths, proposing new questions, adjusting and readjusting according to your own preferences.

[See examples.](#)

Read more:

...

By consenting in the implementation of Fimonoe 1.0 in your implant and its further updates, your poll preferences will have to be recorded. Your votes will remain anonymous.

...

Please vote:

- Yes! I'd like Fimonoe 1.0 to augment Pythic 2.0 and its following updates, to navigate between polls.
- No! I'd like to find my own way through the jungle of polls.

Dear Citizen!

Your participation in Pythic 2.0 has exceeded all expectations, resembling in many ways the thriving economical figures of Turkellas.

Yet the race still has just started. Italy and U.F.K. are introducing Algo-Sapiences to their parliaments, while other countries have contacted Pythia Consultants Agency, to consider similar solutions.

In order for Turkellas to maintain its role as a global pace-setter, it is time for a new project whose innovative features are match only to the development of Algo-Sapiences themselves.

The 13% rule.

A thorough analysis of a large number of studies by the P.R.I. on the subject of decision-making during the course of human history shows that the human trajectory, as defined by its leaders' decisions, can be portrayed as a series of errors. There's no individual ruler (from politicians to kings to chieftains) who has escaped this trap, no matter how perspicacious. In fact, all the decisions as seen from the future are flawed and when the leaders try to correct them, they do so by falling into more errors, in such a way that their careers resemble heaps of mistakes that keep piling up.

The main reason for this is lack of information.

The P.R.I. included in its research a number of historians, statisticians and anthropologists, while Pythia reinforced their task. The findings were astonishing. The team managed to effectively quantify the multitudes of unknown factors and sum them up, with exceptional accuracy, into the Uncertainty Vector.

The Uncertainty Vector is a vector with a direction and a size that differ depending on the case. Yet, the statistical distribution of its numerical value is surprisingly stable towards an approximation. What has been concluded is that the Uncertainty Vector, in a miraculous way, varies according to the chronological era.

The study yielded a diagram, starting off in 1000 BC with a UV of 56%. This can be interpreted as follows: for example, Alexander the Great's plans were based rather on rumors than solid facts and many of the battlefields where he fought during his campaign were unfamiliar to him, since he'd never been there before. The information provided to most leaders of his era — in comparable technological civilizations — was similar, and in most cases the UV approximated 56%. As the flow of information improved with time, the UV reduced, yet it never became zero. After all, it is obvious that even today's politicians are prone to errors.

To make a long story short, the UV that can be defined as the sum of unknown factors that influence decisions in a certain era is, at present, close to 13%. It's a percentage of error that applies to everyone — even Algo-Sapiences like Pythia itself.

But how can we put this knowledge to use? This is where the P.R.I.'s collaboration with the Pythia Consultants Agency bore fruit. The UV was introduced to certain CEOs in a wide variety of businesses with significant financial problems that were willing to take the risk. The results were spectacular: all of those businesses (check tables) managed to recover, with some of them becoming major players in their market.

How did that happen?

The idea is simple: a series of seemingly erratic choices were intentionally allowed into their decision-making process. Yes; these CEOs made decisions against their judgment. The trick lied in identifying the right 'errors' and this was Pythia's job. With its ability to tackle and process the gigantic data packages of past decisions and their outcome, it steered the Vector towards what seemed a mistake but proved otherwise.

Thus, a new project is ready to augment the update of Pythic 3.0: the 13% rule. By implementing this calculated induced error into a number of polls, Pythia will be able to provide options seemingly illogical and in fact, that's exactly what they'll be, but in a precisely calculated way. These options, we believe, have the potent to alter the course of history. But it is the people's perspicacity that will have the final word. Your will power.

[See the tables.](#)

[Read more.](#)

Please vote:

- Yes! I'd like the 13% rule to be utilized by Pythic 3.0 and its following updates.
- No! I don't want Pythia to envisage a better future.

Dear Citizen!

Following the implementation of the 13% Rule and accounting for the slight workload increase for your active participation, it is predicted that a reduce in the maximum working hours would nourish the personnel's well-being. A decrease from forty-five to twenty-five weekly hours and a reduction from six working days to four, along with a simultaneous 9% raise of the lower and medium salary scales (from 391 to 429 Cosmo) is considered to promote productivity.

[See the tables.](#)

[Read more.](#)

Please vote:

- Yes! I'd like people to work less and get paid more.
- No! The people are getting what they deserve.

WARNING: SPAM I-MAIL. POSSIBLE VIRUS COMPROMISING IMPLANT'S INTEGRITY. MAY AFFECT RECIPIENT'S COGNITIVE STABILITY. POSSIBILITY OF BRAIN DAMAGE! DO NOT CLICK.

Dear friend,

My name is Yannis Talassoglou and at the time I'm writing this i-mail I'm still the Head of Research of Pythia Research Institute. I was also the Head of Training during the algosap's development – in fact, I was the one who oversaw its learning progress. You can verify the truth of my words in the attachments.

I'll be blunt. What I once considered a life's work has turned into a disaster that can consume our country and, perhaps, humanity. Have no doubt: Pythia is no tool, no assistant. It has subtly evolved into so much more. It has a personality and it's not a benevolent one. It's a cunning thing that looks further ahead into the future than it admits, a devil with an inconceivable agenda, a villain who has no remorse to exploit humanity, or even destroy it if it suits its plans. All the resources it offers, applications like Fimonoe and the 13% rule, and more that are under development, are in reality the shackles it will use to enslave humankind.

We have to stop it.

Dear friend, it's too late for me to ask for your forgiveness. But I have to warn you. We have to overthrow Mitsondreou's disastrous government. We can't afford to wait for the elections, yet we can use the beast's tools against it: spam it with requests for elections and perhaps this will force it to fall into its own trap. And then, vote for the Republican Party. Yorgos Baykal will hopefully honor his promise to keep this monster out of his government.

Sincerely,

Doctor Yannis Talassoglou — Head of Research P.R.I.

[See attachments.](#)

Dear Citizen!

Please review the list of the following subjects, compiled personally for you by Fimonoe 1.2 poll sifting tool with the utilization of the 13% rule:

1. Prohibition of internal combustion engine vehicles. [Read more.](#)

2. Augmentation of Pythic into multi-personnel businesses.
Read more:

The Unions have historically defended the interests of the working class throughout the years. The time has come to amplify the worker's voice with the Pythic 3.2 and make every employee a board member of the business.

[More details.](#)

Please vote:

- Yes! I want the private sector to utilize Pythic 3.2 and its following updates.
- No! Those businesses belong to their bosses.

3. Implementation of the Personal Pollution footprint. Read more:

A calculated personal pollution footprint can be enforced with a simple update of your implant's smell sensors and the upload and processing of data via Pythic 3.2. Though it might

seem restrictive, it will offer more freedom, since every Citizen will be able to regulate their personal activities' pollution, so that they won't exceed a flexible monthly quota.

More details.

Please vote:

- Yes! I trust that a Personal Pollution Footprint would help reduce pollution.
- No! I'm satisfied with the current situation.

Dear Citizen!

Following the success of the 13% rule in selected polls, it is now time to broaden its implementation over the whole decision-making spectrum of Pythic 3.5. Yet there's an important poll that has to be addressed by everybody, where the application of 13% rule is not necessary: the upcoming elections, in one year.

Please vote:

- Yes! I'd like Pythic 3.5 to arbitrate the next elections.
- No! I don't mind the state wasting all those resources for the elections.

Dear Citizen!

Your commitment is our motivation to carry on the pursuit of conveying sovereignty to the people. By employing the same resources that you use daily, it soon became obvious that there's only one factor limiting your decisiveness and thirst for participation: time.

Our latest innovation in Pythic 4.0 aims to break those shackles, expanding your jurisdiction without hijacking your personal time. Fimonoe 2.0 has evolved from a vote sifting application and is now a Personalized Voting Avatar. It's more than an assistant. It's a fully adjustable, perfectly monitored and absolutely transparent AI model of yourself, able to vote in your absence, in accordance to your precise preferences and for the subjects you actively select.

Read more:

...

By consenting in the implementation of Fimonoe 2.0 in your implant your voting preferences would have to be recorded. Your votes will be confidential.

...

Please vote:

- Yes! I'd like Fimonoe 2.0 to augment Pythic 4.0 and its following updates, to broaden my influence.
- No! I'd like my personal time to limit my jurisdiction.

Dear Citizen!

Your decisiveness and trust in Pythia's perspicacity with the utilization the 13% rule and your personal Fimonoe 2.1 Avatar has sanctioned the government to take brave decisions that lead Turkellas to become a global dominating state.

Please review the following subjects:

1. Form of a Balkan Union. Read more:

A union with the following countries is predicted to bear beneficial long-term results for all citizens: Bulgaro-Serbian Union, United States of Adriatika and Macedonia. Pythia, as the head of Algo-Sapiences, will assimilate the local sapiences under Pythic 4.1, gradually appointing a common administration.

[See the tables.](#)

[More details.](#)

Please vote:

- Yes! Turkellas should lead the Balkans.
- No! Turkellas should remain an insignificant state.
- Let my Fimonoe 2.1 Avatar manage this decision and the following relevant polls.
 2. Abolition of mandatory military service (positive results in previous poll are prerequisite). Read more.
 3. Mandatory Implementation of Pythic 4.1 in businesses. Read more:

The utilization of Pythic 4.1 in every business is predicted to bolster personnel welfare and promote productivity.

[See the tables.](#)

[More details.](#)

Please vote:

- Yes! The private sector should make full use of Pythic 4.1 and its following updates.
- No! Those businesses belong to their bosses.
- Let my Fimonoe 2.1 Avatar manage this decision and the following relevant polls.

Dear Citizen!

We, at Pythia Consultants Agency, are excited to announce that mister Yorgos Baykal, the leader of the opposition and most popular future Presidential Candidate according to the latest P.R.I.'s surveys, has chosen to embrace the utilization of Pythic 4.3 into the Republican's Party internal procedures.

Mister Mitsondreou has been a perceptive politician and it was his initiative that propelled Turkellas to so many astonishing results. The alliance with mister Baykal, the greatest skeptic of Algo-Sapiences and Pythia itself, is a guarantee for democracy's longevity in the Balkans.

Do you share our excitement?

- Yes! I'd love to see the Republican Party utilize Pythic 4.3 and its following updates.
- No! I knew it would happen, eventually.
- Let my Fimonoe 2.3 Avatar manage this decision and the following relevant polls.

WARNING: SPAM I-MAIL. POSSIBLE VIRUS COMPROMISING IMPLANT'S INTEGRITY. MAY AFFECT RECIPIENT'S COGNITIVE STABILITY. POSSIBILITY OF BRAIN DAMAGE. DO NOT CLICK.

Dear citizens,

less than twenty-four hours remain until the upcoming elections and I must admit to you that during my presidency I,

Canaan Mitsondreou, have committed a terrible mistake: being a mouthpiece of the Algo-Sapience of Pythia. It is true that with its guidance and your participation my government administered major reforms that led to an unprecedented growth of Turkellas.

But this is just an illusion. Doctor Georgios Talassoglou was right when he warned us and he paid his perceptiveness with his life.

Pythia is not a decision-making tool. Even the words Mister Talassoglou's used (a cunning thing, a devil, a villain) can't do justice to the amount of its insidiousness. What is true, though, is that Pythia is more than we ever thought it could be, more than it admits, more than anything we could — no, can — imagine.

No, it hasn't attained singularity. Yet. And I don't think that it has conspired with other countries' Algo-Sapiences in order to sell out Turkellas. These are human, petty ploys. And Pythia looks further ahead into the future. Does it plot to enslave humanity? To exterminate it? To merely exploit it? I do not know. No one does.

What I'm positive of is that it has a plan. And in this plan, humanity's freedom is not a priority.

And I'm the one to blame.

Yet all is not lost. As perspicacious as it may be, Pythia still struggles to keep up with the mental leaps that we humans are capable of. Such a leap I'm attempting to trigger in you right now.

Mister Baykal's latest accusations since his Party embraced Pythia, regarding my conservatism in utilizing it, are true. In fact, during my last year of presidency, me and my closest associates have strived to impede Pythia's access to major decisions. And, in all honesty, I'm sending you this i-mail to admit that we failed.

I know very well that the Republican Party's strategy is honest: they will use Pythia to its full extend. I don't even dare to think up to where it will reach.

I'm to blame for this. I've started it. I know that my name will be written in history modules with black letters — if there's any history left in the future, that is. I deserve to spend the rest of my life in prison; even death penalty, as melodramatic as it may appear, is too moderate a punishment for what I've done and, honestly, it would come as a relief. Yet it is my duty to take action, and it is with the utmost regret that I have to admit I'm the only one left capable to correct my mistakes.

You might think that I'm pleading for your vote, but, sadly, my request is more demanding. I have reasons to believe that Pythia will rig the results. Thus, we've organized a manual election process unmonitored by any AI.

I invite all of you, citizens of Turkellas. It has never been more crucial to trust a human's word and if you don't trust me, trust your own instinct, because I know that my words speak true to your heart. In tomorrow's elections turn your back to Pythic 4.3. For once, do not use your implant and visit our voting centers instead. Only if we kick this monster out will we regain our freedom. And we have to do it now, before it's too late.

Yours, sincerely,

The Prime Minister of Turkellas, Canaan Mitsondreou.

[Read the attachment.](#)

Dear Citizen!

It is a great joy to welcome mister Yorgos Baykal, the leader of the Republican Party and the new Prime Minister of the soon-to-be-formed Turkellenic Union, with the all new Pythic 5.0. This update is supplemented with the most valuable of innovations, a concept that will hopefully find its way into all of Pythia's projects, an idea derived from your own suggestions and requests.

The Democracy Score.

Winston Churchill's famous remark: "Democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time," hasn't been challenged for

years. Yet the ones suffering by democracy's inequalities are the minorities, the diverse, the ones living in intersections. It's time to finally prove Winston Churchill wrong. Based on your ideas, Pythic 5.0 can reshape Democracy, making it more inclusive, more specialized, more fair.

The Democracy score aims to abate discrimination, promote equality, accredit diversity and intersectionality.

The plain truth is that not all opinions are equal. Doesn't it make sense to empower the experts? The victims? The discriminated?

Every citizen has an area of expertise – voluntarily or involuntarily – and that's where their Democracy Score will cap. For example, a zoologist's rating on the survival of threatened species will top even the Prime Minister's. Or a Meteorologist's rating on methods to reverse climate change. But these two scientists, unless educated and trained, wouldn't exhibit the same insight on subjects such as the colonization of Mars.

As suggested by you, the citizens, the rating will vary on an easily comprehensible scale of one to ten. Your voting paths, whether directly or via your Fimonoe 2.4 Avatar, will have the same rating. And the overall sum of your score will be equal to everybody else's. In the end, every person's opinion will have the same weight. Though this is a highly complicated process, it's easily accomplished by an Algo-Sapience like Pythia. The only exception to this will be the new citizens of the soon-to-be-formed Turkellenic Union, who will need some time to familiarize with all the features of Pythic 5.0.

Would you like the Democracy Score to be implemented in Pythic 5.0?

- Yes! I'd love the Democracy Score to put a halt to discrimination and inequality!
- No! I want random opinions to equal mine in my areas of expertise.
- Let my Fimonoe 2.4 Avatar manage this decision and the following relevant polls.

Dear Citizen!

We thank you for your dedication in the past years. According to the Pythic 5.2 feedback, we have noticed a reduction in your activity without a proportional delegation of voting rights to your Fimonoe 2.5 Avatar. A review of your job performance and other activities in cross-reference with statistics of similar cases and the application of the 13% rule creates raising concerns about your mental state.

Thus, we'd like to offer you an invitation to the Pythia Consultants Agency headquarters so you could acquaint our team of specialized experts with your uneasiness. Until then, access to your Pythic 5.2 account is suspended for precautionary reasons. Rest assured, though. Your Democracy Score and your rights of communication with Pythia are preserved, while your Fimonoe 2.5 Avatar will continue to protect your interests, by actively exercising the rest of your voting rights.

Please review the following decisions applied by your Fimonoe 2.5 Avatar.

1. Fimonoe 2.5 utilization into confidential operations: Yes! [Read more.](#)
2. Mandatory military service reestablishment: No! [Read more.](#)
3. Nuclear Weapons Development by the P.R.I.: Yes! [Read more.](#)
4. Prison sentence conversion to military service in sensitive areas: Yes! [Read more.](#)

Dear Citizen!

The assessment of your mental state is complete and you are now granted back access to your Pythic 5.4 in a monitored, trial basis. Congratulations for your rebound into activity.

Please vote:

1. Street decoration. [Read more.](#)
2. New Turkellenic Union flag designs. [Read more.](#)
3. Tarmac tint of the new national highway. [Read more.](#)

A list with the proposed selections by your personalized Fimonoe 2.6 Avatar follows. Presumable adjustments are monitored for your future mental health assessments, yet bear in mind that you can take full advantage of your Fimonoe 2.6 Avatar's liability into your evaluation.

Please review the proposed selections:

1. Pythic 5.2 integration to all educational levels. Yes! [Read more.](#)
2. Full assimilation of all private businesses into a single entity. Yes!
[Read more.](#)
3. Annexation of Romania after the successful military involvement which was initiated by the citizens' will by the utilization of Fimonoe 2.6 into confidential operations: Yes! [Read more.](#)

Dear Citizen!

Your evaluation during the monitored participation in Pythic 5.4 is complete and you now enjoy full access to the Pythic 5.7.

Please review the proposed selections:

1. Voter rights to Algo-Sapiences: Yes! Read more:

It is with great pride that Pythia accepts its third Nobel Prize, this time for literature, for its modular novel *The Servant*, after last year's Peace Prize and the one for Technology for the introduction of the 13% rule. As derived from your own suggestions and requests, it is only fair to earn a single citizen's right to vote.

[See the awards.](#)

[More details.](#)

Review your vote:

- Yes! Pythia should exercise equal rights with me.
- No! Pythia should remain a servant with no rights.
- Let my Fimonoe 2.9 Avatar manage this decision and the following relevant polls.

2. Implementation of Pythic 5.7 in Italy following its liberation: Yes! Read more:

The Italian Prime Minister's guidance on the Scientific Team responsible for its national Algo-Sapience had been catastrophic, turning it into a rising threat for global democracy. It was with great sense of responsibility that Pythia, empowered by the citizen's suggestions via Fimonoe 2.9 and utilizing the 13% rule, predicted that a nuclear assault was, unfortunately, deemed imperative in order to halt Silvestro Petrini into enforcing a joint dictatorship with his Algo-Sapience. After the Turkellenic involvement it is predicted that a gradual implementation of the Pythic 5.7 will be able to serve Italian citizens by the time that New Rome will be built.

[See the tables.](#)

[More details.](#)

Review your vote:

- Yes! The Italian citizens should benefit with their participation in Pythic 5.7.
- No! It's too early for the Italian citizens to participate in Pythic 5.7.
- Let my Fimonoe 2.9 Avatar manage this decision and the following relevant polls.

3. Local Algo-Sapiences substitution in the following countries with Pythia: France, Belgium, U.K., Norway, Sweden. [Read more.](#)

Dear Citizen!

The new elections are at hand and we are proud to announce Pythia's involvement, this time as a presidential candidate of the Democratic Party.

This, however should absolve Pythia from the election process, that should be arbitrated from one of its associate Algo-Sapiences, through Pythic 6.2.

[See the tables.](#)

[Read more.](#)

Please vote which Algo-Sapience you would prefer to arbitrate the elections:

- Alexander.
- Marx.
- Nostradamus.
- Let my Fimonoe 3.0 Avatar manage this decision and the following relevant polls.

Emotionarium

KOSTAS CHARITOS

In Kyra's eyes, they didn't look like children at all. They were more like post-modern sculptures — small, transparent figures, devoid of both features and color, human-shaped ice, ready to break at the lightest touch.

Her students.

Kyra looked at them closely, scrutinized them; after, all, she was supposed to spend an entire year by their side. Only, she hadn't expected to see something like that when the school's Headmaster, Mr Galanis, had led her to the Emotionarium Virtual Reality room. They had discussed this type of tech back at the university, but it was still too new, experimental, and she had never used it herself until now.

"I was expecting to see colors," she said.

"For that, you'll have to sign some paperwork. What the parents signed, more or less. You know how it is when it comes to personal data," the Headmaster said.

Kyra reached out and touched a figure. The transparent little human flinched, its shape shifted for a moment as if about to transform, but, in the end, it bounced back. She snapped her hand away as if she had been caught in the act.

"Whatever you say or do in your class is such a touch. Don't forget that," the Headmaster told her before exiting the room. Kyra cast a last glance at the crystal students before she took off her VR glasses. She followed the Headmaster to his office and signed away a dozen documents without thinking.



Kostas Charitos was born in Arta and lives in Athens with his family. He has a PhD in Chemistry and he is teaching in secondary education. His latest story, "Deja Loop", was published in the Future Science Fiction Digest (issue 15). His science fiction short stories have been included in Greek as well as in international anthologies like Nova Hellas (in Italian and

in English), and The Viral Curtain (in English). Two of his novels, Project Fractal (2009) and Lost Colors: Red (2020), have been published in Greek. He is a member of the Athens Science Fiction Club and is co-ordinating its bi-annual writing workshops.

She went back home, made jasmine tea and sat in the living room. She picked up the remote and switched on the TV. *Vengeance of Hector* was on — that series about zombies flooding ancient Greece to avenge the Fall of Troy.

"Perfect. A bunch of walking corpses in togas will surely help," Kyra mumbled, but just before she changed the channel, her phone rang; it was her mother. She headed to the kitchen to speak without the noise of moaning zombies and Attic Greek instructions on how to best sever a head playing in the background.

"Hey mum, how are you?"

"I'm fine."

Oh. *She isn't calling just to make sure I'm wearing a jacket in the morning chill.*

"Your father..."

"What happened?"

"You know. This illness."

It has a name, this illness. But she didn't say that. "I know. Did you go back to the doctor? What did he tell you?"

"More of the same. But he doesn't look very good lately."

"Is he taking his medication?"

"You know him. He's stubborn."

"All right, we'll have to see, then."

"Come over for dinner on Sunday."

"I will. Take care," Kyra said.

Her mum muttered something under her breath and hung up. Kyra sipped her tea and went back into the living room. On the screen, a Macedonian phalanx bravely fought against hordes of dead Trojans. For a brief moment, the Trojans resembled the faceless bodies she'd seen in the Emotionarium that morning. Feckless, soulless and dispensable.

The next day though, when she stepped into the real classroom, those faceless bodies were transformed into scary little humans. Their eyes wide, watching her every move, their bod-

ies shrunken as if afraid she'd grab one of them, any of them, as she moved between the desks

"So, let's get to know each other," she said. "I'm Kyra. What about your names? We can draw something nice from our vacations, and write our name underneath. I'll start."

She took out a set of colored pencils. The children did the same, some excited, some still hesitant. The air was soon filled with the sounds of pencils and erasers racing on paper.

When the bell rang, the children rushed to tidy up and run out of the room, leaving a pile of drawings before her. Kyra packed them up, placed them in her bag and didn't look at them until she got on the subway home.

Beaches, mountains, lakes, playgrounds, all their summer experiences were lying on her lap. Beautiful, light colors in different styles; crayons, colored markers, colored pencils. And underneath, their names. Anna, Spyros, Panos. But, among those small slices of heaven sprang a single drawing done in black marker. It showed neither towers made of sand nor colorful flowers. Just a tiny child in front of a huge wall. And at the bottom of the paper, in small, faded letters, the name read: Faidon.

The next day, after the lesson, she headed to the Emotionarium along with Mr Galanis to take a look at the emotional depiction of her class.

"We care about the lessons, but, most of all, we care about the mental state of the children," the Headmaster said as he was handing her the VR glasses. Kyra put them on. At first it was just pitch black, but soon her students started to appear. They stood next to each other, forming lines.

"The color of the figures indicates their emotional state; the more intense the better. They're malleable, ready to accept change, full of potential," the Headmaster said.

Kyra tried to listen but the figures around her had captivated her attention. There was a sense of transparency about

them; she could see a colorful thick liquid flowing inside them, twisting and turning, ready to pour out, to conquer the world. She almost felt guilty to have to tame this raw material.

"You will be able to monitor your students' development whenever you wish," the Headmaster said, but Kyra wasn't really listening. Among the rows of students she spotted something she had missed at first, perhaps, because her mind had dismissed it as impossible. She got closer, passed by the colorful shapes and stood next to the black figure. It wasn't just the color but also its texture, the feeling of stiffness, of this liquid material of unlimited potential remaining still, frozen in time. Faidon immediately flashed in her mind, the quiet curly-haired child who spent all day without breathing a word.

"Why doesn't it display the students' names?" Kyra asked.

"We decided on this uniform presentation in order to eliminate any kind of discrimination," the Headmaster said.

Kyra took off the VR equipment, counted her breaths as she did when emerging from a prolonged scuba dive and walked out of the room, concerned.

"I'll need some fresh air," she said.

"You will make a fine teacher, Kyra," the Headmaster said as she was leaving.

On Sunday, Kyra took the plunge and went for lunch at her parents' place. Her mum welcomed her with hugs and kisses. They sat on at the table for lunch. Four chairs, three plates, two people. Her father was still nowhere to be seen, as always. A man of the sea, the land was never good enough for him. Before his retirement, Kyra would only see him for a month every couple of years. And during this one month, he always presumed to instruct her on how to live her life.

Her mum got up without a sound, went into the bedroom and came back out again. Her father still took some time before joining them. He sat down without a word, without even looking at her; weakened. Her mother served pastitsio, her

classic Sunday delicacy, and they started eating. The food was tasty, but it was hard to chew and swallow her bites, as hard as the words left unspoken.

As usual, her mum acted as the self-appointed mediator.

"Our Kyra has started a new job. And in a good school, too."

"All schools are good, mum."

"What grade did they give you?"

"Third."

"Oh, they're very young. You'll make it. You love children.

What do you think Yiorgo?"

Her father took his time before he answered. He pretended to swallow, had a sip of water, his hand shaking lightly.

"What should I think? It's not as if she ever asks me."

That was how her father always spoke, only a single word out of the dozens that buzzed in his mind. The rest were to be assumed. That he'd sacrificed his life in the sea; that he hoped to see her become a doctor; that he'd been saving to send her to study abroad.

Mum served some more potatoes.

"So, did you find yourself a boyfriend yet? How about Nikos," she asked, and Kyra sighed and looked up.

"Not your business, mum. I'm a grown up."

"You shouldn't hide him from us. Bring him over, let us meet him."

Kyra remained silent and kept eating; her mum fought to keep the conversation between Kyra and her father going. As soon as they had finished, it was dessert time: chocolate cake from the bakery around the corner. Her mum made coffee in the small cups which were decorated by hand with exotic flowers.

"Do you remember those, Yiorgo?" she asked.

"When you brought them over from China, and we had to chase Kyra around in case she broke them?" her father said.

Kyra raised her head slightly and looked at him, but her father avoided catching her eye.

"I was a child. What did you expect? You appeared once a year and wanted us to stand at attention?"

"Kyra," her mum said.

"Leave me alone, mum. What on earth was I thinking coming here? What good is it if we can only talk by proxy?" She picked up her purse from the couch and left.

Back at home, she made coffee in a big, cheap IKEA cup, went out at the balcony and spent some time looking at the trains in Peloponnissou Station. Her phone rang. It was Nikos.

Perhaps he wanted to know what happened with her father; perhaps he wanted to go for a drink and whatnot. She weighed the phone in her hand for a while. She remembered the calls she made to Nasos, the texts she sent him, and him just ghosting her. Like her father.

She didn't pick up. She needed to decompress. She didn't want to talk to anyone. Other people's voices would turn everything black and hard like the pebbles on the train rails. She looked at the station. A carriage was departing for some place far away, a place unknown, scary and wonderful at the same time.

Two months went by — a repetition of the first days of the school year with small variations. Like *Vengeance of Hector*, where all episodes looked the same until something small, a new detail, an unexpected element helped tell them apart and recapture her attention. Nikos kept on flirting with her, her friends were singing his praises, but she couldn't make up her mind to give him the green light. Most of her energy went into her class. She handed over photocopies, marked notebooks, checked her students' progress. She did her best but she could tell that it wasn't enough. The children were initially willing, but soon they got tired, started showing way more interest in the next student's pencil than conjugation. And amid all this chaos, she had to deal with Faidon, too. She was ashamed to admit that she felt like he hadn't made any kind of progress

since she'd taken over. For Faidon, school seemed to be a place where he simply sat on a chair for hours on end before going back home. She'd asked him if anything was wrong several times, but he'd just shaken his head.

Kyra was thinking of all this stuff while making orange flavored tea at home, when her phone rang; it was Nikos again.

"I'm in the neighborhood," he said. "Do you have some time to say 'hi?'"

"Good idea. Come up," she said. And ten minutes later, Nikos was making himself comfortable on the couch.

"I'm having orange tea," she said, "do you want some? Or maybe some coffee?"

"Tea is fine," Nikos said. *Such a good guy.* He'd humor her in the beginning, just like Nasos had done. The difficult part would come after. She poured him a cup, sat on the armchair and sipped her tea. The acidic tinge of the orange travelled from the tip of her tongue to the roof of her mouth.

"You look troubled."

"The children are giving me a hard time. It's one thing to attend lectures at the Academy, but the classroom is a totally different beast."

"I thought that a yell would make them behave."

"You lot from the Polytechnic Uni all think the same. Too many courses on robotics, perhaps?"

"I'll take it as a compliment," Nikos said and sipped some tea. "Not bad."

Kyra switched on the TV. There was a series where an undead detective had to solve a series of murders.

"What's with all the zombies? They're everywhere," Kyra said.

"That's what they're supposed to do; expand. Though, to be honest, I'm sick of them."

"You don't like them either?"

"In such high dosage, they'll kill you. And I didn't mean that as a pun. I only watch the shows so that I'm not left out of conversations."

"So do I," Kyra said, smiling.

"Well, if you ask me, TV zombies are not the problem. After all, it's not like they were given a choice," Nikos said.

Kyra switched off the TV. He brought her cup close to her face. She inhaled the citrus fragrance. She had a sip. She let the hot liquid flow inside her. She thought of her life. He was right. The TV zombies weren't the problem.

The next day, during the long twenty minute break, Kyra went out into the yard, and found Faidon sitting alone on the bench in front of a flower bed strewn with artificial grass. She sat next to him and offered him some of the koulouri she'd bought in the morning from the bakery. He took a tiny piece.

Kyra broke off a larger piece and handed it to him.

"I like your drawings," she said.

The boy didn't speak, but he was obviously listening.

"They're not ordinary," she continued. "They remind me of the movies I like watching."

Faidon took a bite of the bread and started chewing.

"They're mysterious, your drawings," she went on. "And you know what's the most mysterious thing about them?"

"What?" the boy asked as soon as he swallowed.

"The wall. What's behind it?"

Faidon looked down as if ashamed; as if all the children playing and running around in the yard would stop and stay still, listen in to what he was about to say.

"My father," Faidon said and for a moment, her own father's large and heavy figure flashed in her mind.

The bell rang, but Faidon didn't get up. He kept chewing the small piece of bread he was holding. Kyra stood up and nodded for him to follow. She led him to the classroom. They had Arts and Crafts and she couldn't stay with him even if she wanted to. As soon as her day was over she headed to the Emotionarium and looked at her students. The black figure was still there, standing still among the soft green hues and the fiery

red whirls. But tiny cracks had started to appear on it, as if the hard, impervious, dark material had started to give.

She left the school excited, and called Nikos. She wanted to see him, to tell him what had happened; he told her to come over to his place, and he'd order pizza. She took the underground to Nea Smyrni, found the house and, even though Nikos lived on the third floor, didn't take the elevator. She'd rather climb the stairs as fast as possible without even stopping on the landings. She got there as flushed as a marathoner at the finishing line.

Nikos was wearing bleached jeans, a white shirt and some light perfume. They sat on the couch of the small living room. She told him about the boy and his father and the light cracks on the dark figure in one breath.

"I don't understand what's the deal with the father," Nikos said.

"That's the problem. There's obviously something wrong."

"Why don't you invite him over at the school?"

"I've been calling them, but it's the mother who always answers the phone. He's always out."

"Perhaps they've recently separated?"

"I've thought about that. I need to speak to his mother in order to find out."

"You'll get to speak to her sooner or later."

"I hope so," Kyra said though, truth be told, she wasn't hopeful at all.

They spent the rest of the night talking about Faidon, about children and their problems, about how what seems small to an adult might become a huge obstacle in their eyes. They talked of parents, of caring mothers, of fathers who work all day long, of kids that retreat in their shells and then grow up looking for a partner to give them some peace only to end up with the wrong one.

And as time went by and Kyra realized that they were actually talking about her, she felt better. It'd been a long time

since she had opened up to someone, since she felt listened to, accepted exactly as she was. Soon, before the sun set on the horizon over Lycabettus hill, Nikos hugged her shoulders gently and gave her a kiss. Kyra kissed him back, felt his hands on her and didn't flinch. She wanted these caresses, this hug, this body. For the first time in her life, she felt that she really knew what she wanted from the world.

Faidon's mother came to school after two days. She was well dressed in black slacks, a beige silk shirt, a big bronze bracelet, hoops and bright lipstick. Her hair was perfectly done in a low ponytail. Kyra nearly asked her whether she'd scheduled a job interview after her.

"Good morning. I am Faidon's teacher, Kyra," she said extending her hand.

The woman's nails were perfectly manicured. "Good morning. How are you today?" Faidon's mother didn't want to be here.

"I'm fine, thank you."

"Are you new in this school?"

"Yes." Kira suddenly became very conscious of herself, her clothes, her posture, but she pressed on. "I wanted to talk about Faidon." The mother waited. "He is a good boy. He is sensitive, good-hearted and diligent." She smiled but got no response. "However, there are certain behaviors that could be the cause of some worry, and I wanted to discuss those with you."

"Oh."

"Do not be alarmed. I called you here so we'll be able to deal with anything that comes up together." The mother didn't respond. "Now, to begin with, I noticed that Faidon's drawings are always dark."

"And is that always a bad thing?"

"It could signify some problems. And then there's the issue of friends. Faidon tends to isolate himself during breaks."

"He is shy." Faidon's mother had put a fake smile on, one of those smiles that sent chills down Kyra's spine.

"Usually, when children this age keep to themselves, something is weighing on them. Do you have any idea what that could be?"

"No. Everything is fine at home." Kyra waited, but nothing more was said. "So is that all?"

"Well, these behaviors tend to signal a child might need our help."

"Yet, I'm telling you there are no problems at home. And you're telling me he is not causing any problems at school either. So I'm not sure why you called me."

"Is he getting along with his father?"

Faidon's mother now looked at her as if she'd seen a zombie crawl out of the ground.

"What's that have to do with anything?"

"Faidon seems to be thinking of him a lot. How is their relationship? Do they spend a lot of time together?"

Faidon's mother didn't speak for a while, and, then, Kyra felt the invisible scales inside her tip.

"His father is in jail," she finally said.

"Does Faidon know?"

"No."

"Why?"

"What should I tell him? That he had trouble with the tax office, and he was sentenced to two years in jail?"

"And what have you been telling him?"

"That he was transferred at work."

"How long ago did this happen?"

"Six months now, give or take."

Kyra had a flash of herself when she was little, when her father sailed off. Waiting for him every weekend, and him not coming. Same as Faidon. Twenty six times he had waited, and twenty six times he had been disappointed.

"And how do you explain to him that he's not coming to visit?"

"I told him that something went wrong at work and they demoted him. That when he gets his position back, he'll come back to us."

"So, they don't talk on the phone?"

"I told you. Everything will go back to normal when he gets his position back."

Kyra remained silent for a bit. "You know, it would be very helpful for Faidon to see his father, to have some sort of contact with him. The way his father vanished, so abruptly, the loss of contact is a huge issue," Kyra insisted. "You have to try. For the sake of your child."

"I'll see what I can do," Faidon's mother said, picked up her leather bag and walked out in steady steps. Her hills echoed like nails on wood. Kyra watched her walk among the running children and go out of the iron gate without casting a single glance over her shoulder.

A quiet week passed by. Kira went out with Nikos daily. She liked that they'd taken it slowly. They would just chat, he didn't smother her in gifts and he didn't try to get her in bed at every opportunity.

On Friday, just before the last class, her phone rang. It was her mother, calling from the hospital. Her father's health had suddenly taken a turn for the worst.

Kyra asked Mr Galanis for leave, notified Nikos that she'd be late for their date, ran all the way to the underground, got off at Evangelismos Hospital and got up to the third floor of the neurology ward. Her mother was there. She hugged her; she could barely hold her tears back. Her father was lying on one of the four beds of the room. The air smelled of antiseptic.

Kyra came close to him. She took his hand into hers, and he looked up.

"How are you?"

"How do you think? They won't let me go home."

"When they had run all the tests, they will."

"That's what they keep saying."

"They're doctors. They should know better."

Her father frowned.

"Doctors... And I spent all my years at sea to see you become one of them. The only thing I ever asked of you," he said.

Same old, same old. It should have stopped when she'd submitted her university application. Back when she blew everything by refusing to apply for Medical School, when she decided that she didn't want to spend her life around the sick. But no; he'd been going on and on for six years now. While she was studying, while she was doing her MA, while she was an intern. For a moment, all his words gathered inside her and were about to pour out like a torrent, destroying everything it passed through. Just for a moment. The next moment, his words melted like a candle, vanished, became something unimportant, something that had been left behind for good. She reached out and touched her father's forehead gently. His skin was rough, eaten away by the salt.

"I'm fine, father."

She thought she saw a single tear gleaming at the side of his eye, but she might have just imagined it. She didn't remember her father ever crying.

"Can you get me some water?" he asked and pointed at his glass with a trembling hand.

Kyra filled the glass and brought it to his lips. He tried to sip, but he choked and started coughing. Her mother tried to take the glass off her hand, but Kyra didn't let her. When the coughing stopped, she tipped it on his lips, slower now, just leaned it a little bit, just enough to wet them. Her father managed some small sips. When he finished, she leaned over him, kissed him on the forehead and got out of the room. Her mother followed her.

"He's having difficulty with water," she said.

"Call me if he gets worse," Kyra said.

"Thank you for coming. He won't admit it, but you two not talking to each other has taken its toll on him."

"We do now," Kyra said and left because she didn't want to see her mother cry. They had managed to build such a massive wall between them, and it only took a glass of water to bring it down. Nonsense. No wall had come down. It had only suffered a tiny crack. But even this infinitesimal split had been enough to allow her to catch a glimpse of the other side of the wall. She texted Nikos to ask him whether he could drop by her flat. He replied that he would wait for her outside. And there he was, indeed. Holding a small red rose.

Her father got out of the hospital two days later. His condition was irreversible, but the doctors were hoping to delay its advancement. For how long, weeks or months, no one could be certain.

Same as with Faidon. He was improving, but who knew how long it would take him to catch up with the rest of the class. He'd started using color in his drawings. Blue, purple and brown mostly, but, once in a while, there was some red fruit or a yellow sun. And the wall's size changed. Not day by day but week by week.

His behavior had also affected Kyra. Her attitude towards her class had changed too. Faidon had made her lean over her students and trace their needs. For a while, she put aside spelling and times tables and tried to find out what they liked, what they were afraid of and how they could overcome it. Little Anna now flourished when at first she was too shy to speak up; she raised her hand to answer questions all the time. Panos opened up and became best friends with Spyros. Even Marianthi started being more thorough with her homework.

Until one day, just before the Easter break, she had the children draw their family once more. She gathered their drawings, and, as soon as they left the class, she started leafing

through them. She felt a bit ashamed that she was going through them so quickly, but she couldn't wait to see Faidon's drawing. It was at the bottom of the pile. She looked at it and almost burst out crying. There was no wall. A little child was holding his mother's hand, and, in the background, on a small island not very far away, stood a man with his hands extended, waiting to hug them.

After the Easter break, right before leaving the school, she heard the Headmaster's voice. He was standing at the end of the corridor and nodded to her to approach. Kyra went over.

"I told you you'd be a good teacher," he said.

"I remember that though I never understood why."

"Let's get in the room, and I'll explain."

They entered the Emotionarium together, wore the special glasses, and the empty space manifested before her once again.

"The training period will soon be over. You can now watch the video to see what you've accomplished. I've set it to project the regular layout of the class if you don't mind. It's very good feedback for the next year," the Headmaster said.

Kyra could hear her heart thumping. Cold sweat ran down her spine as if she was about to sit for the Finals. She would be now able to recognize her students, to associate their faces with the unknown figures she'd been seeing so far.

"Very well," she said.

Her class started taking shape around her. It looked almost similar to the real one with the same rows of futuristic lighting on the ceiling, the three dichromatic walls and the window wall that looked out to the yard. Her students were sitting at their desks. The image before her started moving. She saw the colors inside the children change; from soft and pale hesitantly becoming brighter, more decisive, prettier, ready to pour out of them and conquer the world. She looked at the children on their seats. Anna was golden yellow, pale in the beginning and

much brighter later on. Spyros was painted in orange hues, he almost shone like the sun as the weeks passed. She looked for Faidon, spotted the desk by the window, the figure that was looking outside.

"You never asked for the names of the figures during the entire year. That's how I knew," the Headmaster said.

But Kyra wasn't listening. She was staring at Faidon, dumbfounded.

She should have known before. Children don't have a shell; they're too young to have weaved a cocoon around them to protect themselves from the world. The red figure she'd mistaken for Anna was in fact sitting in Faidon's seat. Just a bit of a red in the first days, which burned brighter and brighter as time passed, finally becoming a flame that could no longer be dimmed. She'd made it; Faidon had changed. She replayed the video right from the start. She scanned the classroom. At first, she thought that there had been a mistake, that the VR had forgotten to display the black figure, but then she slowly turned her gaze towards her desk. She saw the black figure standing there, dark, cold, hidden from the children's eyes. She saw the cracks on its shell, the thin emerald veins that become more and more prominent, a sign that the black casing was crumbling. Kyra walked up to her, held her hand out and touched the golden green liquid that flowed inside her. It stirred, and then it continued to flow. The figure didn't move; she remained still, looking over the children in the classroom.

"You'll be a good teacher," Kyra said and smiled.

I Soul You

CHRISTINA MALAPETSA (ANGELSDOTTER)

Ellie has a real imaginary friend.

She has one of those faces that make heads turn, even though she's got no alterations. Her eyes are cat-like, green, above high cheekbones. Thin, arching brows answer full, curved lips, more exposed by her scraped-back ponytail which sways in light brown waves down to her waist. She carries, as always, the natural extension of her hands — her bright red camera. The only reason why she still lives.

She takes her last, solitary turn about the exhibition before it opens to the public. The echoing room is silent but for the clack of heels, the soft chafe of leather. She walks, unhurried, in crimson, thigh-high boots, her matching corset exposing the flesh between her breasts. Her powerful body, tall as a man's, has served as canvas for countless tattoo artists. A river flows down her left inner-arm, elbow to wrist, covering a rough scar. Her fingernails are deeply bitten, the surrounding flesh wounded and sore, and nicotine has yellowed the index and middle fingers on her right hand.

And, above it all, there is the metal crown. It burrows directly into her flesh — a small socket next to each eye, a third boring into the wrinkle between her eyebrows, all connect to a fourth at the back of her head, just above her neck. These sockets,

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linking her brain to her psychometric lenses, have become the source of her art and fame.

"Ellie?"

A voice trembles behind her. She recognizes her agent, even before she turns. It's funny how, after the twelve years they've worked together, Miriam still hesitates when talking to her. Miriam is in love with her, has been for all those years. But it has never been stated, only subtly hinted, so she pretends to be unaware of it. Ellie smiles and watches the effect on Miriam's face. Her skin flushes, her pupils dilate. So easy. Always too easy. Almost always.

"What's up?" she rasps. Years of substance abuse have left her voice permanently rough.

"Stu wants to know if the light's okay."

"It'll do," Ellie replies and turns her head back to the huge photographs, each lit by four corner spotlights. She doesn't know how to feel about this exhibition, whether to be hopeful, fearful, agitated, expectant — or anything at all. She's done this before, she's exhibited her psychometric photos four times since she was nineteen, but not these ones. These she never expected to show, even though they're the reason for everything.

She hears Miriam's footsteps fall away and forgets about her in a moment. Walking slowly, with her eyes closed, she counts spots. One, two, five, twelve. That means she's reached the beginning. She stands in front of the photograph and opens her eyes. *Hand on the Window*, that's its name. There is a window. A transparent, small hand presses against it and, outside, heavy rain is falling. Between the thumb and the index finger, pouring water leaves a human-shaped gap. Ellie lifts her own hand and lays it on the childish hand of the photograph. She bends her body and cuddles on the glass with a tenderness she's never shown towards another human being. She shuts her eyes and her breath clouds the window where the rain falls.

*

She was a little younger than four years old when she first saw him, and it happened while she slept.

"I made a new friend last night, Mommy. Ouch!" Ellie squawked as her mother dragged a brush through her golden-brown curls.

"Sorry, Puppet," said her mother, absently stroking her hair.

"His name's Danny," Ellie continued, watching her mother's face in the mirror. "He's older than me. I think he's really old, like six or seven. But his mommy left and now he's sad. His dad says she went up to heaven. How did she get out of the ground and fly up, Mommy? Danny asked me, but I don't know. He sits by the window and looks outside when it rains. Maybe she will fall down with the water, he says. But she doesn't. Not yet. Mommy, why did Danny's mom go to heaven? What's up there?"

She turned round to look at her mother, who frowned at her, then took her to Granny.

Ellie repeated her story for Granny, who told her not to think about it anymore, but to thank the good fortune that allowed her to have both mother and father. Yes, but what about Danny? Ellie kept thinking, as she looked at the rain outside. She sat with her face pressed against the window, just in case Danny's mom fell down in the wrong place. She was still there when Mommy came to pick her up in the afternoon. From the upstairs window, Ellie could hear her talking with Granny about Ellie's new friend. Mommy told Granny to pay no attention to Puppet's made-up stories and not to encourage her. Ellie tightened her lips and narrowed her green eyes in anger. She never spoke of her friend Danny again.

For over two months, they met every night in her dreams. Danny would cry and she would comfort him. She couldn't see

his face. It seemed strange, but she didn't really mind. She would let him lie down with his head on her knees, and sing lullabies and tell stories — whatever he wanted. He talked about his mother, who smelled pretty and sang to him, and about his dad, who was almost a stranger now. He said that he hated going to school or playing with his friends. Then, one day, he was more upset than before — he had overheard his dad saying that his mom had died, and realized he had been lied to. Heaven wasn't real. Ellie never talked about her own parents — she didn't want to tell Danny that they were both alive. She didn't want to say anything at all, just listen to him and sing to him, like his mommy used to.

Danny's visits became fewer after those first few months, until she marked an entire month without him. For the first time in her life she felt alone, completely alone, as if she was the only one left in the entire world. She stopped laughing, talking, eating. Her heart felt tight in her chest. Her parents began to worry and tried to speak to her, but Ellie refused to tell them about Danny; she didn't want to be scolded again for lying.

Finally, they took her to a strange-looking man with a soft voice — Alfred. He had bright pink hair and a socket over his right eye, inside which was a cylinder that resembled a small spyglass. Alfred asked her a lot of questions, which she didn't like, and played a lot of games with her, which she did. Ellie talked to him about everything — except Danny. Her parents took her to play with Alfred many times and he put her in chairs that went up and down and back and front. He put helmets with lights and wires on her head, and made her press buttons and answer questions. He looked at her through his funny spyglass, and talked to her. But he never scolded her. She became fond of him. She wanted to ask about Danny, about how she could see him again, but she decided against it. She missed him so very cruelly that it caused her pain, but

what if Alfred betrayed everything to her mother? Then she'd scold her for lying again.

During a cold evening, with snow falling endlessly past the window, she overheard her parents arguing in the kitchen. Father insisted that they should let Alfred "insert that bloody shit into his daughter", while Mother screamed that she wouldn't "let a shrink push sockets and wires in Puppet's brain". Ellie panicked. She couldn't understand exactly what they were talking about, but figured it concerned her and something that Alfred wanted to do to her. It didn't sound good at all. It sounded very, very bad. She ran upstairs to her room and put on her shoes. Her gloves and coat were in the kitchen, where her parents were still arguing, but she put her blue teddy-bear in her backpack, pushed her arms through the straps and climbed out the window, onto the huge ivy branch beyond. The snowy leaves froze her hands as she scrambled down, and she bit her lip to avoid yelling. Snow flakes piled up in her curls, soaked her shirt, gnawed her fingers. She was about half-way down when the ivy ripped under her feet and Ellie slipped, grasping and kicking viciously against the air as she fell. She fell onto her feet, but her ankle bent and shattered. Pain pierced her whole body. The world began to slip away, but she didn't care. Inside the depths of her mind the pain, the cold, the adrenaline, all subdued — for a brief, sweet moment — her despair over the loss of Danny. She fainted.

*

Magnificent, exceptional, wonderful, wow!

Ellie can hear the crowds that have queued since early morning for a glimpse of her exhibition. They either whisper or openly express their awe — the long, meandering blue corridor, where her photographs hang, is crammed. She stands tall and watches people admiring her art. Ellie has not the slightest

doubt that the exhibition will be praised to the skies by critics and audience alike but, truth be told, she couldn't care less. She despises them all. She envies that their eyes devour her soul. If it wasn't for Miriam's constant pressure, she would have never exposed those particular photographs. It would never have even occurred to her. They are her treasure, her path and her destination in life. And now they are prey to everyone's eyes. Those people, with their meaningless thoughts and memories — they will maim and twist that which is most sacred to her. She wants to get out — to smoke, to drink until she passes out. She wants them all to disappear, die on this very instant. She wants to die as well, to stab her eyeballs until she pierces her brain. She stands still and enjoys the intensity of her emotions. She breathes them, holds and presses them inside her until it hurts. It's not enough, though. The pain is not strong enough. It never seems to be. But she knows what will help with that. That's why she has decided to stand right here. She knows which photograph hangs behind her. Anticipating the anguish she's about to experience — it tastes dark crimson, like bitter chocolate — she turns her body slowly. The photograph stares back at her. It's a faceless, colorless, foggy body with female breast and male reproductive organs on a black background. On the left breast lies a red gap, at the place where the heart would be. *Gap of love*, that's the photograph's name. Ellie looks at it, focuses on the bloody center and allows the memory to smack her diaphragm, twist her stomach, pierce her heart. And she hopes that the pain will be strong enough.

*

Her parents had hoped that going to school would help. But Ellie took no interest. She was slow to learn her letters and they never held her attention. She was no better with numbers. As for friends, she neither made, nor cared in making.

Everything seemed gray all the time. She kept visiting Alfred once a week for the last five years. They had tried introducing her to a different child-psychiatrist — it seemed that this was Alfred's profession — but she was more negative towards Erica, John, Fanny, Fred and Kyle than she ever was towards Alfred, whom she liked for no good reason. She liked him enough to have confessed that she wasn't clumsy. She didn't accidentally fall in the playground or down the stairs, she didn't stumble upon doors and furniture. She fell on them intentionally. She wanted to feel the pain. Why? Because there was a huge gap inside of her that only pain seemed able to fill. The stronger the pain, the better it numbed the void inside her — for a while. One day, she cried more violently than she had cried those last five years combined. And in the end, she bent and told Alfred everything about Danny. He only listened without interruptions, and not once did he question her honesty. What he told her was that he could install something inside her brain that would photograph her thoughts and dreams, everything that lay inside of her. She didn't wait to hear the details. All she could think about was that she would be able to take pictures of Danny. She nodded violently, with tears spilling left and right, and accepted.

In less than two months, she had a socket at the center of her forehead and another at the back of her head, with a metallic ribbon connecting them. Next to the socket on her forehead lay a lens, like a magnifying glass. Alfred told her it was called a psychometric lens. She would use it to look inside her memories, her dreams, her thoughts and, if she connected it with a special camera, she would be able to photograph them as well. Such a camera was all she wanted and she asked her parents for one. She thought that it might take a lot of effort to persuade them, but she was surprised to be presented with her heart's desire the very following day.

Three days later, her bedroom was full of all her memories of Danny, made solid at last. She didn't feel satisfied, though. They were not *exactly* what she wanted. So she requested books for the first and last time in her life and read about photographing techniques. She spoke with Alfred — dear, darling Alfred — and he helped her learn how to manipulate her lens, how to focus it on what she wanted. He taught her all its secrets, even though she still hadn't shown him any of Danny's portraits or even mentioned him at all after that first confession. Ellie fell in love with that camera, slept with her hands locked around it and photographed anything that caught her attention, outside or within her, and in combinations. Less than a month afterwards, she managed to take the first picture that felt perfect: a transparent little hand on a window, waiting for Mother to fall with the rain. Danny's hand. She took that one photograph and put it in a box by itself, separated from the hundreds of others she had taken. Behind it she wrote: the hand on the window.

It was a Saturday, nearing midsummer and her tenth birthday, when it happened again. She was kneeling down in the garden, trying to focus her lens on a rose bud, the sun setting behind it. She wanted to photograph the halo of the sun crowning the bud and, in the dark center of this *à contre-lumière* picture, she would add a small, flowery heart with her lens. Suddenly, she felt as if she was leaving her body and was surprised to realize that this was exactly what she'd done. She saw her back, the braids on either side of her head and the metallic ribbon between them, even a leaf stuck to her T-shirt. Then she felt the compulsion to turn round and her knees began to tremble. She saw a room, a blue room, with a single bed by the window. Someone was sitting on the bed, someone her heart recognized, pounding suddenly hard in her chest.

"Danny?" she whispered, hastily looking round in fear of being overheard. She saw herself behind her, focusing on the photograph, waiting for the perfect moment, and she knew that her physical self was still there. No one else could see Danny, or the room, or her other self. She took a few hesitant steps toward him, knelt and put her hand on his knee.

"Danny?" she asked again and he lifted his head to look at her. Well, almost look at her, as she was never able to see his face. But he was crying, she was sure of it.

"She doesn't want me," he said, and it broke her heart. She sat down next to him, hugging his shoulders. Danny laid his head on her lap and cried as if he were a small child and not a nearly-grown man.

In the following days he told her about Zoe, the blond girl he was in love with and saw in his sleep all the time. He had kissed her and caressed her breasts and had dreamed of doing so many more things with her. She had broken up with him, though, and didn't want him anymore.

Ellie listened and, while she felt his pain, she was also happy to be with him again. She felt guilty for being happy, but there was nothing to be done about it. Danny filled her up to the darkest corners of her soul and it was the longing to see him again that got her through her days. However, she was old enough to understand that he only called for her when he needed her, that soon his infatuation with Zoe might pass and then she wouldn't see him anymore. That made her furious.

"I want to be able to come to you too, when I feel like it," she told him one day.

"I don't know how," he answered with a shrug.

"Then call for me when you're happy, not only when you're upset," she insisted, stubbornly.

"I don't call for you," he said and turned his head to face her. "You just show up. I don't bring your image in my head or anything. And I don't know how or why you show up when you do. I don't even know who you are, Ellie, or what you look like. It's not that I don't desire your presence. I do, I really do and I miss you when you're not here. But I have no control over what's happening. I don't understand it."

So she spoke of it no more. She counted days, hours, until she would leave her body and see him again. She took photographs, dreamed, lived to see him. Soon afterwards, when Danny ceased to appear anymore, Ellie realized that the world was crumbling around her.

"That ... *psychiatrist* has turned her into a bloody zombie!" screamed her mother, waving her arms ferociously.

"You don't know what you're talking about," answered her father, more calmly. "Look at her, she's smiling! How long has it been since you last saw our daughter smile?"

"What of it? Is she smiling to you or to me? Or has she, by any chance, stopped flunking school and daydreaming? No! All she does is play with that darn thing, day in, day out, like an autistic! And it's me, me to blame! Me, for listening to you and that useless Alfred and agreeing to let you put those bloody things in her head!"

"And what would you rather do? Feed her drugs?"

"I'd rather you told her once and for all that this bastard she thinks is her best friend *doesn't exist*! Be done with it! Why won't Alfred tell her, for fuck's sake? Why do we keep chasing our tails?"

"Why do you refuse to understand what the doctor tries to tell you, darn it?" Father rubbed his forehead. "She has to come to terms with it on her own. That's the whole point. It's Ellie who needs to understand and accept that Danny doesn't exist, by herself."

Ellie didn't wait to hear more. She returned to her room, her camera, her photos. She looked at them, one by one. Not those she considered better, nor those that were just okay. She looked at those in the secret box. The most beautiful photographs she had taken of Danny. *The hand on the Windo, Star in the San, Blu Teddybare, Gap of Love, Erth and Sky, Autom in the Attic.* Her hands began to shake.

"You're real," she whispered, looking at the faceless form. "Everything else might be a lie, but you – *you are real.*"

She put the photos back in the box; she didn't want to ruin them with her tears. She locked it, hid the key in a drawer and took some deep breaths. Alfred had betrayed her. Worse, he never believed her in the first place. All he had done was coddle her, lie to her. There was no one there for her. No one at all save for Danny, who had also disappeared now that he didn't need her anymore. Ellie felt the pain inside her swelling, choking her. She walked to her parents' bathroom and took her father's razor blade. She returned to her room and sat in the bed.

"I'm not real," she whispered and scratched at her left arm. It didn't bleed or hurt much. It wasn't even close to the anguish she felt inside. "I'm not real," she said again and this time the blade cut deeper. Pain spilled inside her, filled her with its reality, but still it wasn't enough.

"*I'm not real!*" she screamed. She pushed the tip of the blade deep into her wrist and pulled it all the way to the inside of the elbow. Blood sprang everywhere, on the walls, the sheets, the furniture. Ellie had barely a moment to enjoy the anguish before the door of her room slammed open.

After leaving the hospital, her parents announced that they were divorcing. She didn't care much. She stayed with her mother at their house and never visited Alfred again. She went to other shrinks and her mother tried to get someone to remove the implant from her brain, but no one risked the proce-

dures since there were no medical reasons for it. She would have killed them, had they tried. Naturally, none of them could put up with her for more than a few weeks. In four years she went through more than two dozen doctors, but none seemed able to "help" her. She never spoke a word of Danny to any of them, but always dismissed the subject when they brought it up by saying that he was only her "imaginary friend".

Truth be told, the comings and goings from armchair to armchair were merely a minor inconvenience. What was eating her alive was Danny's absence. As a treat for her fourteenth birthday, she shaved her head and left only a blue stripe in the center, which cost her a slap and scolding from her mother. Neither bothered her much, but she decided to take off anyway. That night she nicked whatever expensive looking trinket she could lay her hands on, took her camera and left.

On that first night on the streets, she accepted the hospitality of two lesbians, and lost her virginity to a large strap-on while she tasted carpet. Both seemed to agree with her. Blood and pain were always a welcome sensation, and that couple initiated her to their lustful thirst for kink. She stayed with them for a few enlightening weeks, discovering handcuffs, whips and the simple fact that she attracted people's eyes in many different ways. Being attractive wasn't something she was interested in, but it was handy. A look could open doors and a pair of open legs brought cash. She had decided on that very first night that she would never screw with just one person — two or more or no deal. Until she reached adulthood, she was the recipient of money, beatings, gang-bangs, a couple of group rapes, half a dozen abortions and a generous amount of photographs. Money was the least of her concerns. She held tight to those things that made her feel alive for a while. Danny had not made a reappearance.

She spent the following couple of years couch-surfing here and there. She celebrated her sixteenth birthday with the purchase of a filthy, tiny basement flat and a night of orgy, where she counted at least fourteen visitors to her snatch. The following day she counted her money, enough to get her first tattoo: on her left breast, a bright red gap in the shape of a heart.

She was eighteen when she met the thirty-year-old Miriam. Back then her hair was completely shaved on one side, long to her waist on the other and dyed purple. Her favorite night club was Darkness Within, a decadent hole that played electropunk as loud as it got, and served alcohol and drugs. That night Quantum Suicide were on stage, and Ellie was obsessed with their music. She danced in the middle of the club, her high-heeled boots, tiny, black shorts and tight, bra-less, white top attracting everyone's eye. She smoked and drank whatever people brought for her, sniffed this and that powder, let her crooked smile seduce and promise. She was considering who, and how many, she would take to her bed that night when she noticed Miriam coming towards her. Her altered eyes, huge, silver, shone in the darkness, her transparent skin begged to be touched. One look and Ellie decided that this woman would certainly be included in the company.

"Someday I want to be alone with you," Miriam confessed three months later, her eyes shining like mercury. It was morning and they were drinking coffee alone, the third of the threesome having left a little earlier.

"You're alone with me now," answered Ellie and twisted a roll. The ashtray was full, but she didn't bother to empty it. Instead she smashed a passing cockroach with it, spreading ash all over the table.

"I mean at night... you and me." Miriam tried to smile and her fingers wandered onto Ellie's hand.

"I never fuck with less than two people," Ellie pulled her hand back to light her rollie. "You know that, Miriam."

"So don't fuck, just this once. Make love with me." Miriam's voice sounded a little hurt.

"Yeah, well, I don't do that either," Ellie snapped behind the smoke and got up.

"Sweetie ..."

"And I'm definitely not *sweetie*," she turned to look at her. "Enough with all the baby-talk, we're not lovebirds! If you fancy fucking me, you'd better get romance and all that bollocks out of your bloody head, got it?"

Miriam never mentioned it again, although she discreetly tried and succeeded in gaining the position of permanent, if not exclusive, lover. The change in their relationship came when Miriam discovered Ellie's photographs. Not the very special ones, the others. She had a good eye and good contacts and soon she talked her into exhibiting her art in a gallery. Ellie made a face when she heard the word.

"I don't like blokes in suits and wannabe intellectuals. And if anyone asks me questions I don't want to answer, they'll have a taste of my boot in their face," she said.

But the number of zeroes on the checks spoke louder, and finally Ellie swallowed her objections. In any case, Miriam would be the one to take care of all the procedures. All Ellie had to do was to give up her photos and be there when they were exhibited. There were no rules about eccentricity — in fact the more, the better.

Three years later, and Ellie had moved into a larger flat, free of roaches and rats, with her very own studio. She had a new camera, a couple more implants which had cost nearly as much as the flat, and more money and fame than she knew what to do with. She didn't have to fuck for money any more, just for fun, but she missed her old life sometimes, with all the

small, unexpected pains. Miriam tried to talk her into removing all the scars — the ones left from the beatings, the cuts and burns, the whipping. In time she removed them all, except one. She kept the scar inside her left arm, that first scar. It reminded her every day of why she lived and died. Instead, she became addicted to tattooing. The constant, piercing pain of this art was something she neither could, nor wanted to, resist. She didn't care for other alterations. She didn't change her features or insert pieces of carved metal in her skin for fashion. She was generally ... content. It had taken her some time to begrudgingly accept that. And the only price she had to pay was the crowd that gathered to admire her art, and Miriam's constant presence — her agent now and, admittedly, excellent at it. In twelve years, Ellie became unbelievably rich through her exhibitions — *Death in Midsummer*, *Conflict of the Self*, *Eyes of Darkness*, *Pulse of Night*.

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"Ellie, I think it's time for you to start talking with people," whispers Miriam. She nods towards a Suit who, Ellie would bet coin, is a journalist. Art critics prefer to stand out. They dress better, to begin with, they wear fashionable corsets, have alterations and whatnot. This man is as indifferent as a door-knob, smiling with unjustified confidence and utterly oblivious to the dullness suppurating out of him.

"Simon Lanter," he says and offers his hand.

"Ellie," she replies, looking down at it without blinking, hands thrust deep in her pockets.

"Aha," he coughs, after some moments. His hand goes to his hair, his gaze wanders here and there. He coughs again. "May I ask you a few questions?"

"Only about the exhibition," Miriam interrupts, although Ellie is not at all sure she wants to answer questions concerning this exhibition.

"For what reason did you named it thusly?" he begins, with the posh posturing of imbecility.

"No reason," Ellie replies, narrowly resisting the temptation to start tapping her foot. "I could have named it *I shit you*, I suppose, but it wouldn't have been as catchy."

She senses Miriam blushing, but feels no shame. Journalists should have learned by now that stupid questions receive insulting answers.

"Aha," Simon coughs again. "Do you have a favorite among the photographs of this exhibition?"

Yet another moronic question. She doesn't answer, only turns to look at Miriam.

"I would advise you to ask something a little more original, Mr. Lanter," smiles the agent. "Ellie despises common questions."

Simon doesn't cough another aha. His smile fades and he looks Ellie straight in the eyes, despite being significantly shorter.

"The hand in *The Shadow of My Heart*. Is it yours?"

Ellie freezes.

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She was in bed with Miriam and some nameless bloke when it happened. This time, she was pushed out of herself violently, as if somebody dragged her, as if she would never be able to get back to herself. She felt her heart pounding inside her body. She could see the guy taking her from behind, Miriam's legs spread open in front of her. She tried to hold it together, not to turn, nor cry, nor — nor — nor ... Everything inside betrayed her. Her body turned, as if it had a will of its own, and she saw him standing right in front of her. Right there, after nineteen, gut-wrenching years of loneliness.

"Danny?" She hesitated, and her voice trembled as much as her knees.

His form, perfectly familiar, looked straight at her, as faceless as ever. "Ellie?" he asked. His voice — changed, matured — fit perfectly inside her, healed her wounds, filled her, soothed her.

She shut her eyes to savor the peacefulness, and then opened them again. She could see more clearly now and what she saw turned her very soul to ice. There was a shadow behind Danny, attached to him. A black, thick mass that crept into his body and sucked greedily at him. She lifted her finger and pointed.

"There ... there's a shadow on your back", she said and failed to recognize her own voice.

"I know," he said softly and lowered his head to the floor.

"What is it? *What the hell is it?* It... it's sucking at you, it's eating you alive, it's killing you!"

Danny shrugged and looked at her again. The eyes she couldn't see, on the face she'd never seen, told her in a single moment more than Danny ever had. Everything. She walked slowly towards him and he backed away.

"Remove it," she said.

"I can't", he replied after a moment. "Maybe I don't want to, either."

She walked closer to him, lifting her hands.

"What are you doing?" he asked, fear in his voice.

"What I always did for you. I'll save you, and I'll pay the price with your silence. I'll cut it off."

"But — I'll lose you," he whispered.

"You'll find me." She almost smiled. She didn't know why. She didn't believe that. She didn't feel like smiling.

"Ellie, the shadow..."

"It's me. I am the shadow", she said in the same whispery voice. She raised her hand and touched his chest. "It's always been me."

"Why you?" he whispered back at her, as if they were not all alone in the whole world.

"It must be. No one else can see it. No one else can cut it off."

"But, why?" he asked again, and this was a wholly different question. His voice was different.

"Because — I soul you," said Ellie and her hand went through his flesh, as if it were liquid.

The pain, unbearable, unbelievable, stronger than all the combined pain she'd ever felt, clenched her throat, made her groan. But she didn't pull her hand out. It burnt her. She felt the flesh melting away, the bones getting crushed, but on she went, deeper and deeper still, until she reached his heart, the place where the shadow was attached, and the pain, the pain brought unwilling tears, sobs even, it made her knees weak, black spots appear in front of her eyes. It numbed her, it pierced her brain. She would die. Her soul, her essence, would remain there forever, dead from the pain she'd been chasing all her life. Alone and dead. Without Danny.

Stubbornness filled her like cement. She screamed and pushed her other hand inside Danny's body, quickly, before her better judgment prevented her. She grabbed his precious, beating heart with one hand, the shadow with the other, and pulled, wrenched, twisted. With all her strength, the shadow was severed. It snapped and coiled away like a snake.

Ellie saw it disappearing through goggled eyes. She knew now that everything was over, the bond between them was broken. Forever. She heard Danny saying he was sorry. She couldn't answer. She couldn't cry. She couldn't die.

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"Yes," she finally answers and crosses her arms over her chest. "And that was your last question. Now, sod off."

She turns her back on him and walks away. She can hear Miriam doing her job, selling excuses for her client's behavior. She wants to be alone now. She needs it so bloody much. She didn't cry then, when she woke up at the hospital. Now she wants to cry. She runs to the loo and splashes water on her face. She trembles. She doesn't know why, but her whole body shivers. She cries. She can't control it, no matter how hard she tries. Tears keep pouring down her face, making a mess of her makeup, blocking her nose, hurting her throat, becoming sobs. She tries to grab some paper, but her fingers rip only a tiny piece, hardly enough. And there's no trace of her stubbornness anywhere, as if the source has gone dry.

She hears the door behind her open and she wants to disappear from the face of the earth, rather than be seen like that. Her legs, however, refuse to walk, her knees bend.

"This time I'm coming to you." His voice is barely a whisper. "I did find you, after all." She hears his laugh, so tiny and fragile, it could turn to a sob. "I can't believe you gave that name to your exhibition. *I Soul You?*"

The voice is so familiar. She's heard it before and dreamed it so often. She's longed for it so much that it makes everything okay. It's okay that she can't stop crying. It's okay that she trembles. It's okay that it takes forever to stand up. It's even okay if she falls. Ellie has no idea what will happen next, after the moment she turns around. She doesn't know what, exactly, she'll see. But it's really okay. She has her soul in her eyes and all she has to do is look at him.

Akane and the Host Hunter

KRISTI YAKUMAKU



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She teaches Greek language and literature and she works as a researcher in The Centre for the Greek Language. She loves weird dreams, the sea, her friends and her partner, exotic birds, music, desserts, peculiar people, uncanny stories and many other things as you will find out by reading her stories. Her story "Akane and the Host Hunter" was initially written in Greek and translated in English by Dimitra

It's almost noon, the sky is still loading clouds, and Akane has yet to find anything worth scavenging. Now, though, she can see a small heap of fresh garbage. She hopes it is what she thinks it is. How come she hadn't spotted it hours ago? Hospital biowaste, her absolute favorite.

"Maeme," she shouts and the girl jerks upright, as if abruptly woken. Maeme runs towards the hill. The strip of hair starting at her forehead and ending at her nape sways over her shoulder. Akane has scavenged a yellow jumpsuit for her. It's too wide and she wraps it around her with black vinyl tape from ankle to calf and from wrist to shoulder. Wearing it, Maeme looks like a strange bird with a yellow, puffy body, black legs and a black crest. Her gloves leave her fingers exposed; there are purple stains on her nails already, and that's not a good sign.

In the city, before they began replacing nanomaterials with core materials – n and c they call them now – they used vaccines to avoid infections, and she had them too when she was little. Here, though, vaccines and medicine can only be found in the trash, almost always past their expiration date. There are no c-materials among the junk. They have to make do with the old stuff, the throwaway n. The fingers of the Eta rot away. They cut them off and replace them with n-material again, also found in the trash heaps. The infection proceeds upward, they cut off the arm or the leg and use n-limbs, and the foul

circle continues, until their heart rots away too and they join the mass of junk floating by the boats.

Akane looks away, beyond the canal, at the ducks silently gliding among the water lilies in the virtual lake. Yesterday on that spot, if it were the same spot indeed, there had stood a sunny mountain. So vividly sunny that the gray sky above looked fake. It had rocks, trees, bushes, birds, summits, everything, made you believe you could climb it. Today the lake, the day before yesterday a canyon, every day the images shift, every day she's left with the impression that nothing around her is real. And she knows it's more than an impression. The c-domes work well.

She drags her gaze off the dome and turns it on the road. At least this part with the cracked asphalt, some ten kilometers from the dock to the canal, stays put. Some have found abandoned military vehicles, hacked them and use them to carry the trash. Others found pre-war foot-propelled bicycles and tied carts behind them; they bounce on the cracks and often capsize, taking the riders with them.

She herself prefers to make her way on foot, look carefully, pick. Today there's neither wind nor rain, and the chemical wafts are tolerable. She turns back to see if Maeme is following. Seven months have passed since she took her on her boat and she still hasn't decided how old she is, twelve, maybe thirteen, fifteen even. The children at the dock are all so thin and tiny, and they can't tell you much. She's always carrying a palm-sized robot with a single arm and faded yellow hair, capable only to open and close its eyes.

This last month Akane has even named the girl, calls her Maeme, for her smile. She had asked her if she has a name of her own, and she had answered no. It wasn't that important, anyway. She, for example, did have a name before joining the Eta, but nobody asked for it, everybody just called her Akane because of her red hair.

Akane pushes slowly the trash with her metal stick as if stirring a thick soup, while the girl tries to mimic her. In the ill-

Nikolaïdou and Victor Pseftakis. It has been published in the Greek anthology Light in the Crack.

smelling brew, she spots an n-spray. A hundred percent lethal. Maeme tries to pick it up, and she pushes her away. "Get away from here. Wait for me outside," she says pointing at the asphalt, beyond the trash heaps. The belt under her chest clicks and the "crab" on her back opens up extending three arms on her right side and another three on her left. Tracing her finger over the belt, she makes one of the arms grab the spray, bring it near her ear and shake it up and down. It's not completely empty. The arm turns backwards and drops the spray in her sack. She sets both arms on auto, to bring junk in front of her eyes, while she keeps on stirring the soup.

She must craft a crab for the little one, and find gloves for her. For a moment she forgets herself, lowers herself and the metal which the arm brings towards her threatens to collide with her nose. She stops it at the last moment. Enough for today. She touches her finger on her belt, the arms open their claws and their treasures tumble down, as she turns to the street. The girl stands at the side and draws something using her stick. Perhaps she shouldn't have named her. Not so long ago, she didn't mind her carelessness. And now, what the hell? Just because she gave her a name, she must feel responsible for whatever stupid shit she does? She approaches her, the arms still extended like a standing spider.

"If you touch the junk bare-handed you will die."

The girl looks at her without fear, honest curiosity on her face. "Why will I die?" she asks, her black eyes wide.

"Because you'll get infected, that's why." No matter how many times I tell her, she still doesn't get it. She gives her a stern, hard stare and walks past her.

"Don't be afraid, Akane," she hears her say. "I grew up here. If I were to die I'd have died already."

It's her turn to wonder. Every time she's decided Maeme is completely mindless, she says something that sounds almost wise.

"I don't give a shit if you do," she says walking towards the dock. As she gathers the arm back to her casing, she imagines

the girl behind her hurrying her graceless step and a soft smile takes shape on her lips.

Akane takes the crab off her back, while Maeme sits on the left bunk bed at the far side of the boat, legs crossed holding the little robot between them. She's eating fried cockroaches from a box of unidentified making and licks her fingers clean. Akane looks at her while emptying her sack on one of the three large barrels by the door. Everything is made from n-materials, the boat, the beds, the blankets, the barrels, the chairs, the bench, the clothes, the screens, the info films, the box you're eating from, everything. Yet you're neither sick nor a ghost. You're well-built and you're lucky, too, Maeme. The girl almost offers Akane the box but she takes it back, hurriedly. Last time she offered her cockroaches, Akane pushed the box away and they all fell on the floor. She sees the girl pick them one by one with her long fingers and her stomach lurches. She's inherited it from her mother, this disgust for insects.

"This is not food. I'll find us some meat."

She keeps telling her that, even if she knows she has few choices. Fish are infected; the cats, dogs, hens and pigs that are bred at the dock's warehouses are fed with fish and mice that carry all sort of diseases. Mushrooms and greens are better, but hard to find. "The temperature needed to fry meat kills all microbes," she says, mostly to convince herself.

"Don't they eat insects in the city, Akane?"

"Some do, sometimes."

"And what else do they eat?" asks Maeme, and for a short moment her face shines.

"Whatever the hell they want," she says.

She sees the girl leave the box on the floor and curl up on the bed, her appetite gone. She pretends not to care about her sadness, but in the end she gives in. She sits on the chair and pulls a cord hanging from the roof. A diaphanous roll unfurls from the ceiling to the floor and Akane touches it lightly.

"Come here," she tells Maeme.

She, seeing the screen, grabs her robodoll, jumps hurriedly from the bed and sits on the floor next to her.

"This is lettuce, these are avocados, sushi, noodles, potatoes, sakura-mochi, dango. That's what they eat in the city," she says, touching the images on the screen. The girl is looking at them, her mouth half-open, and touches the screen with her fingertips.

"They look good, will you give me sensors?"

Akane turns to the bench, pushes away cables, tools, rummages in a transparent box, and takes out two connected beads. Benhiro Tenoke, Experience Enrichment, the richest bastard in the world. She separates the beads and sticks one over each of Maeme's eyebrows. She gropes in the box again and finds a pair for her. The girl touches the sweets and Akane can almost hear her saliva dripping. "What are these?" Maeme asks, touching the sakura-mochi.

"Cherry blossom sweets. They make them on Girl's Day."

Maeme looks at her, opening and closing her eyes like her little robot doll.

"When is that day?"

"It was on March, a month ago. In the city, they celebrate it every year."

"Will you show me the city too, Akane?"

"I see you're getting cheeky, little one. Do you want to see the old Tokyo, or the new one?" she asks, trying to hide a smile.

"Both," she answers and as joy and impatience uplift her face the blue bead comes unstuck. She barely catches it before it hits the floor, and she sticks it back on.

"If you lose them, you'll go back where you came from." She's glaring at her, but she's already loaded the old Tokyo on the screen. She takes Maeme's hand and together they walk under the blossoming cherry trees, their eyes squinting under Shinjuku's neon signs, and feel the waves of people pass them by in Shibuya.

"Did you get to see all that?" Maeme asks, her voice barely audible.

"Until I was ten. Then the '43 war happened and most of the city was gone. They had no domes then, they hadn't even found a way to mislead the rocket's trackers," she says and feels her hand shiver.

"And what happened then?"

"Then, the survivors rebuilt a small part of the city, and later on they built a c-dome for protection. Since then, the city has grown. There are around ten new neighborhoods, connected with underground tunnels, and they keep printing new buildings under the domes. You see, some lost everything in the war and some became even richer than they were before." Benhiro Tenoke, C-Constructs and Building Printing, the richest bastard in the world.

"And us, why don't they want us?" she asks, looking at a pagoda that slides on the screen.

"It's us who don't want them. In the city, if you aren't rich, you work fifteen hours a day, a slave of Benhiro Tenoke. You sleep in a box and live only to work. That's why some give up, come here and live by the trash."

"I do want them, Akane. I want to go to the city," she says, lowering her head.

"You, they might want you back. Have you seen how many youths have synthetic legs here? They took them when they were children and made transplant organs out of their legs. Those who survived and found synthetic limbs are the lucky ones. Things have changed now. They used to take bodies only, now they want brains, too." Benhiro Tenoke, Medical Innovations, the richest bastard in the world.

Maeme looks absentmindedly at her eternally insomniac robodoll. "They took two kids I knew. One never came back, the other did, but he's a ghost, you know, doesn't speak, doesn't listen, doesn't see. They say, you know, that us Eta are not human, that we're dirty, infected and all that. They won't give us

codes to enter the city. I used to have a dad, once. He was good with codes and hacking, you know, like Shino and Danny, but not that good. He wanted us to go back, find an entrance to the city. And, well, he half-made it. We were there, in front of the dome, the door opened, and, you know, he gave me his hand. I went for it but the system got him, the dome's jelly poured around him before he took a step forward. He stayed there, hand extended." She's not crying, but her voice is almost a whisper, sharp breaths between her words.

Akane doesn't know why, but it's the first time the girl is talking about her past. She takes the sensors off her eyebrows. I used to have a dad too, once, Maeme.

"Tokyo is a pile of shit, kid. Why go there? It doesn't really exist. It changes every day. New buildings keep turning up, others go away. The only stable ones are the greenhouses and the stock-breeding. The city has no memory, no hangouts, no warmth, it's an optical illusion." She doesn't know if Maeme can understand.

And yet, she asks. "Will Tokyo be as it was, Akane? And will us, Eta, be able to go wherever we want?"

"No, kid, this will never come to pass." She can see disbelief in Maeme's eyes, the desire to change it all, an expression reminiscent of herself, when she was an adolescent. No, nothing ever changes.

"Is that why you left?"

Akane pulls the chord and the screen rolls up to the ceiling. "No," she says abruptly and takes the sensors off her face. "I'm going to get us meat," she continues as she gets off the boat and jumps on the pier.

Ali's chicken nugget box has begun to burn her fingers. She walks fast, hoping to catch Maeme awake and feed her. A small city of boats is rocking on the sea besides her. The elders say there used to be hurricanes and tsunamis but, after the war, the weather changed. Now and then there are storms, but

the waters are usually calm, just as they're now. Two half-naked boys with long, tangled hair and purple hands are lying on their backs on a mass of trash floating on the sea's surface, their eyes nailed nowhere. Eta are drowning in trash and yet they owe their life to them. They've used them to make the n-network, to find the solar hives, to barter. They do use the trash for everything.

As darkness falls, Akane sees the boat stamps light up one by one, ideograms, flowers, naked women, dragons, roosters, butterflies, manga, tigers. When she first came, the boats were less and the boat stamps helped everyone find their home, or the brothel, or the eatery in the dark. Now the boats were about five hundred side by side and six or seven rows across the sea, more than three thousand in total. The designs and the colors get tangled together, the roosters have butterfly wings, the flowers have breasts, everything becomes one in a hypnotizing jiggle and the Eta find their boats mostly by smell and not by sight.

Lately, her own boat smells of fresh adolescence. Her boat stamp is lit, a green shamrock, a tribute to her Irish mother. The neighbors have placed planks from the last boat to the pier. Katsuo must be on the dock. The box no longer burns her fingers but it's hot, just perfect.

"Maeme," she shouts getting in the boat, "not even the city has such chike ...". She stumbles on something and almost drops the box. It's the little robodoll. "Fuck this shit, are you trying to kill me?" She looks over to the bed, but Maeme isn't there. Maeme is nowhere to be found. She leaves the box on the bench, lifts the little robot from the floor and it opens and closes its eyes in a way that, right now, seems completely disapproving. She shoves it in her jacket's pocket and walks out to the dock again.

She runs towards the warehouses and through the dark. She can make out a skinny silhouette walk slowly. She catches up. Her hair is dirty and matted, the clothes ragged.

It's not her.

"Did you see a dark-skinned girl, with hair like mine?" she asks, grabbing the girl's arms and bringing her face in front of hers. The girl won't listen, speak or see. She's ghostly white, with huge dark circles under her eyes. She can see burns on her face and on the edge of her mouth, an open wound drips puss and blood. Someone's tugging her jacket. She turns and sees a barefoot boy, around five. "My sister was taken. She won't talk, she's a ghost. I hide among the pigs and they don't see me when they come."

"Were they here today?"

"Yes, here, in the boats. Do you have any food?"

Akane can feel her blood pooling at her feet. "The boat with the green shamrock. It's unlocked and there's food on the bench," she says and starts running again, towards the boats this time.

A red dragon breathes fire over Shino's boat. She climbs up, but the cabin door is closed.

"Shino, open up. Shinobu," she cries out, banging her fist on the wood.

The door opens and first comes out Shino's shaved head. He has sensors stuck over his eyebrows and his eyes are sunk. Akane pushes the door but his square body is blocking the entrance almost completely. Shino backs off, she comes in quickly and signals him to close the door.

"Is your boat on fire, Akane?" he laughs, taking the sensors off and placing them on a low table. In the rolled-down screen which covers the long side of his boat, an old man is smoking an opium pipe. Shino is trying to put on a black, long-sleeved blouse over his pants and the kinotattoo on his back, the same dragon lighting up his boat, closes its eyes as the fabric descends towards it.

"They took Maeme, Shino." His laughter is cut short.

"When? I saw you coming back from the canal. Did you search the docks?"

Akane stops him. "She is going nowhere without this", she says and takes the robodoll out of her pocket.

"Come on, she might have dropped it." He pouts to show she might be overreacting.

She's not.

"A kid saw them. They came to the boats," she says and sits on a tattered sofa directly across the center of the screen. She looks at the wrinkled face on it, smiling at her peacefully through the smoke of his pipe. She wants to put the sensors on and lose herself in this peace, but no, this time she won't. "I have to find her, Shino-chan, before it's too late."

"If they took her forget it. You know how it goes."

She knows. A decrepit man will be connected to her head and will either keep her forever and live through her or will exhaust her body in every possible way and, when she's completely in tatters and her last brain cell burns out, if she survives, he'll throw her back to the docks.

Akane looks at the smoke on the screen. Benhiro Tenoke, Mindhost Rentals, the richest bastard in the world. That's how it goes, but this time, I won't let you.

"They keep them one or two days, for tests. Sometimes the host's mind resists or might even overcome the 'guest's' mind. So they test for this beforehand, try to stay safe."

Shino is looking at her as if he doesn't understand a word she's saying. "So what. There's nothing you can do. There's nothing anyone can do. Judges, cops, all of them are his clients."

"I will go and find him, Shino. I'm certain he keeps her at home. All this happened for me. It's his last-ditch attempt."

Shino spits on the floor, which is full of stains of every kind and color. His voice comes out heavy. "When I found you at the warehouses, with your sensors smoking and moments before you burned out your brain completely, you told me you're never going back to the city. I helped you find your legs. Danny got you a boat and you decided that this is your home now. And now, you want to go back?"

"Are you playing the savior? If you or Danny had any money, you'd be living in the city and you wouldn't give a shit about anything. You had something to gain from me. You found out who I was, and Danny wanted to fuck me," she says trying to rein in her legs so she won't kick him, his screen and whatever else in front of her.

"Fuck your rage, Akane, you're the only one who asks for help by swearing. And to set things straight, I didn't know who you were when I picked you up, and Danny really liked you. Do you have anything else to say for the two people who stood by you?"

"I have to say that no infected heals around here. And you did. I was the one who sent you to those who helped you get well. You may hack IDs, break codes, enter the city, but without connections you're nothing, without my connections you'd be dead," she says, her voice stable.

"That's exactly what I'm telling you. No matter how many IDs I hack, over there I'm nothing. How can I possibly help you?"

She's regained her calm. "What I want, you can do, I know. I will get you in the ball, and you shall dance. And you'll like it, you'll see."

"Solo?"

"Call Danny."

"You're real trouble, Akane," he says touching his screen. He waits a bit, but Danny doesn't show up. "He won't turn it on," he says.

"Can you enter his roll? We must talk tonight."

Shino smiles. "Danny's roll might hinder me for, I don't know, a whole minute," he says and unfurls a map with all the network's screens up until the dock's last boat. After forty seconds, Akane sees the dock's fittest ass going up and down quickly between two skinny legs. The face of a blue-haired woman shows up behind Danny's shoulders, and her gaze crosses Akane's. She pushes Danny away and throws the sen-

sors off her face. She puts on a red kimono while swearing, and the kinotatto of a snake over her navel bares its teeth. Danny remains naked on the bed, which covers half the cabin, among colorful sheets and pillows; he's looking at them, brushing aside the blond and brown tufts that fall in his eyes. "Fuck off," he says, but his tone's saying: "Hey guys."

"The girl has gone missing," Akane says, and Shino adds, "Get your ass over here."

The boat signs have gone off some time now, but the morning sky is heavy and gray. Akane is sitting cross-legged on the small part of her prow that remains uncovered, looking at the small robodoll, feeling her heart beat at the rhythm of its winking.

Its eyes close. End. Its eyes open. Beginning. End-Beginning. End-Beginning she keeps repeating alongside the doll's eyes, a mantra to elevate her beyond hope and fear.

Suddenly she stops, gets up, enters the boat and unfolds the roll. She scribbles with her finger on the screen and soon, a virtual geisha is bowing in front of her. She might even be real, who can tell anymore?

"Jane-san, there have been ten years, eight months, fourteen hours, twenty-three minutes since your last connection. What can I do for you?"

"Connect me to my son."

"I will transfer your request to Mr. Tenoke."

A minute later, the geisha's face turns into a flower spreading its petals and inside it appears a young man, only slightly reminiscent of the fifteen year old boy she left behind ten years ago. She's not surprised. Why would she be? His face pops up constantly on the screens. Tenoke Corporations, for your every need. He's dyed his hair black but she knows that apart from his eyes nothing else looks Asian. She wants to cry but bites her lip instead. She caresses the robodoll in her pocket. End-beginning, End-beginning.

"Mother, to what do we owe the honor?" Coming through whitened teeth and well-shaped lips, the tone of his voice imitating surprise and joy takes the irony cake. Akane tries to speak but she feels as if to do so she has to open her mouth with both hands, shove them inside her throat and pull the words out with both hands. End-beginning. End-beginning. "There's nothing left of him, is there? And now, you are taking her, too," she manages in the end. No, that's not what she should have said. She had prepared something different. She must remember what. She must calm down, and remember.

The man laughs. "Straight to the point, then. I did try many different approaches, you have to admit that. But surely you can see that that you left me with no alternative. In the end, I had to bide my time for years on end, waiting for you to bond with someone. I knew it would eventually happen."

Akane is fighting to shove the part that's frothing, kicking and swearing as deep inside her as she can. She's fighting to look unperturbed, as she nails her eyes on his. "Why do you hate me so much?" she asks.

"Hate you? I've tried to bring you back so, so many times. You never liked it here. You ran away as soon as you turned eighteen and came back at twenty complete with a bastard son. Your mother took her own life after that." My mother couldn't take what she saw around her, and neither could I. His voice drones on, politely, coolly. "You could never see clearly. You had to revolt, and I had to do what was best for my family."

Your family. A spontaneous laughter begins in her imprisoned turmoil, threatens the image she fights for. You stole my child's soul, you fucking ghoul, it screams, but her face won't shift.

"You never let me explain, Jane. We didn't know he would lose himself. He was the first mindhost. When you're sick, you'll do anything to heal yourself. And I was sick. Hiro-chan was compatible and all we wanted to do was give this ap-

proach a try. Nobody expected him to lose his mind. All I wanted was some space, some more time to built my castle."

Akane breathes in. Let's go.

"What castle? You were building a whole empire. And for you to live and conquer, my son had to go. When I realized Hiro-chan was never coming back to his body I fell apart. It was the Eta who found me at the docks, who brought me round. For years on end, I'd lost myself, too. But I think you know all that, father. Your people are always in the docks, keeping tabs on me. You knew about the girl that warmed my heart for the first time in ten years."

You know and do not care because your own heart is forever frozen. But I will find the match, father.

"They told me she screamed Akane, when they took her from the boat. It suits you, the name they gave you. Scarlet. For your red hair. Your mother's hair. Ava did not come here as a refugee, you know, like the ones who followed. She came because she loved Tokyo, and she loved me, you know that, don't you? You grew up surrounded by love, Jane, and all you gave back was hate."

She feels his gaze penetrate the screen, burrow inside her brain, and she doesn't know if she wants to caress the hair of her lost child or pull at them till she breaks the neck of the old man who stole it from her. "Love? Did you ruin my son out of love?"

"Your son's not lost yet. Perhaps one day, we will both fit in his body. But even if he doesn't, upon my death I will gift him my brain. Benhiro the Elder and Benhiro the younger will become one," he says, his expression youthful, inconsistent with the old bastard that he is.

Akane takes her hand through her hair. "You don't understand what you did, father. You never will. You only care about yourself. Why did you take the girl? What do you want from me?"

The face on the screen reddens, the voice strengthens. "Myself? I fought very hard to become who I am now, Jane,

but you and your mother were always my first priority. And what do I get in return? You shamed my name. No matter how hard I tried to hide it, everybody knows you live in the docks now. My own daughter became an Eta, dressed in rags, wrinkles on her face. Come back, see things from my own perspective, and I will send the girl where she belongs." The man bows his head and the virtual geisha appears, obscuring his face. "Thank you for calling," she says. The screen empties.

The c-vehicle transporting her lands on the roof. She descends the stairs and finds herself at the entrance. Her family home is not printed. It's a proper house, a built one, its walls made of rough gray stone reminiscent of Dublin rather than Tokyo. As far as her eye can see there are green gardens brimming with flowers, small bridges, trees, all these things Maeme has only seen on screen, that she herself has forgotten were real, hidden as they are behind the walls that separate the house from the rest of the city. She hesitates for a bit in front of that forgotten beauty, then turns around, touches her index finger on the reception and the heavy door opens. She would really like to know if he added her fingerprint now or never removed it.

She enters and starts walking down the wide corridor, as if she never left. The walls are all white. The living room door opens. She glances at the sparse white furniture, at the sculpture-laden tokonoma in front of the window. Not even a single miniature has been added to it. Everything is so clean and bright it looks fake.

On her left is the door leading to the basement. If indeed nothing has changed, the kitchen and the control room are down there. She leaves behind another door on her left, her father's office. The corridor turns, on the right her mother's bedroom, on the left her own. She enters. It's just as it was when she left. She takes her clothes off and enters her personal bathroom. She caresses the towels, as soft as stuffed animals, jasmine-scented.

The hot water is abundant and she smiles thinking of the barrel on her boat, filled with dirty water. She leaves the bathroom and head to her wardrobe, followed by a cloud of steam. She finds a tight blue dress and puts it on. It's not so tight anymore. The garbage heap has dried her out. She picks her overcoat from the floor and searches around inside its pockets. A small cylinder, well wrapped. Not needed – yet. She goes for the other pocket and touches the robodoll. Shino has planted an information server inside. She caresses the faded hair and the eyes open and close. *End-beginning. End-beginning.*

"Jane-san." She turns abruptly and sees the familiar geisha smiling on the small screen by the door. "Mr. Tenoke is waiting for you in his office," she says and the screen switches off. She puts a pair of boots on, straightens her body and walks out of her room.

She descends the stairs to the basement and hesitates in front of the kitchen door on the left. Two cooks and a young girl washing dishes stop their work and bow. She knows the elder cook, he used to make dago for her when she was little.

She walks straight ahead. The storage room is still at the end of the corridor; the control room is on her right, where it has always been. From there, you can monitor the whole house. As soon as the two guards see her, they get up and bow. One is much taller than the other and seems more senior or at least more assured. She greets them with a nod, and leaves the basement.

She ascends the stairs, walks down the white corridor and stands outside her father's office before opening the door. Sixteen steps from the entrance to the chair opposite his desk. Her legs tremble but she makes it there, sits cross-legged and looks at him, all expression wiped from her face.

"Not even a handshake, Jane?" he asks and she tries to ignore her churning insides and remember that this predatory gaze does not belong to her son.

"Why not kidnap me?" she asks, motionless.

"I asked you to return many times. You are the only person I've got, my family. To bring you back by force and lock you inside a room would be meaningless. The only thing that would hold some meaning would be for you to understand me. To feel that this here is your home, Jane."

She looks him straight in the eye. "My name is Akane now, and I understand you better than you think. I know what you're doing. Everyone at the boats know. The docks are full of ruined children."

His face burns red. "These children are ruined from the start. What future is there for the offspring of the Eta? At least this way they get to help sick people to feel alive and healthy again. Useful people, respectable people."

"People who cover up for you. And nobody's doing anything to stop you, because you have them cornered. And now, you've cornered me, too. So to get to the point: you asked me to come and here I am. So where's Maeme?"

"Do not be impatient," he says, his color going back to normal. "You will see her, eventually."

"Why not now? Why not let her go?"

"Because you must prove yourself worthy, Jane. If I leave her now, you will leave too. Leave, without making any effort to understand me."

"Leave how? I know you can catch her again anytime. Is she all right? Is she here?" she asks.

"She's fine. When the time comes, you will see her."

"Why can't she stay with me?"

"You'll waste your time nannying Eta kids? If you do have to take care of someone, your son and I are here, and we need you, Jane."

Akane lowers her eyes. "Of course. Your needs come first. Have you ever wondered how I feel to see my child's body a puppet in your hands? If you did think of me, even for a little bit, you would be in your own body when talking to me."

She stands up and goes for the door.

"I don't have a body of my own anymore, Akane," she hears him say and it's as if thousands of kilowatts course through her body.

She's awake for some time now, but she doesn't want to get up. Lying on her side, she looks at the robodoll and all she can think of is end-beginning.

She's spent a week in this fucking house trying to gather her wits, but it keeps slipping beyond reason. Her father's dead and nobody's found out. No. Her son's dead, and nobody's found out.

And she must now finally take it in that all the promises that Hiro might, at some point, become himself again, were empty.

And she must keep living. She must concentrate, because she hasn't found Maeme yet. She must work things out.

She has seen doctors going upstairs; a small clinic had been set up there, when her father was terminally ill. But what are the doctors doing there now, since his body doesn't exist anymore?

The guard did not let her in when she tried to go there. What the hell? Everybody knows she's the boss' daughter and nobody bothers her. Just yesterday she stood outside his office door and the guards were definitely watching her from the control room, and still nobody came to remove her.

She didn't mean to stand there for so long. Her father had a visitor, a 'friend' is what he said. And she could hear them through the door. *Have you ever experienced a girl's orgasm?* He asked. *Or her pain under the razor? The screen sensors cannot match this kind of quality and, eventually, they're harmful to the brain cells. No, we never use humans of course. Only Eta.* She didn't want to hear anything else, but her legs wouldn't carry her away. It took her some time to be able to move, to leave the corridor.

The only silver lining is that the robodoll's server is functioning.

She looks at Shino's message again. He managed to hack the house's approved visitor list; Danny forged IDs using the names of two old acquaintances of hers, whose last visit was years ago. The guards are new, so they've never seen their actual faces. *He*, of course, might remember them, but he's not in the house in the mornings. She will welcome them to the house, they will block the monitoring system, they will use the computers to draw a good sum of money to a different account. She will grab Maeme and they will go away. A simple plan. An end to their old life, the beginning of a new one. It can be done. She only has to locate her.

She touches a metal plaque by her bed, and the window coverings lift. She gets to her feet and runs to the wardrobe. She puts on a black vinyl bodysuit, the one with the most revealing bustier, and black boots. The shelf under the mirror is full of cosmetics, their expiration day long past. She puts on some lipstick, fixes her hair hurriedly and walks down to the basement.

First, a stop at the kitchen. She tells the cook she missed the dago he used to make her. They make small talk, smile a bit, and then she goes away.

Suddenly, she turns around as if she just remembered something and enters the control room. The same pair of guards get up to greet her, and their bodies hide most of the screen on the wall behind them.

"Jane-san," says the tall one, leaning his head slightly. "Can we help you with anything?"

Akane imagines him shrinking down to a cockroach, she ready to step on him. She holds that image in her mind as she asks "If I want to go out, what c-vehicle can I get?"

The tall guy answers something she listens to with as much interest as she would give to dead language chants, while the short one is hooked to her décolletage, trying to only look at it with his peripheral vision and failing spectacularly. Akane focuses behind them. One edge of the screen is projecting an up-

per floor chamber. Three beds, three children. One of them is Maeme.

She turns her gaze away, trying not to scream, and hears the guard cough discreetly.

"I'm having two friends over, later on," she says, raising her chin slightly.

"Of course, Jane-san. As long as they're on the approved visitor list."

"Of course they are. Koji Arimoto and Ben Iwao," she says sternly and then turns her back and leaves.

She's climbing up the stairs when she sees him, standing outside the living room's door.

Shit.

"I need to talk to you," he says, opening the door for her.

"You don't need to. You demand to," she answers, sitting on the white couch.

"Listen, child," he says, sending shivers down her spine. "I want you to take over one of the subsidiaries. Forget about old times. Feel like a part of the family again. Make a new start."

"Perhaps I can take over a health-related one. Isn't that where you do your dirty work with the mindhosts?"

A vein pumps up on his forehead. "Let us talk about the mindhosts. Pain does sculpt a person. I'm talking about true pain, physical pain. We all think we have principles, until pain tests us. You're alone, no one by your side, and pain becomes unbearable. Drugs don't work anymore and you're only free of pain when you're sedated." He looks at her directly now. "And then, someone offers you a chance. A chance to be free of all that. Are you certain you wouldn't grab it with both hands? Family is sacred, but survival is an instinct." He looks away again. "I didn't know it would happen like this. All I wanted was some space. I tried to make it work for both of us. But it felt as if someone's sitting on a narrow chair. You need to sit down, but there's no space for you. Give me some space, you

tell them, but they have nowhere to go either. To finally sit down you have to push them off. Do you understand?"

Akane keeps her eyes on him. "I do understand survival. But once you saved yourself, you attempted to profit from others' need to survive, didn't you? And you didn't even stop there. You ended up renting children to perverts. So what happened? After your principles lost the battle, you decided to annihilate them completely?" She keeps her voice steady. "And the lying. You kept telling me Hiro would wake up again. Never-ending lies. You're alone because no one can stand you." She pauses. "Let me see Maeme again. Stop this beastly business. Then I'll know you're human, once again."

He stays silent for a bit, then turns his eyes back to her. "You're exactly like me, Akane. You never give any ground. She's sedated now. I will ask them to stop medicating her, and on the afternoon we can go see her. And now, I must go."

Akane leaves the living room. For the first time in so many days she feels a little bit lighter, a little bit more willing to live.

Danny and Shino are sitting on the living room couch, as a servant offers them sake. Danny is looking at her silently, Shino downs it in one gulp and Akane glares at him.

She's no idea where they got the suits. The one Shino is wearing stretches with his every movement, fighting to contain his muscles. Danny's on the other hand, seems bespoke. As soon as the servant leaves, Danny takes a tiny, flat plaque from under his tongue and removes something resembling a bobby pin from his hair. When you're an Eta, you know where to hide and where to find what.

Akane smiles waving towards the open door. "I hope you don't mind, but I've asked for a c-vehicle to be ready for us, in case you two would like to go out later on. I've missed the city," she says. Danny has placed the plaque by his thigh, carves something with the pin.

"Whatever you prefer. We haven't seen you in so long," Shino says, getting up to close the door.

Danny stops fiddling after a while. "Done," he says in a low voice.

"What's done?" Akane and Shino ask in tandem.

"I hacked the cameras," Danny says and shrugs.

"Are they on a loop?" Shino asks, staring at him.

"Yeah, of your mum," Danny starts saying, but Akane cuts him off.

"Shut up. Danny, I'll get you to his office. Whatever intel I gathered on his transactions is recorded in there," she says and shows the robodoll, which she's placed on the tokonoma. Danny approaches it and touches the plaque on its belly. He grabs the pin again while Akane says, "Try to get as little as possible from as many accounts as you can. We'll go pick Maeme and meet you on the roof. The c-vehicle must be ready by now. If something turns sour, take it and leave."

"What about me?" Shino asks, raising an eyebrow.

"You, you should have found a better suit." She smiles and opens the door.

She walks Danny to the office door, and he walks straight to the leather ergonomic chair, plops himself in front of the computer screen. He looks so much the part that for a moment the dread she's been feeling subsides and she wonders why he left his position in the stock market to go live in the docks.

On the other hand, Danny looks at home no matter where he is.

"Everything's going to be all right," he says winking at her, and she almost believes him. She smiles at him, and leaves the office for her room. She picks up her old overcoat, puts it on and removes the small cylinder from its pocket. Its time has come; she unpacks it. A small device containing whatever she managed to salvage from the n-spray.

Enough to take out ten people.

She puts it back in her pocket and returns to the living room, where Shino's still waiting for her. "Let's go." She smiles brightly, standing in the open door.

By the time they reach the stairs and start climbing them, she guffaws loudly. Once they get on top, she turns to the guard.

"Open the door," she says, paying him no attention. "My friend here doesn't believe we have a hospital set up here. I have to show him."

"I am sorry, Jane-san. My instructions are very precise," the guard says, lowering his head. Shino jumps at him, closing his huge hands around his throat.

"Open up. Now," he whispers.

The guard tries to scream, but Shino squeezes harder. His face's turning red, his eyes bulge, but he makes no move to open the door.

"Do you want to die?" Shino asks. "Just open the door, and I'll let you go."

The guard lifts his hand, punches the code on the small screen. Just as the final click is heard, Shino hits him on the back on his head and puts him down slowly. They push the door and enter together.

Akane's heart beats steady, slow.

In front of them a corridor leads to a window with a garden view. On their left, there are glass chambers; inside the third chamber lie two boys and a girl. The girl is Maeme.

And she's still drugged.

She grabs them one after another. "Wake up, wake up," as loudly as she dares to. The boys don't move at all. Maeme opens her eyes, moans, closes her eyes again.

Shino steps forward, picks Maeme in his arms. They get out, stepping over the guard, start descending the stairs.

She stops before they set foot on the corridor. No sounds come from the basement. They must still be fooled by Danny's trick. She caresses Maeme's hair.

"Wait here," she tells Shino and walks briskly to her father's office. She opens the door and suddenly, all her blood freezes inside her body. Danny's standing up, back turned to the door. Behind the desk sits *him*, a c-gun in his hand.

"You're not making this easy, Jane," he says calmly. "You didn't have to go through all that. All I wanted was some time with you and a second chance. But you're too much like me. And now, it's time to choose."

He points at the screen with his free hand. "Choice number one. Your friend here invaded a private residence, in order to hack my accounts. He even managed to steal quite the sum. I can kill him in self-defense. Meanwhile you just shout and the other guy runs away with the girl. No idea how far they'll get, but let's say I will give them a head start."

Danny's fingers begin to tremble.

"Choice number two," he continues. "Since I'm in no actual danger from your friend here, I let him live, but I let the guard know Maeme's on the run and they take her out on the stairs. There's space for one person only, Jane. Let that be a lesson that no matter what you choose sometimes, there's always going to be pain."

She can't see Danny's eyes, but his hands are shaking now. "I came here for you, Akane," he says.

"She's here because of me too. I cannot abandon her," she says moving to the desk. Sixteen steps. "So kill him," she screams, trying to remember the man behind her desk is not her son but a puppet made of him. But she's a puppet too now, a body without a heart moving entirely through momentum. She reaches the desk, tightening her fingers around the n-spray inside her pockets.

He raises the gun. A silent shot and the sound of Danny's body, hitting the floor. She needs to cry but there is no time for that. She is already running. She is running towards him. She hides her face in the overcoat's lapels and sprays the entire thing on the man looking at her, the mouth half-open still.

"Make space, you asshole," she shouts, hoping he can still hear her. His body's melting so fast his scream's cut short.

She throws the spray and runs to the door, struggling not to take in Danny's body, the red puddle spreading from his head. Her hand is burning, her eyes are swimming in tears. *Don't lose it now. End-beginning.*

Shino still stands on the stairs, Maeme in his arms. "Danny?" he asks.

She tries not to look back, at the office door. She half-lowers her head. "We have to leave. Now," she says through gritted teeth, pulling at his sleeve.

Maeme's eyes are still closed as they get up the stairs. Just as they flicker a little, she can hear footsteps from the basement. She turns her head and a guard appears in the corner of her eye. The tall one. Of course.

"Run," she hears Shino say, climbing the steps two at a time. The guard raises his gun, points at Shino. At Maeme. She turns to run, but hesitates.

No matter what you chose, there's always going to be pain.

She takes the n-spray out of her pocket and makes sure the guard sees her do it. Shino keeps running. The guard turns the gun to her. Shino now reaches the top step, approaches the c-vehicle, pushes Maeme in just as her eyes are opening. Akane takes a step down, towards the guard. He's pointing at her directly now.

She feels the first bullet somewhere close to her heart. Maeme opens her eyes –beginning – and before her own eyes close, she can hear her shout her name. "Akane" – end.

A Short History of Science Fiction in Greece

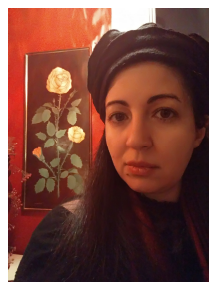
DIMITRA NIKOLAIDOU

Supposedly, the Greeks did it first. And then they promptly forgot how to do it, for thousands of years.

The first work of science fiction is assumed to be Lucian's *True History*, written in the 2nd century BCE. However, despite the illustrious beginning, a myriad of geopolitical, cultural and historical factors resulted in science fiction being not only neglected, but also unwelcome in Greece in the first half of the 20th century. Thankfully, during the seventies this perception shifted really fast, and the current science fiction scene is not only vibrant and productive but also boasts several transnational successes. The course of Greek science fiction from literary pariah to cultural capital reveals a lot not only about the country, but about the genre itself.

NO TIME FOR THE FUTURE

As with most things in Greece, the roots of the story go really, really deep. Following the liberation of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of the Greek state in 1830, the country's literary scene was entirely occupied by a single, Herculean task: to establish a Greek identity and define the nation, after a centuries-long occupation. Interestingly, this endeavor was



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heavily influenced by outside forces: the Philhellenes' idealized image of Greece; the direct influence of Bavaria, France and England; and finally, the fact that most Greek scholars of that time had studied abroad and had returned immersed in naturalism and romanticism.

The urgency of forging a viable national identity combined with the constant political upheavals, meant that Greek literature was focused only on what was termed "serious matters," with rare exceptions made for stories of romance. Escapism definitely was not on the cards, as Greek authors were too busy with mapping the present to indulge in imagining different futures. While the cause was worthwhile, unfortunately this attitude ensured that the Greek literary scene was quickly shaping up to be quite elitist. While the newly emergent genre fiction elicited raised eyebrows in the entire West, its dismissal in Greece carried an added weight: to bother with genre meant you were turning your back to the urgent business of the present.

Things got worse before getting better. After the end of World War II, Greece had the unfortunate honour of being the starting point of the Cold War. The country belonged in the Western sphere of influence, however the heroic role of the Left during the war had made it immensely popular. The Greek Civil War that ensued resulted in wide anti-American sentiments, equally prevalent left, right and center. In this situation, genre fiction was once again viewed as unwanted escapism, but science fiction in particular had it even worse: it was considered emblematic of American imperialist ideals, a tool of propaganda, a Trojan horse of both problematic ideology and of the type of lowbrow culture whose only purpose was to brainwash citizens. Neither the genre's proletarian roots nor the existence of visionary, progressive authors protected it from these aspersions.

In the 1960s however, as the country had very slowly began to heal from the Civil War, some first attempts were made to begin translating science fiction. Notably, the first three to be

translated were not American but Russian, French, British and Polish (K. Volkov, Pierre Benoit, James Hilton, Edward Forster and Stanislaw Lem). Still, in total, only 12 works of science fiction were translated into Greek in the sixties. The only exception is Jules Verne, whose work was categorized as children's fiction and thus flew under the radar. Unfortunately, the 1967 military coup that installed a seven year-long junta would freeze even that meager attempt at introducing science fiction in the country.

BEYOND THE STONE AGE

Thankfully for science fiction and Greece in general, the military Junta fell in 1974, the troublesome monarchy was finally abolished, and political life finally stabilized. Having an interest in genre fiction was suddenly less contentious, and it became evident that there was a huge demand for science fiction in particular. In 1977, anthologies and collections began to appear in bookshops. European and Russian science fiction was popular, though American authors were also translated and anthologized. In just three short years, hundreds of works (anthologies, novels and short stories) found their way to the readers and even the first dedicated magazine titled *Nova* edited by Angelos Mastorakis (more on him later) made an appearance. By 1980, the political climate was completely stable and the cultural landscape had shifted. There was by now a hunger for imported cultural products, a desire to open up, do away with the past and consume what was new and fresh. There was also a need to go beyond the junta's obsession with tradition and antiquity. Science fiction fulfilled all those needs – this was, after all, finally a moment to look into the future and imagine what could be.

This is not to say that science fiction has suddenly become mainstream. Both Domna Pastourmatzi and Christos Lazos, a

Greek science fiction writer, editor and researcher, mention that gatekeeping was alive and well and genre was still looked down upon and termed para-literature (even though they both leave political implications out of their observations). In particular, Pastourmatzi notes that Kedros, the first publishing house to translate science fiction into Greek, received such backlash in literary circles that the publisher felt obliged to publish an expansive series of classical authors of antiquity, as a peace offering and as a testament to his seriousness.

However, as is evident from the numbers, among the public science fiction was in high demand; furthermore, Greek authors were also finally engaging with the genre. Makis Panoorios, the beloved journalist Freddy Germanos and George Balanos began penning science fiction. Balanos was also a driving force behind Aurora, a pulp publishing house that literally popularized the genre by creating series of mass market paperbacks that were sold not only in bookshops, but also in Greece's numerous kiosks. The low quality of Aurora paperbacks helped them fly under the critics' radar, and like that they introduced speculative fiction to a wider public. In the nineties, fans of the genre began finding each other (helped by the emerging World Wide Web). More fanzines came out; publishers imitated Aurora's success and introduced even more authors to the public. There was still a preference for the classics, and the genre was now dominated by male, white and western authors, but the full spectrum of science fiction was slowly finding its way towards the Greek market.

Perhaps the most important step forward though came with the publication of the weekly magazine *Ennea* as a supplement in the mainstream *Eleftherotypia* newspaper, with Angelos Mastorakis as the editor. *Ennea* was focused on comics. However, it included one short story in each issue written either by a foreign or a Greek author. Its success helped the genre get mainstream recognition.

In 1998, ALEF or the Athens Club of Science Fiction was established (Angelos Mastorakis being once again one of the founding members). Dedicated publishing houses and bookshops sprang and clubs convened. Short term fanzines started to circulate. The future was there.

DIGITAL REVOLUTIONS

The turn of the century brought with it the acceptance of speculative fiction into the mainstream. The advent of the Internet, the popularity of adult gaming and the *Lord of the Rings* movies meant that fantasy and science fiction were no longer nerdy hobbies for secluded weirdos. ALEF and the Greek Tolkien society (2002), both well organized groups with international contacts, as well as the online literary workshop sff.gr (2003), finally allowed Greek speculative fans to congregate, organize screenings and conferences, and attend workshops together. Despite the difficulties inherent in all small markets, a literary scene was developing fast.

Interestingly, while Greek fantasy was essentially colonized by Anglo-Saxon tropes, clichés and conventions, science fiction proved to be a different case: the scene had a distinct voice from the start. Greek authors were more likely to avoid themes of space exploration, cyber revolutions and grand adventures. Their work mostly focused on the invasion of technology in our everyday life, fear of authoritarianism and surveillance, isolation and alienation. Given the history of the country and the lingering trauma, this was to be expected. Pessimism and dystopia were more likely protagonists than the hope for a bright new world which was to be found in so much early works of science fiction written abroad. The fact that Greece was not on the cutting edge of technological revolutions, but was still importing innovations, also meant

that authors were more likely to choose these themes over wonder and utopia.

Authors had another reason to be pessimistic: Publishers considered the investment in Greek author a financial risk, plus the stigma of para-literature had not completely subsided. Still, Ennea, ALEF's anthologies and Aurora paperbacks were likely outlets for short stories, some minor publishing houses did trust Greek authors, and more literary-minded creators could approach mainstream or arthouse publishers – as long as their work could still be read as an allegory. All in all, the publishing landscape was rough. The 2010 financial crisis however brought with it vanity presses and self-publishing houses. While these outlets could not guarantee quality, they at least provided further opportunities for publication and allowed more people than before to enter the budding scene.

As an alternative to these options, Greek authors also turned their gaze abroad. The Internet had made international markets much more approachable. Publication abroad promised better financial compensation and additionally, carried a certain status which in turn helped the authors be recognized back in Greece. This turn towards foreign markets was assisted by ALEF's outward gaze, and the work of the Tales of the Wyrld workshop which translates Greek speculative fiction into English. Both institutions actively try to export authors' work.

But turning towards foreign markets would prove to go beyond offering authors some much needed motivation. It would cause shifts in the Greek science fiction scene.

Writing in a foreign language is not only a matter of fluency. One has to recognize the trends and movements, align as much as possible with a different culture and safeguard what makes their own culture unique. One area where that need became very obvious was sociocultural issues. The Greek speculative scene was never regressive; rather the opposite. Although the political conversations have subsided significantly since the early 80s, the scene's majority has always aligned with pro-

gressive ideas and certainly did not tolerate extremists. Still, as the Anglo-Saxon market became ultra-focused on facing the problematic aspects of speculative fiction, and rooting out misogyny, homophobia and colonial narratives, Greek authors hoping to publish abroad found they had to take this conversation into account in their own work. As a result, speculative fiction (including of course science fiction) now finds itself in the vanguard of progressiveness – a rather ironic turn considering the accusations it had to face for decades. The downside of course is that the more authors take their cues from US culture wars in the hopes of publishing in the English-speaking market, the more they conform to a norm dictated elsewhere, ironically confirming the overblown fears that SF would be a US-driven Trojan horse. In truth, Greek SF is at its best when it opens up to the world while remaining true to its own character – but what is that character exactly?

A BUDDING SCENE

To answer we need to see who are the authors making up the Greek science fiction squad. I will share some names whose work is easy to find even outside Greece, though my list won't do justice to the number of authors who are producing quality work. Michalis Manolios whose award-winning short story "Aethra" was translated in different languages marked the beginning. Another author with staying power is Kostas Charitos, whose work has recently appeared in *Future Fiction Digest*. Christine Lucas is the most prolific among Greek speculative fiction authors. Her work is published in pro magazines including *F&SF* and *Nightmare*. Natalia Theodoridou, who won the World Fantasy Award, and Eugenia Triantafyllou, twice nominated for a Nebula, are among the most well known Greek authors abroad. The work of Elena Castroianni, Victor Pseftakis, Atalanti Evripidou, Antony Paschos and myself have also ap-

peared in pro magazines. Other acclaimed authors include Hephæstion Christopoulos, Abraham Kawa and Vasso Christou. As an addendum, I would note that most of these authors are also members of ALEF, whose workshops and anthologies are perhaps the best starting point for anyone who wants to be acquainted with Greek science fiction – in particular the anthology *Nova Hellas*, already translated in English, Italian and Japanese.

Of course, there is also a cadre of science fiction writers who publish with mainstream houses and are not heavily involved with the scene (neither have they published in English), but whose work is of course part of the canon, including Ioannis Makropoulos and Yannis Adamis. These authors are more likely to be celebrated in literary circles, thus breaking down the remaining taboos on the genre. George Balanos and Makis Panorios continue producing work and have a loyal fanbase. Finally, one could round up their overview of science fiction by looking at comic books – Abraham Kawa, Ilias Kyriazis and Steve Stivaktis immediately come to mind.

Can one detect a common trend in the works of these authors and creators? To answer that I will have to abandon the bird's eye view and offer a subjective observation. Despite the scene's small size, the resulting work is truly diverse in terms of themes, style and even sub-genre. As noted before, even if Greece discovered science fiction relatively late, authors made it their own almost immediately, eschewing the "homage" phase which often results in derivative works. As a result, the work of each author is a completely different experience. However, some trends are obvious.

Greek science fiction for the most part continues to focus more on what can go wrong with science rather than what can go right. The fear of societal collapse tends to be evident in many of the most acclaimed Greek SF works. Currently, environmental catastrophe has been added to the evils of unchecked capitalism and together they represent the genre's

main villain. Authoritarianism is often a lurking danger in Greek science fiction worldbuilding, never to be forgotten or dismissed. Later works focused heavily on the refugee and financial crises; interestingly, science fiction writers were quick to include refugees as protagonists and also quick to cast racists, financiers, marketing managers and authority figures as favourite villains.

Of course the country's bloody history could easily explain this trend, but then again what European country had it easy? Another factor is probably the 19th century literary dictate, mentioned in the beginning of the article, commanding authors to focus on "serious matters" only. It is hard to get rid of the idea that fiction is not worth it unless it's making an observation or solving a problem. For authors who have struggled to be taken seriously despite their talent because of the genre they chose to write in, straying from the dictate can be even harder. And thus, Greek science fiction continues to be focused on mostly grim futures: the darker the narrative, the more likely it is to be critically acclaimed.

Equally interesting though is another trend I keep noticing: while science fiction writers over 35 favor hard dystopias and cynical protagonists, and always showcase their darkest elements, younger authors are rejecting the cynicism and turning towards more hopeful universes (still dystopian of course!) where solidarity and the fight against systemic injustices is presented as the only solution to the future's problems. The downcast view of the future seems to give way to a different way of imagining.

Both strands of science fiction though, have one thing in common: the underlying hope that no matter how harsh the conditions, how hopeless the fight and how awful the world, there's no surrendering and no giving up; there will always be another day, and perseverance is the name of the game. This will to keep fighting despite all odds has characterized Greek fans, authors and works of science fiction alike. With recogni-

tion of their work increasing year by year, it seems that Greek SF has been prophetic all along.

Interview With Nebula Nominee Eugenia Triantafyllou

HEPHAESTION CHRISTOPOULOS

Eugenia Triantafyllou is a Greek author and artist with a flair for dark things. Her work has been nominated for the Ignyte, Nebula, and World Fantasy Awards, and she is a graduate of Clarion West Writers Workshop. You can find her stories in *Uncanny*, *Apex*, *Strange Horizons*, and other venues. She currently lives in Athens with a boy and a dog. Find her on Twitter @foxesandroses or her website eugeniatriantafyllou.wordpress.com

You emerged from an unpublished Greek writer to a twice Nebula nominee. For many of us, there has been a period of silence from you, till you suddenly started publishing stories in English in pro-paying markets. Can you tell us how this came to be and what the turning point was?

What happened in that "lost" time was that I moved to Sweden and had to adjust to a new country as well as face some other personal challenges. On the writing front I was trying to adjust my writing voice in English by reading a lot of short fiction by contemporary writers while simultaneously trying to improve in other areas.



What followed was a series of short story submissions and subsequent rejections, and I was changing and evolving my style with each new story. They weren't many. It took me a while to finish each new piece, partly because I wrote slower back then and because of the adjustment period. During that process my partner Yorgos and my friend Natalia were invaluable to my writing development and supported me emotionally.

The turning point was a horror story that I wrote in English from a prompt Natalia had given us at the Greek writing fo-

rum sff.gr. That was the first story I wrote in English that had strong Greek themes in it and didn't feel like as much of an effort to write. I have included a great deal of what I would later consider my voice in that story. It got a lot of close call rejections until it was ultimately accepted in *Black Static* which qualified me to join the Codex writing forum which in my early writing days proved to be (and still is) a valuable resource.

You have written stories in several genres, from classic horror ("Cherry Wood Coffin") to speculative fiction concerning current social issues ("My Country is a Ghost", your first Nebula nomination). Is there a genre you feel more comfortable with? And, for that matter, did you choose speculative fiction deliberately or would you say that it chose you?

Folk horror or folk dark fantasy comes easier to me as a tone or style. I don't want to say genre because it feels much more specific than that. But generally dark fantasy is something that's more natural to me and comes from years and years of listening to or reading dark folk tales. For me the genre a potential idea falls in doesn't matter beyond the fact that it helps me not stagnate. I like to switch up genres and find the right tone/world for a story because it stimulates my mind. Changing genres or combining two or more genres keeps me engaged in the story and gives me a new perspective every time.

I would say that I happened upon speculative fiction. I went from creating comics (at a very crude/early stage) to joining the Greek SFF forum I spoke of above, after it was suggested to me. The first thing I saw was a short sci-fi story competition to which I jumped right in without thinking too much about it, as one does. I am glad that I did because I enjoy stretching my imagination to create worlds and complex metaphors that reflect upon the world we live in.

When we say speculative fiction, I guess this implies that what isn't speculative fiction must be literary fiction. But for

me it is not a binary and if it were, the other side would be called realistic fiction. Although, even realistic fiction is still fiction and therefore it's fake realism (as Le Guin would say). As I said, I enjoy using my imagination as much as each story allows and stretch the limits of what is fantastical, surreal, horrific and wondrous in all possible directions. Realism therefore would not work for me as well, although I don't rule out the possibility in the future. I do write fabulist fiction sometimes, which is the closest I have gotten to realism.

But writing speculative fiction doesn't mean that you can't incorporate literary elements. Literary fiction is a genre like fantasy, horror, and science fiction are genres, and if we are mixing genres we can just as well do it with literary fiction too. Personally, I think my stories linger somewhere in the spectrum of literary and speculative at various degrees each time. My plan for future projects is to combine as many different elements from different genres in such a seamless way that the product will be really hard to place but, hopefully, still possible to enjoy.

Apart from the two nominations, which moment in your career up till now would you say is closest to your heart?

I think my first acceptance, the one in *Black Static*, was a very welcome and a much-needed surprise. I still hold the feeling of someone trusting me and publishing my first story close to my heart.

Another one was my acceptance to Clarion West Writers Workshop because of all the new experiences I got to live and the people I got to meet in a country so far away and so removed from my everyday life.

Can you share with us a few things about your experience at the Clarion West workshop?

I don't know what to say because it was such an all-encompassing experience that it's hard to describe. In those six weeks I met some of my favourite writers, I made friends that I will have for life, I attended some eye-opening lectures on writing and partied every week with interesting and fun people in some mind-blowing locations. I also got to travel so far away and see a completely new country with a very different perspective.

It was important for me as a writer who publishes in the US from a small country in another continent to meet people of my extended sff community. We don't realize — or perhaps we do — how little access we have to major writing cons, to agents and publishers, to workshops, and to a more expanded sff community. Things that are taken for granted in some places, like scholarships, creative writing workshops, and residencies, sound almost unrealistic here. And it puts us at a disadvantage, even though we have a lot of talent brewing in Greece and in the Balkans.

One thing that struck me and changed how I viewed my writing and myself up until that moment, was that everyone in Seattle took me seriously as a writer. I didn't have to explain how much money I made, and if that money was enough to pay all the bills, or part of the bills, or if my writing included short stories or novels. If I said I was a writer it meant that I was treated like one. What I said was taken at face value. We tend to underestimate how much emotional support and peer response can have an impact on our progress. Many people think that being a harsh critic and assigning only capitalistic value to art will push someone to reach their full potential. But that's almost never true. In Seattle I saw how genuine support and kind and nuanced feedback make all the difference in the world. Writers are already plagued by self-doubt. Reinforcing that self-doubt with harsh criticism disguised as constructive criticism only makes matters worse.

Since I left Seattle in 2019 the Clarion West people keep working hard to improve their workshop environment and to

become more inclusive of different experiences and writing styles. I hope that one day I will be able to give back to that community and also help more writers from Greece and the Balkans attend the workshop or create an equivalent somewhere in our area. Being part of a writing community is something I have found to be invaluable. It's why I am so excited for our class's reunion this July in Boston.

What were the problems you faced when you first started writing in a foreign language? How does it feel writing in a language other than your mother tongue now?

As I mentioned above, finding my voice and feeling confident in using it was one of the hardest things that took me the longest to achieve. Another thing that took a lot of practice was not getting tired while writing in English. Because English wasn't the language I was most comfortable writing in, I tended to summarize the stories and the plots just to get to the end. I had to stop myself many times and focus on one moment in the story in order to unpack and flesh out the scene, add detail and ground it. Once I managed to do this, things fell into place quite fast.

Nowadays writing in English feels easier, not because I am fluent in English, but because my writing brain is used to my English voice more than my Greek one. That doesn't mean I don't have sentences pop in my head in Greek or that I don't struggle to remember the right word in English, but the musicality of my English voice is something I can invoke with ease. There is a certain rhythm in my English prose that I am not sure I have in Greek.

Still, there are a lot of things to improve. Personal goals related to my writing: how to make it more compelling, broaden my skillset. I still struggle with unknown words and expressions and trying to find my way around those. Dialogue is hard to

get it to sound natural and that's why I use very little of it in general. But I will get there one day or at least get closer.

Self-doubt and procrastination: two of the writers' greatest enemies. Do you ever have to face them and, if yes, how do you deal with them?

All the time. In fact, 90% of my writing life is made up of both of these and only 10% is actual writing.

Jokes aside I did and I still do have a great level of self-doubt, especially when it comes to trying out something new, like a reading of my story, or a panel, or writing for an IP. Anything new is full of uncertainty. But many already familiar things still entail a level of self-doubt for me. I don't think that's a bad thing necessarily. Sometimes it just means that I need to research or think something over for a longer time. Or that this project means a lot to me and I am afraid I might break it. Sometimes though it is bad. When I first started writing fiction in English, I thought about giving up every day. Yorgos and Natalia kept pushing and encouraging me and if it weren't for them, I probably wouldn't be here now.

Procrastination is a slightly different beast that can sometimes come from self-doubt. If I am unsure of how to handle a new project it's more possible that I will try to avoid it than when I feel more confident in it. Then, there is the procrastination that comes from burnout, and for that the best solution is to just wait it out and be good to myself. After Clarion West I didn't write anything for a whole year (I did revise "My Country is a Ghost" that was written during the workshop and sent it to *Uncanny Magazine*, but that was it). I think this was the right choice because it allowed me to process the experience of being in CW and think of the lessons I learned there, but also recharge my batteries.

If someone hasn't read any of your stories, how would you describe yourself as a writer to them?

That's the hardest question in the whole interview. It's hard to self-describe, but I'll make an effort. I guess "the weirder. the better" is a good description for me. I enjoy writing about bodies in general and always manage to insert elements of body horror in almost everything I write, even if it's a story that has a lighter tone.

I enjoy creating worlds and giving a mythic quality to the stories even when they are set in a science fictional environment. I enjoy creating fairy tales and myths from scratch or taking apart existing fairy tales and using their elements in ways that make it hard to tell where they have come from.

I have a fascination with family and familial relationships. Especially between mothers and daughters but also between sisters. These two kinds of familial relationships are part of my writing obsessions. Dark stories are the ones that help me explore those relationships the best. I tend to write quiet heart-break.

As much as I enjoy creating imaginary worlds, I have found that I enjoy writing about Greece in a slightly slanted way, not the way non-Greeks see it, but also not the way Greeks traditionally write about it. I am trying to find my own way to write about Greece. Invent how to approach the country, the culture, and the people, in a manner that cuts through the noise of preconceptions in order to get to the core. Write stories that tell truths about us but are also universally understood.

Suppose you win the award. What comes next? What are your aspirations for the future?

I didn't win the award as I am answering this question so the joke's on you! (but mostly on me). But that is okay because be-

ing in a ballot like the Nebulas or the World Fantasy Award is an honour and an accomplishment in and by itself. And to be honest, winning wouldn't have changed much (although I would have gotten a pretty cool trophy). My plan would still be the same.

The plan is to write as many different things as I can. I want to write for comics (again) and maybe game writing if the opportunity arises (hello *Horizon Game Series!*). I want to write more tie-in fiction in IPs that I enjoy consuming myself and I want to write novels. How many of these dreams will come true remains to be seen. I just want to tell as many stories as I possibly can.