The Ottoman Connection

Contemporary Science Fiction from Türkiye



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Editorial

MICHAEL K. IWOLEIT

For a German writer like me, editing a Germany-based magazine intended for a global audience, it is hardly possible to compile an issue like the present one without having the history and current situation of Turks in Germany in the back of my head, let alone the peculiar position of Turkey in the transition zone between Europe and the Near East, between the Christian and the Islamic world. Since a recruitment agreement was signed between Germany and Turkey in 1961, at the height of the post-war *Wirtschaftswunder* era in Germany when foreign workers (»Gastarbeiter«/»guest workers«, as we called them) were needed, the Turkish community in Germany has grown to about three million people. Half of them were born in Germany, up to the third generation. Also about half of them have become German citizens. Turks, many still with strong ties to their home country, have left lasting marks in the economy, culture, politics, and educational system of contemporary Germany.

And still it's not unfair to note that we Germans know remarkably little about the history and culture of the people living side by side with us for by now more than half a century. The rich history of the Ottoman Empire, the precursor of modern Turkey, a multic-ethnic and multi-religious state that lasted for 600 years, and the huge modernization efforts of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, founding father and first president of the Republic of Turkey, are only marginal topics in our school curricula. Cabaret artist Hagen Rether has accused Germans of a certain ignorance towards the culture heritage and the lived experience of Turks in Germany. Has anybody of us, in fifty years, listened to stories that the Turks tell? Can anybody recite a poem by a Turk-



Michael K. Iwoleit was born in Düsseldorf in 1962 and lives in Wuppertal today. He was educated as a lab assistant and studied philosophy, sociology and German philology. Since 1989 he is a freelance writer, translator, editor and critic mostly in the science fiction field. Apart from his literary activities he has also worked as a copywriter for advertising and IT industry. He is the founder and editor of InterNova and was the co-founder and long-term fiction editor of its German sister magazine Nova. In the science fiction scene he is best-known for his novellas

and for his essays about major short story writers in science fiction. His latest book is a reissue of his novel Der Moloch. *His homepage is at mki.worldculturehub.net*

ish writer, sing a Turkish song, anything? Mind you, I can't claim to be a glorious exception. My passion for short fiction led me to write a short essay about Sait Faik, one of the pioneers of the modern Turkish short story, and I collected a number of his books in German and English translations. Apart from that my rather voluminous private library includes, when it comes to Turkey, only a few short story anthologies and some novels by outstanding writers such as Yaşar Kemal. What little I have previously known about science fiction in Turkey stems from the slim monograph *Einführung in die türkische Science Fiction Literatur* (Wieser Verlag) by Inanc Atilgan.

I owe to fortunate circumstances a chance to share with *InterNova's* readers now an eye-opening encounter with a facet of Turkish literature and artistry that, at first sight, seems very uncommon for the country: its contemporary science fiction production. About one and a half year ago I was contacted by a remarkable man from the Turkish part of Cyprus named Ünver Alibey, who was swiftly to become one of my closest and most eager collaborators. Ünver, as it turned out, is even more of a hardcore workaholic than me (or *InterNova's* host publisher Michael Haitel). Prompted by my idea that it might be interesting to edit an *InterNova* theme issue about science fiction from Turkey, it took him just two months to present me with a strong selection of stories that proved, not for the first time, his skills as a Turkish to English translator and his infallible instinct for good writing. The result of his efforts, that I hope our readers will enjoy as much as I did, is a varied mixture of cyberpunk, psychological thrillers, planetary adventures and some of the most wonderous, mind-boggling phantasmagorias I have read in recent years. What I hope, in the ideal case, from international science fiction is not only new voices, fresh styles and surprising variations of old ideas, but unique ways of seeing the world, of imagining other kinds of reality. All of this, I think, can be found in these stories.

Michael K. Iwoleit
November 2026

Impostor

CEM CAN

As I approached the port of Istankara Mega City, where all the good things I remember about life are, but which I still had to leave from time to time, there was only one thought on my mind: find that crook as soon as possible, hand him over to the Company, and make a fresh start. A clean record... Then no more running away. Maybe I'd settle down in another town, maybe a small and unspoilt one, make a simple life for myself, and I wouldn't have to watch my back or hide my face for the rest of my life.

While the ship on which I was travelling – for the first time not as a stowaway – was waiting for permission to approach, I had a chance to take a long look at the city. It didn't seem to have changed much since my last visit. The region had already lost all its natural resources, and what was left was being exploited by the ships that roamed the skies like carrion crows, and by the humans, cybers, and robots that were constantly on the move on the ground.

By the way, I have never seen a carrion crow in my life. It was thanks to the documentaries I watched during the long journey, that I could learn about these interesting creatures. That's a nice thing about traveling as a registered passenger.

It was time for me to get ready for landing. I opened the locker at the back of the ship and looked at the clothes the Company had given me to wear, saying they might be environmentally appropriate. I had no intention of wearing any of them. My flight suit with the Company logo on it was comfortable, as if I had been wearing it since I was born.



Cem Can is from Istanbul, Turkey. He is a computer engineer who did his university thesis on robots. He is currently a gamer, music enthusiast, and science fiction fan. Ah, and he is also an author with more than fifty published stories published in his own country. His first novel Arayıcı Günlükleri (The Searcher Chronicles), a space opera, has recently been published too. He sees himself as a dreamer who tries to write down his dreams. "I knew I couldn't change this world; so I went to other worlds."

Besides, I grew up in this city. Even though I had to leave it, I know every corner like the back of my hand: no one has time to check what others are wearing. The streets are crowded. Moreover, apparently the population had increased and now a hundred million people were stuck in the region. I think it really doesn't matter who wears what.

Since I wasn't going to change clothes, I stashed my gun, bullets, and stun darts in the special compartments of my jumpsuit. It is just as useful as it is comfortable.

I took another look at myself in the mirror in the closet. Every time I did that, it was as if I was looking at a different person. My reflection was not the same as yesterday; in fact, it was not the same as a week ago either. I might be exaggerating. After all, I've been watching documentaries and getting new information along the way. It must have affected my thoughts. What about my face? Had it changed too? I touched my face with my hands. Did it feel different from yesterday? Well, same chin, same nose…

The voice of the automated operator startled me.

»Istankara Harbour to Falcon 3, your documents have been approved. Port 82 is ready for landing. Please take your seats and fasten your seat belts. Docking starts in two minutes.«

I immediately took my seat and buckled up.

There was complete silence as the systems lowered the ship and the restraining chains attached themselves to the hull. Despite the thick metal cladding, I could hear the creaking of the static electricity discharge ropes. The landing was completed with a slight jolt. I glanced out the cockpit window.

Everything is as I had left it.

The port's famous porters were already swarming around the pier where the ship had landed, looking for work. I knew that, as soon as the doors opened, I would hear the screams of the cybers.

I grabbed the bag I had prepared beforehand with the materials I thought would be useful. I pulled my hooded jacket over my flight suit and opened the hatches.

They started immediately.

The incomprehensible shouts of the porters were like the sound of a polyphonic orchestra. The clearest voices I remem-

ber were those of people crushing each other, even killing each other, for a few upgrades or body enhancements.

I walked down the corridor and measured our radioactive levels. As soon as I stepped outside, the robot attendant scanned me.

»Welcome, Mr. Namtar. All items on your person are licensed and Company-approved. We wish you a good time in our city.«

»Thank you.«

As strange as it was to thank a machine, it was even stranger to be greeted in such a way. The last time I was here, I exited the ship along with the bile and sewage discharge, and as soon as I finished my business, I left the city as a fugitive.

But this time my deal was solid. I had a Company-issued warrant. That meant near-immunity. I could understand why they had chosen me for the job. I was a notorious breaker and fugitive, and the man I was after was using my identity. According to the Company, he had sabotaged their system. First they thought it was me and came after me, then they realized it was someone else. In the meantime, they caught me and offered me a freedom deal, which I gladly accepted.

In fact, I was partly to blame for this impostor using my identity. I had been in so many different bars, that he could have broken my extra memory card in any one of them. Then he could have easily gotten his hands on three or five credits.

Once I found out that I was going to Istankara to catch the impostor, the man's behavior made perfect sense. Using my name and memories, here he could open many doors, get what he wanted and hide easily. After all, I had been doing the same for years.

I left the safe zone of the harbour and mingled among the people. At that moment, a noise made me turn right. Not far away, two cyber porters were fighting over a three-credit load. The other clear memory I had from around here, apart from the crowd, was the fights between two punks. I think I turned into one of them later on. If the memories the crook had stolen from me gave him my thoughts, he wouldn't be able to stay away from this kind of noise. Maybe he was somewhere nearby.

I activated the facial scanning lens provided by the Company. Even though I had memorized the man's face during the long journey, the technology at my disposal could do better. In the meantime, I would watch the fight.

In a fight between two cybers, something always breaks. In this case, wires had popped out of the mechanical muscle connections of one of them just after a few punches. Well, that's what happens when you invest in mechanical muscle instead of brains. Cheap labour and the cheapest upgrades always go to the muscular ones. Even if these guys worked every day for the rest of their lives, they would never be able to buy even one neuron of circuitry for their neural network development.

Here are a few metal parts already popping out!

I used to like watching these fights, but this time I wasn't enjoying the flying wires and crumbling circuits. The moment I decided not to watch anymore, the scanning stopped. The impostor I was looking for was not here. Just as I was about to leave, one of the fighters fell to the ground and stayed there.

The ambulance and the police used to come in situations like this. Now the city was so crowded that nobody seemed to care if a few punks died or were left disabled. Now the scrap dealers were the first on the scene; they would pick up the useful stuff and leave.

It was time for me to go too. I knew where to start. Whenever I came back, I'd always stop by the Dogubank Business Centre and buy updates that would disguise me and make it easier for me to escape. As a fugitive, this would have been the first thing the impostor did.

I decided to hang out at the centre for a while. As he was three days ahead of me, someone must have seen him. If I couldn't find any trace of him there, I would check out my favourite entertainment venues. It would have been enough for him to just give my name there, but of course I wasn't going to let that happen. I intended to catch that jerk in a few days at the most and start my new and spotless life.

After a short walk, I reached the entrance to Dogubank; it had been a while since I'd been there. Like the rest of the city, this place was like a breathing organism. It was living, chang-

ing, transforming. Someone you met once could be unrecognisable the next time you visited. Or worse, they could already be in the boneyard.

How worthless life is in this city.

I passed through the central screening system, then I was greeted automatically and loudly. People who heard my name would turn and look at me. I started walking inside.

The second store on the left… Yes, I remembered this place, but the man at the door didn't look familiar. So why was he still staring at me?

»Mr. Namtar?« he finally said.

»Yes, it's me.«

»I didn't think I'd see you so soon.«

Yes, right on the money! So the impostor had indeed stopped here.

»You've changed a bit.«

»Yes, I have. While I was in the neighbourhood, I had some cosmetic and software upgrades.«

»Very good, Sir. I found the devices you asked for the other day. They'll be here in a few days.«

»You know where to send word when they arrive, don't you?«

»Would I ever forget? I'll bring them to Goat's Place myself.«

Now that's what I call hitting the bull's eye. I should get to the place without wasting time.

»Thank you. You will be rewarded.«

»I know, Sir.«

I rushed out of the center and onto the highway. I hopped into the first autotaxi I came across, and for once I didn't have to worry how far I had to go, since my expenses were covered by the Company. My mission was clear.

An hour later I arrived at the Goat's, stopped in front of the large glass storefront, and switched on the scanning lens. My man wasn't there yet.

Now I had to come up with logical answers to the questions that were popping into my head: Had he already been here? If he had only been there a few hours earlier, for example, it would be difficult to explain the change in appearance. Was

Goat there? If he was there, could he have realized the guy wasn't me and given him a good beating?

Think fast, fire up the coprocessor. Find logical solutions to problems.

Without wasting any more time, I went inside.

»Good evening.«

»Welcome,« said the man standing in Goat's place behind the bar.

»I'm looking for a friend.«

»If I get a name, I can scan my database and help you.«

»Namtar.«

»Ah … I know of him. He last stopped by years ago. I wasn't around then.«

»Yeah, Goat was here. Where is he?«

»My father passed away …«

»What happened? A fight?«

»No, Sir. Brain virus. It infected his artificial neural network. It didn't take long to wipe out his entire system and render his internal organs inoperable. I told him not to mess with that shit.«

»What about you? Don't you have any upgrades?«

»I don't, except for one, Sir. I'm still ninety-eight percent biological.«

»That's because you're young. When you get a little older, you'll be addicted too. You know what they say, every innovation is a step into eternity.«

»Yeah. A false eternity until a good breaker breaks you.«

»That's true too … I'll sit over there. Send over a stiff drink. And if Namtar comes, tell him I'm waiting and show him where I am. We are supposed to meet here. What he wants is inside this bag.«

»All right.«

I moved to a table with a direct view of the bar and placed the bag between my feet. I took off my hoodie and jacket and kept them on my lap. I took out my gun and put a tranquillizer dart in it. I was in a position to take the impostor down quite easily, even with the gun resting on my knees. The automatic sight would do the job anyway.

I just had my drink delivered when the door opened. I braced myself. Goat's son raised his hand.

»Welcome, Detective.«

»Can you stop calling me that? I'm just a regular cop.«

»You must have had a hard day, you're grumpy again.«

I cursed inwardly. The last person I wanted in there was a cop.

It doesn't matter. The Company will take care of it. Aren't they all on their payroll?

I took a few sips of my drink. I remembered getting very drunk here before, and enjoying my drinks, but this time I didn't feel anything. I was completely focused on my task.

I was almost finished when the door opened again.

»Good evening,« said the man who came in. »No Goat?«

»Who's calling?« the bartender asked.

»This is Namtar.«

»My father passed away, Sir, but there's someone waiting for you. He brought your upgrades. At that table…«

He was pointing his finger at me. As soon as the man turned to me, I fired my gun. The arrow hit him right in the heart and the impostor fell to the ground. If what the Company officials said was true, the drug was supposed to keep him asleep for at least four hours.

»With two doses you can go the whole trip without a headache,« they added.

The man who said he was a policeman suddenly pulled out his gun and came at me.

»Freeze!«

»Detective, calm down!« the bartender yelled.

The detective ignored him, leaned over the body with his gun pointed at me and checked for a pulse.

»Listen to me, man,« I said. »I work for the Company. You can check my fingerprints or my face with your scanner. They'll confirm who I am. This guy is a saboteur wanted by the Company!«

»He said his name was Namtar,« the bartender interrupted.

»He's an impostor and a criminal. I am Namtar. If you calm down, I'll pay my bill and you can verify my identity. You will see that I work for the Company.«

The detective objected, »Namtar is a breaker, he doesn't work for the Company.«

Seeing the detective hesitate at the name of the Company, the bartender intervened.

»Let the man verify his identity,« he said.

I put my finger on the payment system and authorized two drinks to be deducted from my bill.

»Your drink is on me, Mr. Police Officer.«

»The guy wasn't kidding. He's exactly who he says he is!«

»Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to take this crook and I'll make sure to tell the Company officials about your help.«

I left with the unconscious impostor, loaded him into an autotaxi, and went back to the port. I walked through the crowd and told the robot attendant that the transaction was complete. He nodded with a few seconds' delay, and I returned to my ship. I handcuffed the man to one of the sturdy pipes. He would come to in a few hours. I had no intention of giving him a second dose, I wanted to talk to him and find out how he stole my memories. Who was he, really?

Within minutes, when the port handed over control of the ship to me, I took a few actions to set a course and the coordinates of the Company building as my destination. After that, it was just a matter of waiting.

I spent the second hour looking at the face of the person in front of me. It wasn't the same as seeing myself in the mirror; he had my memories, but he wasn't me. And yet, he looked strangely familiar.

At the end of the third hour, I got up and checked myself in the mirror, feeling as alien to myself as to the man lying on the floor with his hands tied.

As the fourth hour drew to a close, the me in front of me began to stir. I wandered a little more in my artificial neural network. Had I never looked in the mirror in my memories? I found a few moments when I had… A big hole… I couldn't see my reflection in the mirror. Was it normal for memories to be wrong? Why was I not seeing my reflection in the mirror?

Finally the man came to his senses. Fidgeting slightly, he asked:

»Where am I? What happened to me?«

»You slept for a while, you identity thief!«

»Identity thief? What nonsense! Who are you?«

»I am Namtar. The real one.«

»Get outta here!«

»I don't think you're in a position to argue. You can take it up with the Company.«

»Why are you doing this?«

»I've been assigned to deliver you, the fake me, to the Company.«

»You're the fake. Tell me your real name!«

»I don't think I need to repeat it. You know it well. Now tell me: how did you steal my memories?«

»Whose memories did I steal? What do I want with the memories of a regular man like you? I'm sure they're boring. I'd rather deal with the Company than with you.«

»Yeah, I know that. They told me you are a saboteur. The only thing I don't know is how you got my credentials, my memories.«

»You keep repeating the same bullshit! I am Namtar. I didn't steal anyone's memories or identity.«

Maybe the drug hadn't worn off yet. Maybe I'd have to push him a little. I'm sure he would start talking, then.

»I've beaten a lot of men at the Goat's place. I don't think the Company would mind if I beat you up a bit,« I said.

»I was either drunk in those fights or they were Company agents. Just like you … I would have kicked your ass too if you hadn't sneakily shot me with a tranquilizer dart.«

»Those are my memories. I remember all my fights.«

»You're starting to piss me off. Okay, you can pretend to be me to a certain extent, but don't get too caught up in the role.«

»I just want to know what software you used to steal my memories. What virus.«

»Hey, that's enough! I didn't steal your memories! Once I get my hands out of here, I'll make you as unrecognizable as any other corporate agent.«

»Don't worry, I'll make you talk.«

»What, you are angry now?«

»No.«

»But you are going to hit me?«

»If necessary, yes.«

»I usually get very angry before I hit someone. Or are you the one who gets very angry?«

»I certainly do. In my memories, too.«

»Who or what are you really? You keep talking about memories. What memories? What's important to you? Do you remember my mom, or the first time I ran away from this city? What about my dog? The day he died?«

»Yes. It was a rainy day in Istankara, as usual. He was caught in a rain of acid from the chemicals in the air from the Company's burning pipes. I was sad.«

»Yes. I was sad. Even now, when I think about it, I feel sad and then angry. I hate the Company. What about you?«

»I don't feel anything. I made a deal with the Company. My record will be cleared. I will make a fresh start and have no reason to be angry with them anymore. From now on I won't do any dirty work anymore.«

»What kind of dirty business? Like sabotaging the Company and giving out loans to people?«

I paused for a while; I didn't remember sabotaging the Company.

»I think that's your job. Because that's not in my memories,« I said and scanned my neural network for a while.

»They definitely uploaded my memories to you and erased whatever else was in your head. You think you are me. What are you doing? Are you scanning your neural network? I did the same thing and I saw that people were happy. Every time I sabotaged the Company, I saved someone's life. That gives me joy. How about you?«

»I don't have those memories,« I said, sharply.

I'd given up. The impostor who thought he was me wasn't going to give himself away. And now that I had caught him, he couldn't do it again. I was going to be more careful from now on and not give away the information on my memory card.

For the remaining three hours of the trip, I had to listen to the fake Namtar's ramblings about happiness, sadness, anger, confusion, etcetera. Finally he gave up.

»It's futile, it's like trying to explain colors to a blind man …« he said and fell silent.

When we reached the headquarters, I put the impostor in front of me and made my way to the boardroom. As soon as I entered, there was applause.

»Another mission accomplished,« the chairman said. »It just keeps getting better and better.«

What was getting better? The system they had set up? The system of catching criminals and have them catch other criminals?

»Namtar!«

»Sir?« the man in front of me and I said at the same time.

»Can someone shut him up? Duty officer?«

»Right away, Sir.«

The fake me didn't need to speak anymore. He was a criminal and had to be punished. After accepting the congratulations, I could start with a clean slate.

The mission chief stood up and came over to me.

»Falcon 3, close.«

…

System rebooting.

…

New mission in progress.

…

All systems active.

…

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As I approached the port of San Angeles Mega City, where all the good things I remember about life are, but which I still had to leave from time to time, there was only one thought on my mind: find that crook as soon as possible, hand him over to the Company, and make a fresh start.

Opalescence

SELIN ARAPKIRLI



Selin Arapkirli is a Turkish scriptwriter, playwright, and short-story writer. In 2008, she won the third prize in TBD Science Fiction Story Competition with her first science fiction story "Children of Beki". She has written many short science fiction stories since then, some of which have also been turned into plays. Her feminist science fiction stories "Remember Tomorrow" and "Please Do Not Disturb" were translated into Italian and included in the anthology Futurchia. She continues to work as a screenwriter and keeps writing science fiction stories.

»Unfortunately, I've never seen two white sharks making love. But it's easy to recognize newly mated females because they have a scar on their body. The male bites his mate to immobilize her. So he sinks three hundred teeth into her flesh. No wonder nature has given females thicker skin.«

– The Equilibrium of Sharks *by Caterina Bonvicini*

Present day

AO (After the Occurrence) 84th Year 121st Day. Ayla A's Experiment Records. Record One.

It is now 01:17 am. I am wandering in the sinister street of Hemzendiyar, which is known to be the place of rape and murder, naked and looking for my husband. May the Eternal, the only witness of my sins, forgive me. I have to commit this sin at the risk of dying and resurrecting infinitely in his fiery pools, because my husband Dr. Aref Akhazan has been missing for seventy-eight days. He has been lost. I have to find him.

I'm not a doctor like my husband. I'm not a journalist. I couldn't be even if I wanted to. I'm nothing but a woman. Just like all my sisters from Hemzendiyan, I am just a name in this universe. I know that, when the truth comes out, the Obedients will erase my name from all existing records. That is why I am leaving this audio recording, so that my name will be remembered after me. My name is Ayla. I am the property and only wife of Aref Akhazan, but that is not what should be remembered. Each of you should know and remember that I am the only woman who has managed to walk the streets of

Hemzendiyar in the middle of the night – naked. As far as I am concerned, this is a revolution and every revolution, whether successful or not, deserves to be remembered.

It's 1:23 am. I've been on the street for a quarter of an hour and I haven't met a single man yet. It's three days before the anniversary of the Occurrence. The inhabitants of the neighborhood, who are excited, must have gathered at the House of Prayer to prepare for the Day of the Occurrence. Those who did not go to the meetings must be hiding under their wives' robes, fearing the wrath of those who did. I am a little angry with myself for not thinking of this sooner. Not a lot, a little. I know I have to meet those men as soon as possible, but the truth is, I don't mind them not being around right now. Eternal forgive me, but being on the street at this time of night fills me with such pure happiness that I want to forget my main purpose for a few minutes. For the first time in my twenty-eight years of life, I feel the wind all over my body. I think this incredible discovery is worth a few minutes of oblivion.

Right now there is a tingling all over my body as if to pay homage to the warm spring wind and welcome it. The famous dust of Hemzendiyar flows softly over me. I'm shivering inside, but I'm not cold. I'm very glad that the sun, which is always beating us as if it hates people, is not around. No offense to Eternal, but I have seen enough of the sun's treacherous lights. Now, for the first time in my life, I want to look at the man-made lights of the houses from the outside, to hear the voices of nocturnal animals up close, to offer my hair, which Aref said I stole from the night, to its original owner. While diving into this magical darkness, I feel like I am trespassing upon a man's property and this amuses me insanely. My mother once said »The night belongs to the property owners«, quoting the 28th Edict. But no, now I have to be quiet because finally one of the owners of the night makes his presence known. I hear a man shouting.

The man's voice comes from one of the earthen houses that resemble molehills at night. A three-metre statue of Al-Alamshah III stands directly opposite the set of ruined earthen

houses lined up on the right side of the road. Even though the inhabitants of this neighborhood burn and destroy everything, they would never touch the gigantic statue of our ruler Alemshah III, who is actually one hundred and sixty centimeters tall at most. They can't touch it. I'm walking towards the statue. Maybe I'll get a chance to spit on it once, before the shouting man shows himself. May Ezeli forgive me for this destructive desire, but right now I am filled with rage against Al-Alamshah III, because his policemen have not given me permission to search for Aref. As a woman without a husband, I am no longer allowed to go out during the day either. Moreover, they told me that when one hundred days have passed since my husband's disappearance, they will consider him officially dead and they will get me a new owner. As if I were a kitten … The man is shouting again. This time he sounds closer: *»I told you to switch off the lights!«* As if it were the statue itself shouting, I stand in front of it and look into the angry eyes of Alemshah III. No, I won't let you get me a new owner.

The man, who I now know exactly which windmill he lives in, must be shouting at one of his wives. This means he's going out. That's why he's asking her to switch off the lights. Here's an unwritten edict: Not only the night, but the lights too belong to the men. Anyway, it suits me now that he's going out. I'm finally going to meet one of them. The thought of it makes my heart beat faster. My nakedness, which I haven't felt for minutes, suddenly becomes visible and dangerous at the sound of a man's voice. Soon, this naked body, whose secrets no one but Aref has discovered, will be confronted by a man who has most likely been the perpetrator of at least five rapes in his lifetime.

I hear a door slam and fear wraps my body like a swaddled blanket. I think that this sudden wave of panic, which will confuse my hormones, may disrupt the experiment. With this thought, I become even more frightened and hide behind the statue of Alemshah III in a huff. From now on, I have to pick up my tiny recorder, which looks like a metal *Stenocara* beetle, and whisper. My pulse is beating so fast that I feel as if I have run across the Great Occurrence Square. From my hiding place,

I hear footsteps; my legs tremble. I am so scared that I repeat to myself the last notes of the 76th Edict: *»Only the Eternal they fear; those who have not sinned.«* But before I even finish the sentence, my fear grows like a desert storm. Because I realize I am a sinner too. As a woman walking naked in the streets at midnight, I am now in violation of both the 3rd Edict and the 28th Edict. Then I see the man through the gap between the legs of the stone Alemshah. He appears in the middle of the street in his robe, which was once white, now horribly filthy, his ammunition belt full of bullets and his red beard reaching to his chest. He is polluting the beautiful night. Now he's busy slinging his rifle around his neck like a precious jewel. There are only four or five meters between us. May the Eternal protect me from his unquenchable hunger! The man is walking towards the statue.

I resort to the only weapon I have to fight my fear: my breathing. As Aref taught me, I close my eyes, breathe in through my belly and nose and exhale through my mouth, counting to three from the inside. In the dark curtain in front of my tightly closed eyes, Dorothy appears with all her grace. When I look at the transparent skin of Dorothy swinging inside my head, I can see the darkness behind it and the fog of fear enveloping my mind dissipates in an instant. Freed from the bondage of fear, the mind now speaks its own word: *»Don't be silly. You know you are safe.«* I open my eyes.

There is only one meter and a statue of a monarch between me and the man. The man's eyes are closed. He keeps his right palm on his heart and his left palm on his forehead while he repeats the oath of allegiance to Alamshah III in a loud voice: *Our ambassador and our lord and our precious and so on and so on …* That's why he doesn't hear me whispering. More importantly, his declaration of love to a pile of stones shows that he is an Obedient. This man is one of the tens of thousands of Obedients who made Aref disappear. Just the man I'd hoped to see. Now the seat vacated by fear is occupied by destructive anger. But fortunately my mind still reigns supreme. While the eyes of the Obedient man are still closed, with the strength that reason and anger give my legs, I come out from behind the statue and

stand in front of him in all my nakedness. The man looks directly at me, but all he sees is a *Stenocara* beetle standing motionless in the air; in fact, my tiny voice recorder in the palm of my hand. The man cannot see me. Because I am invisible.

Two years ago
AO (After Occurence) 82nd Year 125th Day. Dr. Aref Akhazan's Secret Laboratory Notes. Record One.

When the female of the cuttlefish species *Doryteuthis opalescens* enters dangerous waters, as many of its cephalopod relatives can do, the strip on its body changes its color from white to transparent for a while, to hide it from the hungry eyes of its predator. The cuttlefish owes this glittering camouflage to pigment translocation in the chromatophore cells of its skin. Inside the chromatophore cells are cytoelastic sacs containing pigments associated with muscles. Cephalopods, which are extraordinary creatures, voluntarily contract these muscles and, like an illusionist, reflect light at various wavelengths by changing the pigment distribution in the cytoelastic sac. This color change, which we call metacrosis, allows the female cuttlefish to become invisible and pass safely through dangerous waters. It's a glorious game of color – opalescence! *Doryteuthis opalescens* is a marvelous actress, a mesmerizing actress who can make the dark waters, where only the strong survive, safe for herself.

Since my early days as an aspiring genetic engineer, I have been thinking: Can human skin also be made transparent? Can humans, like *Doryteuthis opalescens*, become invisible? Now, as I look at Dorothy, our pet cuttlefish in the aquarium in front of me, free from all dangerous predators, I can give a clear answer to this question: Yes. Humans can succeed in becoming invisible, and this success will surely be a revolution in a country like Hemzendiyar where everything is done behind closed doors. I can safely say that we are very close to this revolution. It is probably unnecessary for me to tell you that I have been conducting this experiment, which I call Project Dorothy, in secret from the government of Alamshah III.

For nearly two years, I have been working on injecting multipotent chromatophore stem cells, which I isolated in the laboratory from Dorothy, whom I managed to bring to this desert country with great difficulty, under the mammalian skin. Those who know what I am talking about know that this is a thousand times more difficult than make a camel jump over a ditch (a Turkish saying explaining the difficulty of a situation). This is because what we call xenogeneic transplantation, which means transplantation between different species, brings along a pile of problems. Immunological rejection, infectious diseases, micro-environmental incompatibility, abnormal cell differentiation and many other problems that need to be controlled.

For two years, I fought all these annoying problems which accumulated to be like a giant desert snake, and I am sorry to say that I sacrificed a few dozen desert rats for this cause. I can still see my wife Ayla sighing and feeling sorry for those poor laboratory animals. She is an extremely sensitive soul. But she is also very brave and curious. She wants to know everything I know, to discover all the secrets of the universe, even those that are too heavy for her. Eternal forgive me, but it seems to me a great injustice that such an extraordinary woman was born in Hemzendiyar. So much so that I cannot help but question the famous note of the 5th Edict, which forbids women to be educated: *»Women will be servants to Eblis; if they get knowledge.«*

I can freely admit that I have seen with my own eyes that this is not true. Of course, no one knows this but me, but today Ayla is almost as well-equipped a scientist as I am, and I can testify before the Eternal that she is not a servant of Eblis. Without Ayla, I would not have been able to take this project this far. Ayla has been my student, my teacher and my first human guinea pig, taking all the risks. If my colleagues at the FSDT heard that I was using my wife as a guinea pig, they would trample on each other to report me to the Submissives immediately. Well, until it comes to that, there are bigger laws I've broken. Like training my wife and conducting experiments in our secret room. Fortunately, my colleagues are oblivious to

all this, and devote all their time and energy to creating new weapons for their master's Submissives. So I steal a piece at a time from the Foundation's supplies without any of them noticing, and then my lovely wife and I devote the hours of our lovemaking to inventing invisibility without anyone bothering us. Anyway, I keep digressing. I'm a bit emotional today, because today we conducted our first experiment on Ayla's body, which was extraordinarily exciting and terrifying in equal measure for both of us. But before we get there, I would like to talk about the first stages of the experiment.

Roughly speaking, what I had to do was to implant under Ayla's skin the chromatophore cells typical of cephalopods and some reptiles. Predictably, the only way to do this was by stem cell transplantation. That's what I did; cytotherapy. Of course, this was not as easy as it sounds and it did not end there. I had to adjust Ayla's nervous system to work in harmony and voluntarily with these cells so that pigment translocation would be possible. Thus, when Ayla was frightened or excited, the pigment distribution in the cytoelastic sacs would change due to the effect of the hormones, and Ayla would be able to change color and become invisible like Dorothy.

When we succeeded in injecting the chromatophore stem cells into my wife's entire body, Ayla joked that she and Dorothy were now sisters in a sense. Almighty Eternal, I thank you for bringing me this marvelous woman who was willing to suffer many possible illnesses and temptations for the love of learning! Before our first experiment today, Ayla refused to back down, even though she was trembling with fear and I repeatedly suggested that she give up. *»In exchange for being your guinea pig, I want one thing from you,«* she told me. *»If you succeed in making me invisible, I want to go out on the street for one night and walk alone. This has been my biggest dream since I was a child.«*

To walk alone in the street at night. The fact that this event, which is extremely ordinary for us men, was the biggest dream of a woman, my beloved wife, and that I could do nothing to make this dream come true shattered my heart. Until today, I wasn't sure why I was putting so much thought into invisibility

experiments, but now I am sure. If for nothing else, I'll have Ayla walk the streets, freely and safely, for one night. As a matter of fact, we took that first important step today.

Today, thanks to the drug metacronin, which I invented myself and which manipulates Ayla's endocrine system and controls pigment translocation, we were able to make my wife's entire body transparent for twenty-five seconds! Now it's just a matter of finding the right ratios for metacronin. I believe that won't take too long. And Ayla, in all her transparency, will be able to glide through the dangerous predators and enjoy the night that she favors more than the day. I don't care if I've defied the 28th Edict. I'm willing to risk this little sin for the woman I love. Oh Eternal ... I can't understand why you put so much responsibility on their shoulders. If I didn't see your Occurrence with my own eyes, I would almost question your existence ...

NOTE: It was determined that the last sentence of Dr. Aref Akhazan was deleted by himself and removed from the recording. The deleted last sentence was re-transcribed and added to the recording.

Present day

AO (After Occurence) 84th Year. 122nd Day. Ayla A's Experiment Records. Record Two.

It's 00:45. I've been on the street for fifteen minutes. I'm standing in the same place as last night, next to the grim statue of Alamshah III, waiting for the red beard to come out. I'm going to follow him when he comes out of the house. For tonight's experiment, I played with the dose of methachronin a little. If Aref had been with me, he probably would not have allowed me to increase the dose, he would have said he could not foresee the consequences. However, I had to take this risk because I will be traveling a longer distance tonight. The dose I took last night only rendered me invisible for two hours. Although even this little time was enough for me to find the red beard and enjoy the night, I unfortunately couldn't follow him. Still, I can't

downplay two hours of invisibility. Because as I stand here waiting for my prey, I remember the first experiment I did with Aref in our secret room. It lasted only twenty-five seconds, and even that filled Aref's beautiful eyes, which looked like the rainforests of other lands, with tears of happiness.

My darling, my dear Aref … It fell to me to fulfill your dream, to complete the picture that you have been embroidering for years with the innocent excitement of a child. That first day you said to me, *»I will do this for you«*. And I promise you now: I will do this for you. I will put on the cloak you sewed with your dreams and I will find you even if I have to look under every stone of this country. Then we will hug each other in our secret room and listen to these recordings and fill the room with our laughter, thankful for our soundproof walls. Then I'll tell you something else that will make you laugh, Aref. When I don't need to whisper a recording, I'll put this tiny voice recorder you made, inspired by a desert insect that saves water for bad times, inside me. Yes, there. I know you'll laugh at this, I know you'll say, *»Only you could think of something so crazy.«* And I know something else, darling: I've never given birth to a child, but maybe I'll give birth to that truth you've been searching for out of my womanhood. What do you think? Just a minute. That's his voice. Redbeard's coming out of the house. Now I must stop thinking about you and go after him. Because I know this man doesn't go to one of the houses of prayer at night. He's not dressed for it. And he can't get his rifle in there. Where could he be going at this hour, with his weapon and after swearing an oath to his sovereign? I don't know that yet, but when I do, I feel I'll be a little closer to you … The Redbeard's oath is over, we're on our way. I've put about four meters between me and him, so that he won't hear the sounds the metal bug makes. The thought that he might notice it disturbs me more and more as I walk. Actually, I could hold the beetle in my hand right now, but I don't want these people, who are eager to destroy everything beautiful, to think that it is an ordinary desert beetle and crush it. Anyway, I'd rather put dozens of voice recorders inside me than be raped by a Hemzendian.

We took a side street. It's more crowded than the street where the Red Beard lives. I see men gathered in groups of three or four like packs of dogs, talking loudly, as if they are not talking but barking. While barking, some of them are drinking cheap fruit wine, some of them are smoking baru grass, some of them are staring at the unlit windows of the earthen houses and grinning, and some of them are scratching their balls, which look like crumpled rags, with their robes raised up to their navels. This horrible sight mixed with the smell of baru grass makes me feel sick. I know that if they knew I existed, they would pounce on me like hyenas and leave me with nothing but a few strands of hair. I turn my head. Then I see Redbeard give the classic obedient salute to a group of three: first the right palm to the heart, then to the forehead. The others reply in kind and then follow Redbeard without a word. There are now five of us. Four Obedients and one invisible woman who has never learned to obey, we turn right at the end of the street and … No, no …

Redbeard and his entourage have entered the Alim Behraami underpass. My mind keeps reminding me that I am invisible, but my feet resist, they do not want to enter. The almost flesh-and-blood visibility of fear makes the invisibility of the body insignificant. Last year, our neighbor Yade was raped in this passage while it was still dark and her husband was with her. Her husband did not divorce Yade, but he treats her like a leper now. He no longer sleeps with her. It is as if Yade were a dish of desert hare stew that belonged to her husband, and now that other people have dipped their spoons in it, he is disgusted. These are poor Yade's words, and that is the saddest part: Yade blames herself for what happened. For a year she has been repeating the same sentence as if she were praying: *»We should have gone another way.«* As if there were another way for us in this world. The paths that we can walk safely are paved in the other world, my Yade. Only when we meet the Eternal will we be able to walk on the paths we want. That's how I comfort Yade and myself.

The men are far away but I can still hear their voices. If I don't go in now, I'll lose sight of them. I take a deep breath again to gather my courage. I count to three as I exhale. One,

two and three ... Eternal! It's a woman! A woman is screaming. There's a woman in the passage! I go inside.

It's 02:30. We're out of the underpass. We keep walking. I didn't have the time or the strength to describe what I saw. Now I can describe the horrible sight as I followed Redbeard and the others four meters behind ... Three men were tearing at a woman's robe like desert dogs that had been starving for days, while Redbeard and his companions were taking a short break from their journey, stroking their beards as if they were watching a children's game. The passage smelled of wine, urine and figs. At my feet was a bag of desert figs, some of which had been crushed underfoot. They obviously belonged to the woman. Maybe she had stolen them from someone's garden. That's why she was on the street at this hour.

»Tell the truth, you're craving it too,« the men laughed, *»otherwise what are you doing here at midnight?«* The woman, who I think only craved figs, answered them with screams. None of them saw the need to stop her screams by putting a piece of cloth in her mouth. They thought that no one would come out and try to take away their prey anyway. That's why they were taking it slow and enjoying their rough behavior. They were right. No one would dare to come out and stop these hungry hyenas. But they didn't realize that there was someone out there who could scare the shit out of them without showing up. These men, even though they rode around with one-meter rifles on their backs, were afraid of everything they couldn't see, couldn't know, couldn't make sense of. A handful of desert figs. With just a handful of desert figs, I made seven men, four of them armed, show their heels.

I picked up three figs from the ground and threw one at the naked man who had descended on the woman, and two at the other two, who had stripped off their coats and were preparing to grab her genitals. They all froze in their tracks. An invisible hand had broken the game. I kept picking up figs from the ground and throwing them in the air.

As the woman took advantage of the men's surprise and recovered, the naked man shouted, »Eblis! Eblis! This woman is a descendant of the Devil!«

Indeed, the figs raining down on them like bombs never hit the woman, but only the men, and according to them, it was surely Eblis who was protecting the woman, since it could not be Eternal.

Finally, they could not stand the rain of figs and ran away without looking back. So much so that the naked one left his robe and skullcap behind him. In Hemzendiyar, nudity is shameful only for a woman. Anyway. Redbeard's friends also followed the runners. Redbeard – he was obviously the bravest of them all – stayed a short while longer and looked at the woman, hoping to make sense of this extraordinary event.

»Please, my house is here, just over there, forgive me. Eternal forgave me and helped me, so you forgive me too,« the woman pleaded with Redbeard, while trying to cover her body with her shredded robe. Redbeard, still in shock and wondering whether Eternal or Eblis was behind this, said nothing and the woman ran away in the opposite direction of the men. I hope she made it home.

For a few seconds, Redbeard and I were alone in the passage, and it gave me great pleasure to look closely into his frightened eyes. Then one of his cowardly friends shouted his name from outside the underpass and Redbeard went out with quick steps. His name was Ziyar. This word means 'fearless' in the Hemzendic language. I think you lost the right to bear this name tonight, Ziyar. Because now you're scared to death. All four of you are scared to death. That's why you've been walking for almost an hour without saying a word. If you listen to this recording one day, remember this: It wasn't Eternal or Eblis who turned you into cowardly boys. It was the women.

Ziyar and the others finally stop in front of the garden gate of a concrete building and I realize with great surprise that I recognize this building. This is the main building of the FSDT, The Foundation for the Study of Divine Truths. Where Aref works! I had stood in front of this door once before and waited for Aref, but places, just like people, look different at night than they do during the day. As Ziyar and his friends show their ID cards to the security guard, I take the recorder out of me and hold it in my palm. My little bug reminds me that it's

three o'clock. So I've been out for two and a half hours. I don't know how long I'll remain invisible, but I have to go in. The four men, who have confirmed that they are Obedient, are about to enter the iron gate, which is being opened with a great noise. Wait a minute, a man comes out of the building and runs towards them. He's followed by others. They're all running. Something strange is happening. I seem to recognize the man running at the front. I get a little closer to those waiting in front of the garden gate.

I am within a few meters of Ziyar and the others. Ziyar shouts at the running man and asks him what is going on. This man cannot speak without shouting.

»Razzam!« the man running at the front shouts, »Razzam is faulty! The machine is broken! The meeting is canceled! We're going to the shipyard!«

Okay, I remember now. This man's name is Hisar, one of Aref's hated colleagues; an optical engineer. And what machine is he talking about? What's a shipyard? And Razzam? Where have I heard that word?

Ziyar and his friends' eyes widen with terror; they weren't so frightened even in the fig rain. Then it must be a very important machine. Ziyar kicks the iron gate.

»Is this the time to make a mistake?« he screams. »It's only two days until the anniversary!«

I can't figure out what's going on. What's Occurrence got to do with the anniversary? Wait a minute, why are they all looking in my direction in confusion? Is someone coming from behind me? No, there's no one. I look down and see myself. Oh, no ... My right hand. They can see my right hand with an artificial *Stenocara* beetle on it. As I start to appear in front of a lot of men, starting with my right hand, I remember: Razzam!

One year ago

AO (After Occurence) 83rd Year 222nd Day. Dr. Aref Akhazan's Secret Laboratory Notes. Record Nine.

I'm upset. Two days ago there was an inquiry at the Foundation. Of course they didn't say why – they never do – they said that

all the employees of the Foundation were being questioned, but somehow I felt that the investigation was about me personally. Could they have found out about the Dorothy Project? Nobody knows about this project except Ayla and me, but if they found out that I stole material from the Foundation, maybe they could have reasoned and… No, I don't think they're that clever. Besides, there's spares at the Foundation for the very thing I stole, they could not be missed. And no-one else is doing stem cell experiments, so they couldn't have realized what we took anyway. Then what? Why was I questioned?

Perhaps they suspected that I was teaching Ayla. Because the questions were mostly about my family life and my loyalty to Eternal. How many years I had been married, how many times a day my wife and I remembered Eternal, why I still had no children, and why I continued to be monogamous. Since I couldn't say that I was in love with my wife and didn't need another woman – because that would draw attention to Ayla – I made up the lie that I was impotent. »Pardon my rudeness, but I'm barely enough for one woman, gentlemen,« I even joked. This lie could also be used as an excuse for the fact that we hadn't had children yet. In fact, since we were spending all our time and energy on the Dorothy Project, we were postponing plans for children until the future, but of course I couldn't mention this to the policemen. The Chief Obedient of King Alemshah III said that I was too young to be impotent and that the problem might have something to do with my wife. Then one of them made a joke: »Let's get a thirteen-year-old virgin, then we can talk about impotence.« At that moment I thought of my poor mother, who was married off at the age of thirteen, who was told all her life that she was an animal, who was beaten every day and every night, but by some miracle did not lose her mind, and who tried to explain to me that women were human beings too whenever my father was not at home. I wanted to punch the policeman in the face, but all I could do was look at him with a half smile. I had to. I had to. In order to protect our secret paradise where we can escape the shitty realities of this shitty country for a while, I have to prove anytime, anywhere that I'm no different from these guys. I know

it's hypocritical, but I'm trying to keep at least one of my faces clean. For my grandmother, for my mother, for my wife … On the other hand, these guys, who know nothing but licking their Alemshah's balls and constantly remind us that we need to reproduce, have nothing clean about them. Especially these days, I have a funny feeling they're up to something. The 83rd anniversary of the Occurrence is coming up. Could the investigation have something to do with that? Around this time last year, there was a lot of activity at the Foundation. A few engineers were laid off and replaced by new ones. If only I knew what they were up to …

Anyway. I haven't been able to do anything for the Dorothy Project for two days because I've been so frustrated not knowing the reason for the investigation. Ayla thinks I'm being paranoid. She says they'll never find out about our project or that she's an educated woman. »We do our experiments in a secret cellar under our toilet, in a place even Eblis wouldn't think of. No one will ever find it, Aref,« she says, »and as for me being educated, that's much harder to discover because I talk to everyone but you like I'm an idiot. Remember, I'm a good actress.« She is the only one who really manages to make me laugh these days, whereas today I made her cry. I hope the Eternal will punish me for that …

My nerves are really shattered. Working at the Foundation is getting harder and harder every day. For a long time I have felt as if something that everyone knows is being hidden from me. Today I realized that I am not wrong about that. This morning I heard Hisar and Almed whispering in the bathroom. They didn't know that I was in one of the stalls. Hoping to learn something about the investigation, I kept quiet and tried to hear the whispers of those two men whom I dislike. The words I heard made no sense to me, it was a coded language. Nevertheless, I continued to listen. Since I knew that the words that are often repeated in coded languages allow one to decipher the language, I tried to catch the words that were repeated in that nonsensical conversation. Razzam.

That was the word I heard whispered most often. I couldn't make out anything else. At that moment, I cursed myself for

not having finalized Project Dorothy yet. If I had been invisible, I would have been able to understand what those two busybodies were talking about. But the fact that they were whispering in the bathroom, thinking they were alone and still speaking in a coded language, helped me to understand something else. Whatever this Razzam was, it was a vital secret, and the investigation had to be about it.

When I got home later, I did a few useless searches to try to find out what Razzam was. Of course, I couldn't find the word in any source. The strange thing is, this particular word has a connotation for me, a very strong connotation. I remember hearing it somewhere, but where? When? I erased the formulae on the transparent board and filled the whole board with the word Razzam. This did not help much. On the contrary, it made me shout at my wife and make her cry.

While I was walking up and down in the secret room, tearing my hair, Ayla came in. As she hugged me and tried to calm me down, she saw the words on the board and asked what they meant. I took it out on my wife for the sense of failure I felt at that moment for being an idiot and I shouted at her and told her to leave me alone. When Ayla was stubborn and said she wouldn't leave me alone on the brink of madness, I grabbed her by the arm and threw her out and locked the door. I can still hear her sitting in the toilet upstairs crying. I'm terribly sorry, but I didn't do it just because I felt I had to take it out on something or someone. Now that I'm a bit more clear-headed, I understand that better.

I feel in my bones that whatever this Razzam thing is, it's dangerous. I've taught my wife everything I've ever seen, everything I've ever known, but not this time. I have to keep her away from this issue. Even I hesitate to think about it. I feel that when I solve the mystery of Razzam, nothing will be the same as before. This feeling comes from the recollection of that memory that I can't figure out which secret drawer of my brain I put it in. Remember, Aref! You know what Razzam is. You just need to remember ...

Present day

AO (After Occurence) 84th Year. 123rd Day. Ayla A's Experiment Records. Record Three.

I remember. I don't know yet what kind of a machine this Razzam is, but I remember seeing the word for the first time on the board in our secret room where we conducted our experiments. Because of it, my dear husband, treated me the way other men from Hemzendiyan treat their wives for the first time in our nine years of marriage. It is impossible for me to forget. It was last year, about this time. Last night, when I remembered that moment, as if the sheer intensity of the memory could overcome the transparency of my body, I noticed that my right hand was becoming visible. The men noticed it too. While they were gaping in horror at the hand hanging in the air and probably thinking that it was the same hand that had showered them with figs, I ran away. I knew that my invisibility would not take me all the way home. In ten minutes at most I would be completely visible, completely naked. I had to find something to put on as soon as possible. Then I remembered how to do that.

I ran the fastest run of my life and returned to the Alim Behraami underpass. When I entered the passage, I was completely visible except for my head, like a fairy tale hero. If anyone saw me like this, they must have wet their pants. The passage was deserted. Because the sun would rise soon and this time of the day was the time reserved for sleep even for rapists. When I reached the place where the fig incident took place, I had completely lost my invisibility. The robe of the rapist, who had run away naked in fear of Eblis, was lying like a sack of shit where he had left it. It smelled like wet dogs, but I was too anxious to worry about hygiene at that moment. I tied my hair up with the bag that once held the figs and put the filthy man's filthy skullcap on my head. Although there was no mirror around to see my reflection, I knew I looked like a very bad imitation of a man.

To be beardless in Hemzendiyar is tantamount to inviting rape. I had no chance to make myself a false beard on the

spot. My solution lied with the figs again. Thinking that the figs that the poor woman had stolen at the risk of a thousand dangers were good for everything except dulling her hunger, I rubbed the crushed figs on my face. Then I smeared my sticky face with mud. I still lacked the beard that would make me look like a man, but my face should now resemble the face of a leper. I was sure that the fig seeds poking their heads out of the mud looked like purulent pimples. I went home, hoping that this disgusting face would protect me from the desires of a man. I was lucky. No one looked at my face until I got home. I took a quick shower, slept for only two hours to rest my tired legs, and after feeding Dorothy, I put on my invisibility suit again and hit the streets.

It's 8:00 am. I'm standing in front of Hisar's fancy stone house waiting for him to come out and go to the place they call the shipyard. I didn't know what a shipyard was, I looked it up in Aref's dictionary before I left the house. It's a place where ships are built and repaired. I don't understand why a country like Hemzendiyar, surrounded by desert, should have a shipyard. We don't have ships. We don't have any contact with the countries that have ships. The 18th Edict forbids such a contact. Anyway, the courtyard door of Hisar's house opened. Probably the youngest and most inexperienced of the wives opened the door. I can tell by her cheerful and careless behavior. She obviously doesn't know anything about real life yet. Because when you know, you become an angry woman, just like me ...

Wait a minute, Hisar's camels are with him. One saddled and two spares following that one. So we're going to the desert. Does this mean the shipyard is in the desert? This is really confusing me. I have to make a quick decision. I can ride the camel too, and if the animal doesn't get restless because of my invisible presence, my journey can be more comfortable. I don't think there will be a problem, though. I am a fifty-five-kilo woman. Even Hisar's weapons weigh more than me. But if I ride a spare camel, even if I keep my bug in my hand, I should not make a sound all the way. Or I can walk beside Hisar and the camel as if I were his wife. At this moment, when Hisar is

pinching his childish wife's thigh, thinking that no one can see them, it makes me sick to imagine myself as this man's wife. The decision is made. I'm getting on the camel. I'll continue recording when we reach the shipyard.

It was 9:50 am. After almost two hours of traveling on camelback, we stopped in front of a dense baru bush in the middle of the desert. While I was cursing in my heart, thinking that we had come all this way to collect baru grass, Hisar bent down and started pushing the bush aside. The camel turned round and looked stupidly at the sand on the ground, but Hisar was too busy trying to open the horizontal iron gate under the bushes to notice. I never expected to see an iron gate in the middle of the desert, who would? This great secrecy made me think that they might be hiding my husband here, of whom I had not seen a trace for almost three months. So when Hisar managed to open the gate, I rushed in without hesitation. The gate closed hard behind us and we descended a seventy-step stone staircase in the light of a torch that Hisar had taken from the wall and lit. Now I'm walking down a long corridor with anthracite-colored side walls and white lights, a little behind Hisar, into the unknown. I can't help thinking that if I become visible in this iron cage under the desert, no one will even find my bones. However, the feeling that I'm getting closer to Aref gives me great courage. Moreover, I think that the methachronine dose I've taken will keep me invisible for at least five hours ... I hope so.

Hisar stood in front of an oval door and disclosed his identity. The wings of the oval door opened to both sides as if it were a curtain drawn by invisible hands. The slight breeze created by this movement made the man feel uneasy for a moment, but he did not dwell on this feeling. For I don't know why, he was in a great panic mood and was obviously dealing with the anxiety storms in his head. After passing through the door, we came in front of a giant well. Yes, this place looks like a giant well. Since I have never seen such a structure before, I don't know how to describe it, but I can say that the mouth of the well is at least forty meters wide. There are iron railings on the sides and in some places there are iron stairs going up and

down. If I were to approach those railings and look at them, I would be able to understand the depth of the well, but since I have never climbed to a high place in my life, I do not dare to do so. Hisar is standing on the opposite side of the cliff between us, discussing something heatedly with three men. They all look like engineers working at FSDT. I'm sure they all know Aref. However, I can't hear what they are talking about. I'm madly curious about what these men are doing in this desert lair right now, when they should be working for tomorrow's Occurrence Day. I'll approach them soon and try to understand what they are talking about, but first I have to overcome my fear and look down. One, two, three ...

I'm holding on to the railing, looking down. The well isn't as deep as I thought. But that's not what's interesting. At the bottom of the well, there's a giant sphere. It looks like a black ball stuck at the end of a pipe. It's a black sphere, but its surface isn't smooth. There are thousands of smaller, brighter orbs on it, like eyes. Eternal, what is this? Since that day when I first saw you appear, nothing has surprised me as much as what I see today. Is this what they call Razzam? Wait a minute, there's movement on the other side. Someone's shouting. I hear the word *rehearsal*.

»What?« one of the engineers shouts in panic, »No! The machine is not ready!«

Here, they are talking about the machine again. Hisar grabs the panicked man by the shoulders, shakes him and exclaims, »Is there time left? Do you want everyone to know the truth?«

What truth? What are they talking about? I hear a sound, like an alarm. At this sound, Hisar and the others immediately stop arguing and stand at attention. They're all looking in my direction. Oh, am I being visible again? No, thank Eternal, nothing like that. The men, with one hand on their chests and the other on their foreheads, are looking at the oval door standing right behind me. The wings of the door open to both sides again and out comes ... Alamshah III.

Just now our sovereign Alemshah III, accompanied by two tall Obedients, passed through the oval gate to the opposite side, where Hisar and the others were. I am utterly astonished.

I almost fainted. I have never seen him so close. What a beautiful face he has, just like a woman's face. Were it not for the yellow beard touching his chest, I would think he was a woman. But that is not the main reason for my astonishment. Alamshah III should not be here. He should be in seclusion! Like all Alemshahs he should have stayed in the Cave of Purification for seven days and not come into contact with any human being before ascending to heaven on the Day of Occurrence to meet the Eternal. How could he break this sacred law? How can he break the 4th Edict? Will he appear before the Eternal without purification? I think of the tortures they would inflict on him if he were a woman who had committed such a great sin, and I feel like going mad!

It seems that Alemshah III is also going mad. He grabs one of the engineers by the collar and shouts: »You incompetent imbecile! What are you waiting for?«

His voice doesn't sound like the voice I heard on the Day of the Occurrence. It's pitched higher. His voice must get stronger when he meets Eternal, like his soul. Whatever it is. At this moment, the other engineer is holding the big remote control in his trembling hands and pressing one of its buttons. What's that noise? Something's happening down there. I look down into the well. The black sphere has started to spin round. The bright eyes on it are even brighter now. What kind of machine is this?

Right now, the Obedients are removing Alemshah III's robe. Alemshah III looks even smaller when he's stripped of his huge robe. He looks so frail I can hardly believe he's Alemshah III. Hisar puts something resembling a metallic backpack on Alemshah III's back. The Obedients are putting the robe back on. Whatever the backpack thing was, it's no longer visible. The noise downstairs has increased. I hope the recorder can pick up my voice amidst the clatter and clatter.

Wait a minute! The sphere has stopped spinning. Now it's rising upwards. How can this be? Alemshah III is standing on the railing. He spread his arms wide, just like he did on the Day of Obedience. Oh Eternal! Alemshah III will throw himself into the well! He will kill himself! If he does that, he'll be breaking

the 14th Edict. How can Eternal's envoy ignore the edicts when we poor women still try to live by them? I'm losing my mind. The black sphere continues to rise. It's past where we are now. It's heading for the ceiling. No, no, no, no, no! The monarch has fallen into the void! I can't look at this!

He did not fall. Alemshah III didn't fall. He rose up into the air … just like he did on the Day of Occurrence! Now he rises with the orb to the ceiling of the well. A piece breaks off from him and falls where I am. I look at the feathery thing falling at my feet like a mustard-colored bird … It is a beard … A false beard …

Alamshah III is a woman! How can this be? Why … And the black sphere suddenly … The black sphere suddenly emits a light … Becomes invisible … Now it has turned into a giant ball of light … Just like …

The Eternal … This is … the Eternal … My eyes darken and …

Excerpt from the biography of Alamshah I written by the founder of FSDT, Alim Behraami:

Page 25: *… and when we heard the voice, our miserable souls, thirsting for salvation, were filled with excitement. We were like millions of birds. We flocked together to the square, and behold, the clouds of the black sky were scattering in all directions. It was evident that a holy being was approaching. When the clouds opened, we saw that otherworldly light. That being was a sphere, we thought that the sun had come down. We said that the time of mankind on earth was over. And we were not afraid of going blind. We kept our eyes on that holy light …*

Page 27: *… and then a ladder of light descended from that holy sphere. And a man from among us, without wings, ascended into heaven and mounted the ladder. He spread his arms wide. He approached that being brighter than the sun …*

Page 30: *He who had ascended to heaven came down after a long time. We saw only the whites of his eyes. We thought that this great man had lost his mind. When the luminous sphere disappeared, the one who ascended to the sky opened his mouth. He said to us: »*It is Eternal who appears here.*«*

Page 32: *The name of the one who ascended to the sky was Alamshah. Eternal, who created the heavens and the earth, had chosen him as his messenger.*

Page 35: *... so Alamshah informed us of the first Edict. We knew that the Creator of this universe is Eternal ...*

80 days ago

AO (After Occurence) 84th Year 43rd Day. Dr. Aref Akhazan's Secret Laboratory Notes. Last Recording.

I've learnt what Razzam is. Razzam is the name of a lie, a god machine! There is no Eternal! There never was an Occurrence! For generations we have been molding our lives according to a lie ... I am about to lose my mind and there is no Eternal for me to take refuge in, to beg for my sanity! There is no Eternal to rain curses on my enemies! I feel like a baby thrown into the center of an endless desert, which is constantly growing and has no exit. Alone, helpless, frightened! What am I going to do? How am I going to live with this truth?

It's been four days since I learned the truth, but I still haven't calmed down. This is not something easily digested. Maybe I will never be able to calm down. Five days ago, I went into seclusion in our secret room, as they said they did in the place called the Cave of Purification by the infamous Alemshahs. I asked Ayla not to disturb me. I was not to eat, not to sleep, not to see anyone, not to do anything, but only to meditate on the word Razzam and to find its meaning from the hidden corners of my memory. At the end of twenty-three hours, I succeeded. I remembered. The first time I heard the word Razzam was from my grandmother's mouth.

I was six years old. Unlike the other women around me, my grandmother possessed a lot of knowledge. She was a sage. She told me the secrets of grass, animals and stars before bedtime. It was my grandmother who made me love science.

»Eternal has forbidden you to read,« I said one day in my child's mind. »Aren't you sinful for knowing so much?« My grandmother was silent for a while, trying to swallow her anger, the reason of which I could not understand, as if she

wanted to push down a morsel stuck in her throat, and then, failing to do so, she said to me, »It is not Eternal or any other deity who deems knowledge too much for us, but Razzam. Everything is a lie, my son, everything is a lie …«

My grandmother's eyes widened with horror as soon as the words left her mouth, as if she had unintentionally cursed Eternal. Then she got up and ran to the door, forgetting even to cover her hair, and looked out onto the street. I was too young that day to understand why she behaved like that. I understand now. My grandmother died that evening of a heart attack. It was the first death I had ever seen in my life, my first great pain, so I must have buried what was said that day very deeply.

My grandmother somehow knew the truth. Not being able to say what she knew caused her so much pain and disgust that she finally couldn't stand it and threw up the truth. The truth that came out of her made her sick in a few hours. The name of the disease that no physician knew the cure for was fear. The weight of the truth killed my grandmother. I think it will kill me too. Because I stole the secret files of the Foundation by risking all dangers. I learned where the machine named Razzam, which means »the greatest secret« in their encrypted language, is hidden, how it works, all of it, all of it!

While I thought that I was the first person to invent invisibility in my secret laboratory and we, the Hemzendiyarians, thought that we lacked such a technology, they had built a flying ship years ago and managed to make it invisible with optical tricks. It was only a rocket backpack that lifted all the Alamshahs into the sky. A rocket backpack! And Eternal, who we thought had appeared, was nothing but a ship that made itself invisible with the help of small cameras and screens! Opalescence! Everything was just a game of colors! We were just stupid spectators who shed tears believing that the film they were watching was real!

I hadn't spoken a word to Ayla for four days. Like a kitten, Ayla didn't leave the doorstep for hours. She said I could tell her whatever my problem was. She swore to Eternal that she wouldn't judge me no matter what. Finally I sent her to her mother's

house. I needed to be alone … How do I tell her? How do I tell her that there is no such thing as Eternal? How do I explain to her that all the torments she has been enduring all her life with the prospect of a fairer afterlife are in vain? How do I explain that Alemshah III, who made her life hell just because she was a woman, is also a woman? How do I answer her questions? Because she will have many. She will ask why. She always asks why … The reasons are in the secret file in front of me right now, but I can't tell you about them, Ayla. I can't tell you yet …

A few months after I started teaching you everything I know, I asked you: »What is your biggest dream?« I thought you might mention a red-cheeked baby or a house built of white stone where you could grow desert flowers in the courtyard. It wouldn't be too difficult for me to make these dreams come true. But you dreamed a dream that I could never give you. You whispered: »A world where I am free«, as if you were committing a great sin. Now how can I tell you that women were free before that big lie they call the Occurrence?

Women and men were free, Ayla. Edicts did not determine the limits of anyone's life. Marriage and reproduction were not divine orders. No ruler's power was enough to suppress the rebellions of the crowds. No one was a servant to the Alemshahs. No one wanted to keep multiplying so that they would die in heaps in their wars! That's why, my darling. While people like you hide behind four walls and produce new soldiers, people like me should wear necklaces of lead around their necks. This is what they want. That's why they wrote this cruel story. It was not the bullets that won Alemshah I that great world war in the 25th year. It was this story … It was this story that made us think that the world was all about Hemzendiyar …

I don't think I can bear to see the horror in your eyes, but I'm going to tell you anyway, because you're the only thing I believe is real now. The only thing I have … But first I have to figure out how to take down this vile organization that surrounds us like a spider's web. I'm going to do it. From my toes to my throat, I'm filled with the truth that took my grandmother's life. I'm going to vomit this truth all over the country, even if it means drowning and dying in it. And then with you …

Wait a minute, those footsteps ... Are you back? No ... It's not you ... They came to get me ... Ayla!

NOTE: Dr. Aref Akhazan's voice suddenly stops here. A few minutes later, doors are heard opening and closing, followed by three gunshots. There is no other audio recording of Dr. Aref Akhazan.

Present day
AO (After Occurence) 84th Year. 124th Day. Ayla A's Experiment Recordings. Last Recording.

Ayla ... That was his last word. You heard it too, didn't you, Dorothy? We call Eternal when we're scared and when we're happy. We shout it, hoping that stupid word would protect us ... Aref shouted my name with his last breath ... Do you know what hurts more than the truth? I couldn't protect him. Neither of us could save him.

I'm on the record. So let me tell you what happened with one last effort ... What I saw in that desert lair engulfed me like a sandstorm, turned me upside down and tore me apart. I fainted. When I came to, I was still invisible. I must have been unconscious for a few minutes only. Then I ran like the wind across that ominous desert to our house, to our secret room. I ransacked the room hoping to make sense of what I had seen and finally found my lover's voice ... The truth has been under your fish tank all along, Dorothy. Aref had a *Stenocara* beetle too. And you've seen it all, heard it all. Unlike me, you knew the truth ... Aref was murdered ... Nothing else matters. NOTHING!

It's over, Dorothy. I'm no longer just a woman who's lost her faith. I've lost everything except the last vestiges of sanity that I've barely kept in that head of mine ... But let me tell you something, Dorothy, this colossal loss hasn't made me feel lighter. What comes is not relief when someone loses their faith. Isn't that interesting? Just think, a big piece of you, a piece as big as a continent, is gone, but you're heavier than before. They grow like a desert, Dorothy. I'm growing like a

desert. They're crushed under their own weight and they can't move. I can't move …

Get a grip … You're recording … Okay. It's 7:00 am. Two hours before the start of the shit show they call Occurrence Day … How many hours have I been sitting across from you, Dorothy? Twenty? Anyway, it doesn't matter … Look, listen to me. All this time you haven't told me about my husband's dead, but I'm gonna tell you something. Are you listening? Okay. You don't belong in this desert land. Neither do I … One more thing. Making yourself invisible while crossing dangerous waters is not a perfect solution for me, even if it is for you. It doesn't work for shit. Do you know why? Because I'm not a prey. I – AM – NOT – A – PREY! Even though they have tried for years and years to make me believe that I'm a prey, I now know the truth. It is not my destiny to be afraid, to hide, to surrender when I can't hide, and to try to ease the pain of this surrender with dreams of the afterlife. Not anymore. NO!

Why didn't you tell me my husband was dead all this time? WHY? Okay, I'll stop screaming, don't be scared … I'm sorry. I've made up my mind. I'm not going to be invisible anymore. Ever! You know what I'm gonna do, Dorothy? In a moment, I'm going to stop recording my voice, give my legs one last command to move, and I'm going to take myself all the way to the very center of danger, to that spectacle scene called the Great Occurrence Square. Yes, I'm going to do it. With my night-colored hair, which I won't keep hidden under a veil, and my purple dress, which I can only wear between these shitty walls, I will walk through the streets without taking responsibility for any man's desires!

Then … Then … Then … When I reach the square, I will show the face of the truth to that stupid crowd with their hands on their hearts, waiting to see the Eternal appear. That will be my real revolution, Dorothy! What are you saying? Nothing … Nothing at all! My husband is dead! My God is dead! Say something, you stupid animal!

My darling, my dear Aref … I'm about to lose my mind … But do you know what saddens me the most about the truth? Knowing that there is no afterlife where I can see you again …

Yet a faint voice inside me tells me that I will meet you again. Maybe you and I will be reborn as two little black fish in a deep blue ocean and we will continue to search for the truth without paying attention to anyone. What do you say Aref?

NOTE: Ayla A's speech ends here. In the rest of the recording, a violent crying fit and the sounds of breaking glass are heard for a while. There is no other audio recording of her.

Excerpt from the article titled »A New Miracle« in the 84th Occurrence Day Special Issue of Foundation Newspaper:
... Hundreds of thousands of Hemzendins filled the Great Occurrence Square to celebrate the 84th Anniversary of the Occurrence and to hear the 84th Edict. The children, who were the future of Hemzendiyar, were shouting with heartfelt enthusiasm that they were the followers of His Holiness Alemshah III ... At exactly 11.00 am, eyes were turned towards the sky and the Almighty Eternal appeared and raised His messenger Alemshah III to the sky ... When that strange event took place, the eyes of all the Obedients of Hemzendiyar were on His Holiness Alemshah III, who was coming down again. Because soon the messenger of Eternal would announce the 84th Edict. That's why no one but two children noticed a sinful concubine, who had lost her sanity, enter the Great Occurrence Square. One of these children, who was an eyewitness, said that the mad woman clung to the arms of the faithful women and cursed Eternal ... It was at this very moment that the new miracle took place. As you all know, the 84th Edict proclaimed by His Eminence Alemshah III is as follows: »If any of you should one day deny the existence of Eternal, do not see or hear them. Punish the unbelievers with nothingness.« *According to the other child eyewitness, the mad woman, who did not even have a name, continued to run around in the crowd and harass the believing women, but none of the women turned to look at this unbeliever. The crowd of believers, especially the women, were following the 84th Edict, which was reported as a miracle, punishing the sinful woman for the absence she tried to attribute to the Almighty Eternal*

and ignored her. Obviously, this woman, a servant of Eblis, is now an invisible being. Having once again proved their loyalty to the Almighty Eternal and his messenger His Eminence Alemshah III, the people of Hemzendiyar will surely be rewarded with the best of rewards in the afterlife.

Above the Clouds

FUNDA ÖZLEM ŞERAN

-I-



Funda Özlem Şeran was born in İstanbul, Turkey, in 1984. She graduated from Political Science and International Relations at Marmara University, completed her master's degree in the same department with her thesis on political science fiction, comparing utopian and dystopian literature. Her published works include horror anthologies, adult urban-fantasy novels, sci-fi novellas and various children's books. She won several national awards with sci-fi short stories and is published in Italian, Dutch, Greek, German and Canadian anthologies.

Mavi Bayraktar awoke from a bad dream and opened his eyes to the morning of another new day in his perfect life.

His beloved wife, whom he believed to be his soul mate, and his two smart and well-behaved children were sleeping in their rooms. They got up at the sound of the alarm, each completed their own preparations and met at the breakfast table.

Conversation was calm and their meals were healthy. However, Mr. Mavi's absent-mindedness attracted his wife's attention.

»Darling, are you okay?«

Like a TV set just turned on, Mavi blinked his eyes, which were not blue at all, unlike the meaning of his name. »Yes... Of course...«

»You didn't have nightmares again, did you?«

Mr. Mavi froze for a moment - as if the broadcast had stopped - then smiled. »No... I guess I didn't get enough sleep.«

His wife's smile was as forced as his own, almost studied. But neither of them dwelled on the matter.

They put the children on the school bus and went in opposite directions. They both walked to work, because a little exercise, especially in the morning, was good for everyone.

But Mavi Bayraktar didn't feel well at all. He had hoped that walking would help him loosen up and feel normal again. In fact, he had done everything he could to return to normal. So why did he still feel this way?

He was taking good care of himself. He cherished his wife. He loved and spoiled his children. He had a good job that

benefited society. Everything in his life was logical and consistent. So what was the problem? Why couldn't his mind feel at ease? What was causing the strange nightmares? Why couldn't he get rid of them?

Mavi Bayraktar suddenly stopped in the middle of the road. He was almost run over by a labor bus, but fortunately the vehicle stopped in time. Nevertheless, this unexpected movement caused a small disturbance. Vehicles were lined up one after the other, people were looking at him strangely.

But for the first time in a long while, Mr. Mavi didn't feel strange - he had finally figured out what to do. He marveled that he had never thought about it before, but there was nothing to be surprised about. It was something that had never been done before.

Mr. Mavi quickened his steps in the opposite direction. The determined strides of the people around him moved in perfect harmony, but he couldn't keep pace.

He reached the bridge after a half-hour walk. Vehicles were coming and going in their usual order. There were no other pedestrians because nobody walked that far. And Mr. Mavi was not interested in walking either. He stopped in the middle of the bridge. In front of him was a unique view of the Bosphorus. A bright sun overhead, happy little clouds in front of him: everything was perfect. Maybe too perfect. Of course no one had had that thought before.

Mavi Bayraktar gripped the bridge railing firmly and carefully swung his legs over to the other side. Stepping past the safety wire, he didn't hesitate–he let himself fall into the void. The sea below was a deep blue, and the clouds above were still and motionless.

-II-

»... While no announcement has yet been made about the asteroid approaching the Earth, authorities say there is nothing to worry about and that necessary precautions will be taken. At this rate, the object is expected to enter the atmosphere in a few days... It's 6.30 am... Now the weather... Ist -«

Without waiting for the rest, he reached over and turned off the radio. He wasn't listening to it anyway; he just wanted some sound in the empty house. Any sound other than the voices in his head…

Then he went to the kitchen and took a second pill. He had taken the first one when a nightmare had awakened him, and it seemed to have worked. At the very least, he had managed to ward off the bloody images that flooded his mind every time he closed his eyes. The voices would go away too, he knew that. They always did.

After a short morning work-out, he showered and prepared a nutritious breakfast while still naked–the advantage of living alone. When no one was around, he liked to do little »oddities« like this. But then an uncomfortable feeling would come over him, as if someone were watching… He felt an icy chill on the back of his head, right on the nape of his neck, and it bothered him so much that he had to get up and perform some other nonsensical action. It was usually something small, like leaving the cupboard doors open or throwing whites and colors in the washer at the same time, but it felt like a challenge toward his imaginary audience. He was claiming his freedom to do whatever he wanted.

Today, before leaving the house, he took one of the glasses lined up on the counter and pulled it forward, breaking the line. He could not help but wash and put away the dishes or dress appropriately, but the misplaced glass was enough. After all, he was a supervisor; he could not possibly tolerate a bigger disturbance. But that was precisely why he could not avoid indulging in these absurd ventures, and the worse he felt, the more he wanted to perform them. That was the real conundrum, and unfortunately there was no pill for that.

In fact, as a supervisor, he was not even needed. With the end of the Great Destruction and the Dark Age that followed, humanity had learned its lesson; there was no room for »disorder« in the new order. Inequality, injustice, violence, crime, war, disease, hunger… whatever had caused the Great Destruction had been left behind in the Dark Age. People had forsaken all those things; they had been able to learn from

their mistakes and build a new life. Yes, maybe their civilization was not as advanced as it used to be before the Destruction, but at least they were »civilized.« It had been a long time since they had come out of the Darkness, and they had learned to live in peace. Individuals acted rationally and with common sense, and as a result society functioned in harmony.

In such an order, everyone was in fact their own supervisors, but there was also a monitoring mechanism in case of minor accidents or misfortunes. In this way, citizens could go on with their lives without wasting time and energy on mishaps. The job of the inspectors was to ensure that everything returned to normal as soon as possible. So they were not overworked, but they had a great responsibility. Why an unforeseen event had occurred, where, how, and who had caused it-and the possible consequences for society-were investigated in detail and the result reported to the authorities. An unforeseen event... like an object approaching Earth.

Yet today's mission was not about a meteorite crashing into the earth, but about a man who had crashed into the sea. He was to investigate the case of Mavi Bayraktar, the man who had fallen to his death from the Fifth Bosphorus Bridge. The event was considered an accident, but precautions had to be taken to prevent it from happening again. The bridge was temporarily closed to pedestrian traffic–perhaps individual crossings would have to be banned altogether. While the flow of vehicles on the road was being maintained in an orderly fashion, the officers blocking the sidewalk with lanes were discussing the issue.

»Good luck,« he said, interrupting the two men's conversation and pulling his ID card out of his pocket. Auditor Engin Kurt had arrived on the scene, and everything would soon return to normal. Both officers appeared relieved and tried to help Engin as much as they could.

Mavi Bayraktar was, like everyone else, a useful citizen of society. A well-liked and respected individual. He was a married dentist with two children. The previous morning, he had left his house to go to work, but he had not made it to his office. The last place he was seen was on this bridge, right in

the middle of it. People in passing cars witnessed his fall, and his lifeless body was later found washed up on the shore. It was not known why he had come to the bridge, why he was on foot, and how he had fallen down despite the safety barrier. This is where Auditor Engin Kurt came in.

He examined and analyzed everything: from the wind speed on the bridge at the time of the incident, to the condition of the stones on the sidewalk; from whether the ground was slippery to the vehicles passing on the adjacent road; from the guardrail to the safety wire. There were no external factors that could have caused the man to fall from the bridge. He checked Mr. Mavi's medical records. The dentist was of sound constitution, nothing could make him suddenly weak or make him feel like fainting. If it happened, he would take the necessary steps, as any person with good sense would.

The officer next to Engin hesitantly asked, »Do you think someone would… you know… push him?«

The Auditor, like the other officer present, was startled by such a preposterous claim. Yes, there were black marks in human history. Their ancestors had once lived and died in barbaric and miserable conditions. But now everything was very different. In the new order, everyone was equal; the rules were for the good of everyone and applied to everyone. Everything that used to cause wars and massacres had disappeared. Religion, language, race, gender were no longer grounds for discrimination or privilege; there were no economic or social classes. Material resources were shared equally. Each individual was responsible for his or her own spiritual fulfillment and would make the decision that would make him or her happy and benefit society within the framework of logic. No one interfered with anyone else. Rare disagreements were resolved by common sense under the supervision of arbitrators.

So, who could have what problem with whom? Or who would want to harm Mavi Bayraktar?

»Maybe someone accidentally hit him?« the second officer speculated. The Auditor had ruled out this possibility; the eyewitnesses had not mentioned anyone being with Mr. Mavi. Still, he could not overlook any detail. He asked the officers to

take written statements from all the eyewitnesses, and he himself would go and talk to the medical examiner who was inspecting the body.

He would do whatever it took to ensure that such an incident would never happen again.

-III-

Mavi Bayraktar's wife Rana Bayraktar was a survey engineer. On the day of the accident, she was helping to register newly found places in the system, so the news had reached her too late. But that didn't change much.

The woman - in her late middle age - had not shed a tear. Nor was she crying now. Sitting opposite Engin, she was very composed and calm. Of course this was expected; after all, life went on.

»Did you observe any differences or anomalies in your husband on that day or previously?«

»No...« Rana thought for a moment. »Mavi was an ideal husband and a very good father. Ours is a very regular and normal life.«

»Of course, of course...«

The auditor reassured her that the opposite was unthinkable. He looked at the two children who were doing their homework at the dining table.

The woman had told them what had happened - it would be absurd to keep the truth from them just because they were young. They had understood the reason for their father's absence and, after receiving information from their mother about their future lives, they had gone back to their studies. As any normal child would do...

»What about his health? The records and the post-mortem report show no anomalies, but as a matter of procedure, I must ask you. Did your husband have any illnesses that may have caused him to fall off the bridge?«

»No. I would have known, and he would have been treated. This... This is ridiculous.«

Engin Kurt agreed with her.

So far, he had been unable to explain how the man had managed to fall from such a height. Getting up on the bridge, climbing over the railings, going beyond the wires... Everything seemed illogical. There was a flaw in the reasoning somewhere... Auditor Kurt was determined to find it.

He asked her permission to examine the man's house and belongings. Rana didn't mind; while the auditor looked around, she went into the kitchen and started to prepare dinner for the children.

The house was an ordinary, normal dwelling. As a rule, the number of rooms increased based on the number of occupants, ensuring each person had a private space to store their personal belongings - essential hygiene items, clothing, and school or work supplies, which varied according to the owner. All was clean and organized as expected; the only difference from Engin's house was that there was no kitchen cabinet left open, and the glasses were kept in order.

Although Engin lived alone, he noticed something familiar when he entered the couple's shared bedroom. On Rana's bedside table were scattered work-related documents. So she, too, sometimes lost her calm and control, particularly when it came to her work. Leaning over the papers more closely, Engin realized that they were map sketches. During the Great Destruction, much of Earth's landmass was wiped out - some areas submerged by rising waters, while others were torn apart by earthquakes, forming new islands and continents. The world had plunged into the Dark Ages. While humankind had reshaped it and built a new civilization, they were still in the process of discovering and exploring this transformed world. Rana Bayraktar's work seemed important, but most of the documents were full of terms and symbols that Engin did not know.

He turned his attention to the man's side of the bed. There was only an alarm clock and a glass of water on his nightstand. Water that Mr. Mavi had not drunk that morning and would never drink again. The nightstand had a drawer; the Auditor opened it and looked inside. He found instruction manuals for household items, and after some digging, a few boxes of pills: painkillers, antipyretics, and eye drops. A bottle of pills was

almost empty, and Engin Kurt recognized it: it was the same medicine he used to take when he woke up in the middle of the night from recurring nightmares.

At that moment, the house phone started ringing. The auditor kept staring at the bottle in his hand as he heard Mrs. Rana's voice call him. He blinked as if waking up from sleep.

»Mr. Engin, it's for you. An officer from the center, it's important...«

He nodded and left the room, leaving the nightstand's drawer open. Only this time he didn't do it on purpose.

In the hall, he saw the telephone receiver on the coffee table, where Rana had left it. He picked it up and brought it to his ear. It was the officer he had assigned to take witness statements on the bridge.

»Chief, you need to get down here right away. One of the witnesses saw the incident up close... The man jumped down... I mean... Spontaneously... Specifically... Deliberately...«

Hearing no response from the Auditor, the officer spoke again. Only then did Engin Kurt reply.

»Are you sure? I mean, is the witness sure what they saw?«

»Well, there is a recording, chief. The witness was taking pictures at the time. He also captured the moment of the incident.«

»OK, I'm coming.«

Engin's voice was calm; he did not realize that he was still holding the pill bottle. He was clutching it so tightly in his palm that it was about to break into pieces.

-IV-

The photos were blurry because the vehicle was moving when it was taken, but they showed it all: the man standing on the bridge, grabbing the bars, swinging his legs over the railing and beyond the wires. In the last one, the bridge was empty. Mavi Bayraktar had jumped down.

The photos had been taken by a 12-year-old boy on a school trip. He was on the school bus to the second bank and wanted to take a picture of the city as a whole as they crossed

the bridge. The man was blocking his view, but he had kept snapping, thinking he would capture the sight anyway. When he noticed that the man had disappeared, he figured out what had happened and notified his teacher.

There were no other witnesses. Some people had seen Mavi Bayraktar on the bridge, but no one could say exactly what had happened. The photos, however, left no doubt. Auditor Engin Kurt had examined the blurry shots again and again, had even tampered with the camera to make sure there were no mistakes, yet the truth – that unthinkable truth – was crystal clear: Mavi Bayraktar had jumped off the bridge deliberately and ended his own life.

It was impossible that he hadn't considered the consequences of his actions – he was a healthy, rational, and self-controlled individual. Yet, for those very reasons, his decision to take his own life – to commit *suicide* – was inexplicable. Why would a decent citizen, healthy and content with his life, choose to die?

Engin had heard of suicides in ancient civilizations, he knew there were various reasons: unhappiness, insanity, guilt, constant suffering... But all this nonsense had ended with the New Order. The life of every living being was important, and every human being had responsibilities to himself and the environment. Life energy was never to be wasted. So why had Mavi Bayraktar disregarded his own?

The inspector looked again at the pills in a sample bag. After the phone call, he had spoken to Rana Bayraktar some more, asked her about the pills in the bottle and learned about Mavi Bayraktar's nightmares. The man had been having trouble sleeping for some time but Rana did not know what the dreams were about. She could only say that Mr. Mavi, who was very affected by those unreal images, avoided talking about them and had recently consulted a doctor for help. Engin Kurt took the name of the doctor along with the pill bottle and said goodbye to the woman – who had no idea why her husband had committed suicide.

At the center, the supervisor and his colleagues wouldn't leave him alone. Once word spread that it hadn't been an acci-

dent, but a self-termination – the first and only case in nearly a century – chaos erupted. Unable to keep their curiosity and bewilderment under control, the auditors filled the corridor where Engin Kurt's office was located. There were those who reasoned and considered different theories and those who wanted to help Engin with the case. But all whispers were cut off as if with a knife when the supervisor arrived. The man, a complete authority in age as much as in experience, cleared his throat gently and suddenly the hallway emptied.

»Good luck, Auditor Engin.«

The auditor quickly recovered from the surprise and hid the bottle of pills without even realizing it.

»Thank you, chief.«

»What's the latest?« the supervisor asked, pointing to the pill bottle as he sat down. The head of a unit whose duty was to observe and supervise was not going to leave out such a detail. Engin was embarrassed and stammered for a moment, not understanding why he was doing this.

»The investigation continues. I will talk to Mavi Bayraktar's doctor, maybe he can provide an explanation.«

»If he can't, you will have to.«

»What?«

The supervisor leaned toward him as if talking about a private matter.

»This case has disturbed us all. Especially the authorities want order to be restored as soon as possible… We all do…«

The second part of the sentence, added as a later thought, did not go unnoticed by Engin. The man was really in great discomfort. Engin had known him for a long time, and he had never seen him like this. The signs of age on his face had been there for a while, but his cheeks were more saggy today, the lines on his forehead more prominent. His sunken eyes were bloodshot and watery. Engin wondered for a moment whether he was having nightmares, too, and if so, whether he was on medication. Deep in these thoughts, he missed part of the supervisor's speech.

»As I said, I expect a report from you examining every single moment. This is very important. No rest until we explain the

situation and get everything in order. And talk to his doctor as soon as possible…«

»Sure, I'll go tomorrow…«

»Not tomorrow!« the supervisor objected. »Do it today.«

This outburst from the usually calm, poised supervisor surprised and worried the auditor.

»But the office hours are almost over…«

»Then hurry up! Go, don't let me hold you.« He got up and was about to leave but he turned at the door. »I want copies of these photos on my desk. Give them to my secretary before you go.«

»Sure,« was all Engin could say. However, he felt like answering »No!« for the first time.

He didn't know where that impulse came from – but he immediately controlled it. Nevertheless, before leaving the office, he could not help but open both desk drawers completely and leave them like that.

-V-

When he arrived at the doctor's office, the assistant girl at the entrance was closing her calendar and packing her things. When Engin came in, she looked at him indifferently and spoke.

»Ms. Sanem is with her last patient; they are about to leave. Unfortunately, we cannot accept any more patients today. If you want, you can make an appointment for tomorrow.«

Sighing with relief that he had arrived before closing time, Engin was taken aback, however, by the word *patient*. That must also be the way his doctor spoke of him. But in fact, it was normal: people who had pain somewhere, a limb or organ that was malfunctioning, went to the doctor to be treated. And the mind could sometimes get confused and when one had, for example, nightmares that affected the quality of their sleep and daily life, they could consult a doctor as well. But it bothered him all the same, and he immediately started to explain.

»I'm not a patient, I'm from the supervision center. I have a few questions for the doctor about one of her patients…«

The doctor's assistant replied automatically.

»Unfortunately, we cannot share information about patients.«

Engin froze for a moment, then remembered to show her his auditor ID card.

»Look, this is a very important matter. One of the doctor's patients lost his life,« he added, without hesitation, to impress her. »Or rather, he took his own life. So please, I would appreciate it if you could help us restore order as soon as possible.«

He didn't need to say anything else. The assistant's wide eyes, her batting eyelashes, and her stammering voice indicated that she was reconsidering her decision.

»Sure, sure. Just sit there; you can go in when the patient comes out.«

Engin took a seat in one of the armchairs in the waiting room, while the secretary put her things back on her desk and sat down. Now she couldn't take her eyes off the auditor.

»Excuse me... Which patient is it? Who would do such a thing?«

Engin couldn't resist the urge. »I'm afraid I can't share this information,« he said with a professional, polite smile. Contrary to his words, the gesture was practiced.

At that moment, the office door opened, and the doctor came out with her patient, seeing him off while giving him some final advice. The man looked quite exhausted. Engin wondered for a moment if he also had trouble sleeping and if he himself looked like that.

The doctor's voice roused him from his thoughts.

»Hello! Welcome, but our office hours are over for today. If you wish...«

The assistant explained the situation. When Ms. Sanem realized the circumstances, she immediately let the auditor into her office.

»Thank you, Deniz,« she said to her assistant. »You can leave now.«

Once they stepped into the office, the doctor did not hide her surprise. She was stunned that one of her patients had committed suicide – especially because said patient was Mr. Mavi Bayraktar.

»Mr. Mavi was doing very well lately. In fact, after his last checkup, we stopped the medication because he was feeling better.«

»You're talking about these pills, aren't you?« the auditor said, pulling out a sample bottle from his pocket.

»Yes, these… After he finished the first bottle, I wrote him another prescription in case he needed it, but then he started sleeping better.«

Engin looked at the bottle. Only a few pills were left. It looked like Mr. Mavi had needed them.

»Are you sure about this? It seems like he continued the treatment himself…«

The doctor's eyebrows rose in honest incomprehension. »But… he would have told me if he did such a thing. In our recent conversations, he told me that the nightmares had stopped and that he was sleeping better.«

The auditor couldn't believe he was asking such a question, but before he could think, he blurted out, »Could he have kept it from you?«

»No way!« Ms. Sanem tried to keep a professional tone. »Why would he hide it? That's preposterous. He was coming here of his own free will, why would a human being…«

Her voice trailed off as she realized what she had said. After all, Mr. Mavi had killed himself. Still, the doctor had a hard time accepting it. Clearing her throat, she maintained her scientific stance. »It is unrealistic that he did not tell the truth, this is unacceptable. To deceive someone else is to deceive yourself. Lying is the work of barbarians; it belongs to decadent civilizations.«

»The same is true for suicide…«

Engin sighed. Apparently, he couldn't hold his tongue. He decided to change the subject.

»So, can you tell me a little bit about the nightmares he had? What kept Mr. Mavi up at night?«

She took a deep breath. »It's horrible… And so absurd. It was as if he had created a world of his own inside his mind. But it was not a beautiful world. It was a place of pain, of torture, of illogical events. Sometimes he would share bits and pieces, described long but meaningless events. He claimed that his

dreams were real, that he had been there and experienced those things, as if they were real!«

Engin Kurt felt a chill on the back of his neck and flinched. He hoped the doctor hadn't noticed it.

»Did he ever mention what kind of images or events he considered real?« he asked fearfully.

»Of course, it was very clear-headed, at first. He described the uninhabitable streets of a chaotic city. The air was unbreathable, people used special devices to breathe. He said that there was another city reaching up to the sky and only certain people could live there – what the ancients called *the rich*, I think. But he used a different term, let me remember what it was… Something like superior or high level. It is detailed in my notes, I recorded it all.«

Engin felt relieved for a moment, but he had to be sure.

»Can I see those notes?«

»Sure, you can take whatever you need, if it helps.«

»Thank you. I won't take any more of your time. If you want to add anything or remember anything, you can contact me at the center.«

Actually, he was the one who didn't want to stay in this office any longer. He had an unfounded concern that the topic would change, and the discussion would focus on him. Did Mavi Bayraktar do the same? How did he keep his secrets? By cutting short his sessions with the doctor?

»Yes, of course,« the doctor replied. »I am ready to do whatever I can. It bothers me a lot, that a patient of mine would do such a thing… I mean… After all, he was my responsibility.«

Struggling with his own guilt, the auditor replied in an automatic tone: »Every individual is responsible for themselves, their first duty is to themselves, and then to society.«

This brought the doctor to her senses; she gathered herself and walked Engin to the door.

At the entrance, they noticed that the assistant had not left yet. Ms. Sanem asked her to share the notes about Mr. Mavi with Engin, then she excused herself.

The auditor sensed a change in the assistant's demeanor. Perhaps she was relieved to know who the patient was that

had committed suicide, but Engin still found her behavior strange.

As she rummaged through the filing cabinet, she wouldn't stop talking.

»It's such a pity! Mr. Mavi was a very good man. He didn't seem like the kind of person who would do such a thing.«

»Did you know him well?«

»No… But you get an idea about people as they come and go.«

The girl's attitude was way too friendly now, but he didn't dwell on it.

»You said he was a very good man. What did you mean?«

»He was just a good person… Kind, respectful, measured…«

»Isn't everyone?«

Deniz turned her head towards him and smiled. She caught the auditor off guard. Her smile was so bright, so real. Engin felt that no one had ever smiled like that at him in his entire life.

»It still makes you sad, of course. Ms. Sanem cares a lot about her patients; it is very painful to lose them in such an untimely manner…«

Engin was shocked as she handed the folder to him. But it wasn't the girl's sweet smile that took his attention this time.

»What do you mean by 'them'?«

»Uh…« She waved her hand as if it were unimportant. »You know, dear… Accidents, unexpected events, etcetera…«

The auditor took the file without taking his eyes off her. Accidents and unexpected events were his profession.

»Did the doctor have other patients who died? I mean, out of the blue, for no reason?«

»We can't say they died without a reason, of course. Some traffic accidents, some domestic accidents… Well, accidents happen, don't they?« The girl laughed outrageously. »But of course, you auditors know better!«

Engin did not know how to react in the face of her extreme attitude. The girl took advantage of his hesitation.

»Anyway, my shift is over. Have a good evening, and if you need anything else, you know where to find me!«

She threw her bag over her shoulder and walked toward the door.

The auditor stared after her, muttering, »Good evening.«

He was sure now: he had never met anyone like this in his life.

-VI-

After informing his supervisor of the latest developments, he went straight home. He wanted to check the file himself first, without any interference.

He completed his daily chores and had dinner and then he went straight to work. The folder the doctor's secretary had given him was quite thick, and just as he was thinking, *I wonder how long Mr. Mavi had been going to the doctor or what he told her*, he came across something else. The file contained not only information about Mr. Mavi, but also notes of other patients of Ms. Sanem. At first he thought there must be some confusion. Maybe the girl was talking too much and couldn't do her job properly. But when he shuffled the papers a bit, he realized that there was something else going on.

The documents in the folder all belonged to patients who had died. Some had been hit by a car, some had fallen from somewhere. Some had been accidentally electrocuted, some had slipped and hit their head. Every single one of them was an accident victim. Just like the assistant had said…

It was also quite interesting that all those patients had sleep problems and were taking a medication, the same pills that Engin himself was taking to counteract the nightmares. All these patients talked about nightmares, just like Mavi Bayraktar, and Ms. Sanem had taken detailed notes on their stories. For example, one of the patients, a female teacher in her twenties, kept seeing herself in a laboratory full of pregnant women. In the dream, her belly was also swollen, and she was repeatedly giving birth to her lookalike (specifically referred to in the notes as a clone and the doctor had put a question mark next to that word. Engin did not know what it meant). The woman had later died of food poisoning.

A sixty-three-year-old carpenter man dreamed that he was on a brightly lighted platform. Hundreds of people were gathered around him, watching him, and small machines and tools were flying through the air. A woman approached him and stabbed him with a knife while someone shouted in a loud voice. The carpenter insisted that he committed suicide in the nightmare. In reality, he had had an accident in his carpentry shop: a blade had accidentally plunged into his torso, and he had bled to death before he could call for help.

Another patient, a ten-year-old girl, found herself trapped in a room in her dreams. A large, ugly man was shoving a red-hot skewer into her genitals and demanding that she scream, »Don't do it, Daddy!« Then someone identical to the girl entered the room (Engin noticed that the girl referred to her as *clonebot* in the notes) and started strangling her. Oddly enough, the same girl had drowned by falling into a pond.

Then there was a farmer. Thirty-five years old, he claimed that when he slept, a chip (the doctor had put a question mark there) was implanted behind one of his eyes. This chip supposedly controlled his brain, making decisions for him. An intelligent machine saw, heard, knew, and managed everything. There was no escape from it, he said. But the farmer must have escaped, because the nightmares ended when he was killed by a moving plow.

And then there was Mr. Mavi. A forty-three-year-old dentist, married with two children, who in his dreams was the »pet« of the youngest son of a very rich family in a place he called *Uptown*. Like a pet, he was fed, taken to the toilet, and expected to entertain the child in return. Whenever the child was unhappy, he would either starve him or torture him by locking him in a dark place. Mavi Bayraktar once described having his eye peeled with a fruit knife. But the worst thing was that when he got older and was replaced by a younger, newer version, the boy's father threw him down one of the air ducts in the upper city. That is, from many kilometers above the ground... Just as Mr. Mavi had died: from a fall - or rather, from a jump...

The list went on and on. As he read the notes, names, nightmares, and accidents started to blend together. Engin felt nau-

seous. He couldn't be sure of anything anymore. Those people had no connection to each other, their nightmares bore strange similarities and seemed real, all had had accidents and inexplicable deaths…He felt his eyelids close, but he forced himself not to fall asleep. His pills were in a bottle on the table. But now it was not only the nightmares that worried him, it was also what happened to the people who took those pills.

He reached for the bottle. He had not yet decided whether to open it and swallow one of the pills or throw it away. He knocked a stack of papers with his hand, and they scattered around. The folder slipped off the table and fell to the floor.

With a groan, Engin bent down to fix the mess and noticed a hidden pocket inside the file cover. He spotted the corner of a piece of paper tucked inside. Surprised he hadn't seen it before, he picked up the folder and pulled out the paper, realizing it had been deliberately hidden. Maybe someone had placed it there for him to find. Maybe Assistant Deniz wasn't so absent-minded after all.

The paper had writing on both sides, like one of those old documents penned by a cheap dactilo. *The Great Destruction/ Big Lie* was written on the front in huge letters and followed by lots of exclamation marks. The words *New Order* and *New Evil* were side by side, with an equal sign between them. The paragraphs that followed were completely insane.

According to this piece of paper, the Dark Ages never happened. Humanity had become completely dehumanized after being enslaved by advanced technology, and then had fallen into the hands of certain forces. There was no free will anymore, everything was under the control of the authorities. People were programmed to do whatever those in power wanted. They even made people forget their past and imposed false memories on them. The shifting of continents, the climate, even the color of the sea were all part of this big lie. And they used the clouds to manage everything, so they could watch everyone and know what was going through a person's mind before they even thought about it.

All this nonsense was so wild that Engin stopped reading after a while and threw the paper aside. He tried crumpling it

but the paper, somehow, resumed its old shape. It was as if someone were mocking him, but who could be so irrational? Whoever it was, they must have read all the patients' dreams, made up some stupid stories, and then attached them to the doctor's file. Dr. Sanem did not seem the type to do such a thing. Her assistant was weird, but this was too much even for her. After all, who would attempt such a thing and for what purpose?

Realizing that the situation was worse than he thought, Engin left the mess as it was and went to the kitchen. His nerves were upset, his nausea had turned into heartburn. Whenever he couldn't explain something, he felt a burning inside him, as if flames were engulfing his chest.

He opened the fridge and looked for something to drink – it was not the time for fruit juices with lots of vitamins, Coffee or tea would keep him awake, he was craving something else. If only there was a drink that could take away the nonsensical ideas filling his head! One that would make him forget everything and give him peace, even for a moment. If only he could drink himself into oblivion and forget until morning. But there wasn't.

He poured a glass of water and went to his bedroom. He had taken the pill bottle with him. He took a pill out of it. As he held it in his palm, he shook himself out of his thoughts, took out another capsule and swallowed them both with plenty of water. He was not taking any chances tonight.

-VII-

He was in that white corridor again. He was standing, but it was as if he were looking through someone else's eyes. He raised his arms; his hands were metal. When he moved his fingers, he could see tiny pistons, cables, and connections moving under a transparent skin. When he wanted to squeeze his palm, the machine that was his body obeyed.

Then they came. They were running toward him from the opposite end of the corridor, carrying strange weapons. One ran ahead of everyone, behind him two more, and behind

them even more. Their faces were expressionless, their clothes looked the same – but it didn't matter to him anyway.

When the first shots were fired, he reflexively stretched his hands forward. At the same moment, a mechanical voice in his ears said, »Protection shield activated,« and the bullets that were coming out of the guns were neutralized and fell to the ground.

He didn't wait. He rushed forward, grabbed the man in front by the collar and threw him against the wall. It was effortless, as if he weighed nothing. Then he went for the others. Kicks, punches, precise and heavy blows landed one after the other. He moved so fast that the men could not keep up with him, even though they outnumbered him. He never missed a shot; he knew exactly whom to hit and when and where. That's when he realized that other parts of his body were also part of the steel machine. He was a flesh and blood killing machine…

He broke one man's neck and hit several others in different parts of their bodies. He shot one with his own pistol. He slit the throat of another who pulled a knife. The man he had just thrown against the wall picked himself up – he kept coming back. He plunged his metal hand into his chest, his fingers dug into the flesh, breaking bones and then grasping something and pulling it out. The man collapsed to the ground, his beating heart still in the steel palm of his opponent's hand. The sound was accompanied by the moans and screams of the dying men.

When he woke up, gasping for breath, he realized that it was he who was moaning, and it was his own heart that was pounding. All those images of violence, blood, and brutality filled his head. Instead of banishing the nightmares, the pills had made them worse. This time the nightmare had felt more real than ever. He remembered killing those people with perfect clarity, he even felt the pleasure of it. But there was also something else. Inside the nightmare, he had felt a presence, like someone watching him through his own eyes. A silent driver controlling his arms and legs, giving him instructions. Maybe it was this someone who had activated the *protection shield*.

He was afraid that if he kept thinking he might lose his reason. He got up and washed his face and hands. He didn't take any more pills, but he didn't go back to sleep either. He stared at the stack of papers on the table and the flat brochure in the center and waited for morning. He needed answers.

-VIII-

»Good morning, how can I help you?«

At first, the assistant looked up and stared blankly with the disinterested demeanor she had displayed at their first meeting. She recovered when she saw Engin.

»Ah, it's you.«

There was no trace of last night's good humor and smiling demeanor now. It was a good thing, because the auditor was in no mood to laugh either. He threw the file in front of her, trying to restrain himself as he spoke.

»Are you making fun of me?«

Startled, Deniz looked at him and at the file. »Excuse me?«

»I don't know where this nonsense came from, but you have to explain it to me!«

It was the first time he ever raised his voice to someone, but he was finding it difficult to stay calm. The auditor was about to lose control.

When the assistant, who had been dealing with all kinds of patients for years, saw him in such a state, she composed herself and addressed him according to the protocol for similar cases.

»Please calm down, sit down for a while. Then tell me what happened. I am here to help you.«

The change in the girl's attitude calmed Engin down for a moment. He took a deep breath.

»Why did you give me these files?«

The assistant looked at the papers on the desk. She was puzzled. She opened the file cover but looked at it uncomprehending. »But…«

»I asked you to give me the notes about Mavi Bayraktar, but you also added other patients' information. Besides…« His voice

rose again, and he stood up. »You slipped this nonsense in there too!« He showed her. »What's all this crazy nonsense? Where did all this come from, why did you do such a thing?«

The assistant, whose eyes widened as she studied the papers, finally turned to him with a blank stare. She looked genuinely puzzled.

»What file, sir? I didn't give you anything, how did you get hold of these?«

It was Engin's turn to stare blankly. »What are you saying? Is this a joke? I remind you that I am an auditor, Ma'am!«

As their roles were reversed, Deniz got angry.

»Being an auditor doesn't give you the right to do this! These notes are highly confidential, you can't take them without permission! I will report you!«

Engin calmed down and explained. There was something odd going on.

»You gave them to me yesterday afternoon, at the request of the doctor. She was here too. I didn't do anything irregular. Please, come to your senses.«

»Sir, are you dreaming or something? If that were the case, I would remember. I never gave these to you! You went in for a meeting with Ms. Sanem and I left because my shift was over. You probably took advantage of my absence and took the files. How should I know?«

»Don't be ridiculous! You were here when my meeting with the doctor was over. You talked about other patients, you said, 'Mr. Mavi was such a good man'. I'm not making this up!«

»What, am I making it up? Am I lying?!«

The girl was terrified, she could not comprehend what Engin was saying. They were like two stubborn goats on a bridge. But the auditor insisted.

»This isn't going anywhere. Can't we ask Ms. Sanem to end this discussion? She was here anyway.«

»Of course, Sir! But she is in a committee meeting right now. She will be back in the afternoon; we have to wait.«

Both of them kept silent, keeping their nerves under control. Engin went to sit in the waiting room and Deniz returned to her desk. As he sat down, something rustled in his pocket.

Then he remembered what it was and decided to play his last card.

»And what do you have to say about this?« he said, pulling out the brochure he had unsuccessfully tried to crumple the night before. He hadn't put it back in the file because he thought it was evidence, but he had taken it with him. Waving it in front of her face, he waited for her to finally give in, to come clean and confess.

The assistant picked the flyer, turned it over, and handed it back to Engin with an expression that showed she was unimpressed.

»What is this?«

»You tell me what it is! It was hidden in the folder. Nonsensical allegations, absurd theories…« He fell silent as he looked at the paper again. The page was blank.

»What…«

He grabbed it and looked at both sides, but there was nothing of what he had read last night. Not a word, not a dot. It was just plain, milky white paper. His mouth hung open; he could not speak. A thousand thoughts raced through his head at the same time and at the same speed. He certainly hadn't put the wrong flyer in his pocket; he didn't have any others. Besides, it was too peculiar to be mistaken for anything else. He turned it over in his hands again and again, waved it, and lifted it into the air, but it was all in vain. At that moment, he locked eyes with the girl. The assistant looked at him with concern, as if she thought the auditor had lost his mind and was frightened by it. Was he really losing his mind? Was this what it felt like to go crazy?

»Please, have a seat. Can I get you some water?«

She was as understanding and compassionate as if she were dealing with one of Dr. Sanem's patients. Engin couldn't argue with her anymore. When she walked away to get some water, he stared at the floor as if the words which had disappeared were down there and he could actually pick them up.

Was he already having nightmares before he had fallen asleep? Was this how dying patients felt in their last days, just before they had an accident or committed suicide?

Shuddering, he tried to rouse himself. The cold water the girl brought him helped a little. After drinking, he thanked her and asked her for something else. He wanted her to tell him what had happened yesterday afternoon. If it was true that he was imagining things, maybe he had also imagined the files and the insane flyer.

Deniz explained everything in a patient voice, leaving out no detail. The auditor had come to the office, asked to see the doctor to talk about a patient who had committed suicide, then sat and waited until the patient who was with Dr. Sanem came out of her office. Then Dr. Sanem had welcomed him. After that, everything was different from what the auditor remembered. The secretary claimed she had left because she was late and in a hurry. She hadn't been here when Engin and Dr. Sanem ended their interview. They never spoke and she never smiled at him.

Engin didn't object. What reason would she have to lie? Besides, that blank piece of paper told him that she was telling the truth. He was the odd one and that scared him terribly. He apologized to the assistant, asked her to contact him when the doctor arrived, and left. He had gotten nothing more out of their meeting than that useless and disturbing piece of paper.

-IX-

When he arrived at the center, everyone was waiting for him. But the whispering crowd was unbearable. The voices in his head and the ache in his stomach had intensified and he was afraid to take more pills.

»You are never late, Engin. Did something happen?«

The supervisor caught him off guard, he had expected to be alone, but the man was already there when he entered his office. However, Engin was not ready to report.

»Chief... I was going to come to your office later.«

As the words came out of his mouth, he realized they were a lie. How easily he had said it. First the dreams, now the lies... What was next? Suicide?

»Did you find anything useful in the doctor's notes?«

»I…« he had to force himself to speak. »I haven't come to any conclusions yet, but I'm continuing to investigate.«

The other man's dissatisfaction was evident.

»Hurry up, you know this is a very important matter.« He pointed at the photographs on the table. »Those are bothering me a lot. We need to clarify this situation as soon as possible. It is up to us to restore order. We have society and authorities to answer to.«

As the words *authority* and *order* echoed in his mind, his hand reflexively brushed against his pocket. He wasn't going to tell his supervisor about the paper that claimed everything was a lie, only to turn out to be a lie itself. Fortunately, the man didn't realize he was hiding something.

»Well then. Get back to work. Let me know as soon as you can.«

Engin let out the breath he was holding. He had no idea what to do next. It was the first time he experienced such indecisiveness, and such uncertainty terrified him.

He closed the door and threw himself on the couch. On the desk, the last images of Mavi Bayraktar were lined up in reverse, as if mocking him; first the empty bridge, then Mr. Mavi jumping off, then he was climbing over the railing. As if nothing had happened, as if order had not been disturbed …

Engin nervously opened a few drawers, but that wasn't enough. He got up and opened the window. The sky was blue, and big white clouds hung in the air, motionless. For a moment it seemed as if someone were watching him again. He could not be sure whether they were above the clouds or inside his head as in his nightmare.

»Hi!«

He was startled by a voice behind him. He hadn't heard a knock on the door nor the door opening. It was one of his coworkers, one he sometimes had lunch with.

»Did you hear, the asteroid is going to fall north of Mara. You can watch it from the shore, but they said not to go down the hills, just in case. Nurcan and I are going, will you come?«

He murmured, feeling exasperated. »Nurcan who, what meteorite?«

Suddenly, he shut up. He approached his friend excitedly.

»How did you learn about this?«

»On the news … They said it in the morning broadcast.«

»Did they say anything else? About Mavi Bayraktar?«

The man shrugged. »No … By the way, what happened to that case? I wasn't in yesterday, I just heard some rumors, but what's the situation?«

Engin took a deep breath and grabbed his shoulders. It was the friendliest gesture he had made since they met, and the other man looked surprised. Engin then surprised him even more by walking out of the office without saying a word.

Perhaps he had imagined crazy words on a strange piece of paper; perhaps he had had frightening nightmares at night. Perhaps he had even taken those medical records himself. But one thing was certain and indisputable: Mavi Bayraktar had committed suicide. And unlike the news of a falling meteorite, this information had not been shared.

Auditor Engin went down to the archive floor with determined steps, showed his ID card and went inside. The officer didn't ask him what he was looking for. He didn't need to, because he was an auditor. One with a very important matter to investigate.

He had left the patients' files in the doctor's office, but he didn't mind. He knew their names by heart. It took him a while to dig out each one from the accident archive, but he finally made it back to his office carrying a small bundle. Fortunately, no one tried to stop him or question what he was doing.

After arranging the files on the table, he began to read them one by one. All of the incidents had been reported as accidental – but Engin knew better. By examining them in more depth he noticed oddities in the photographs or in the witnesses' statements.

The teacher who had died of food poisoning had cooked dinner herself that night, and the medicine bottles in her house were empty. The carpenter had forty years of experience and yet he had left a knife lying around, had fallen onto it, and hadn't called for help even though there was a telephone within reach. The girl who had fallen into the pond could

swim, but strangely enough, she had a rope wrapped around her foot – and there was a stone at the end of the rope.

Many similar cases had been closed, all of them suspicious deaths where the deceased had committed suicide. Nevertheless, all the cases had been recorded as an accident. Perhaps if it hadn't been for the photographs taken at the time of the incident, Mavi Bayraktar's death would have been remembered in the same way.

The auditor pulled himself together. He couldn't be imagining this; something was definitely wrong. He should report the situation to his superior immediately and inform the authorities. That's what a rational citizen would do. Engin paused. Thousands of thoughts and hundreds of possibilities were going through his mind. How had no one noticed these suicides until now? Or had they been deliberately ignored? He remembered how people had reacted when Mavi Bayraktar's case had become public – even he had felt confused. Perhaps everything had been covered up to prevent a collective frenzy?

But why were these people committing suicide? What was the meaning of their nightmares? What effect did the pills have? The doctor should have known more. Maybe the assistant girl had lied and made Engin doubt himself. But what about that flyer? He found the courage to pull it out of his pocket to look at it again. The page, untouched, not crumpled or torn, bore different words, in a different font and color from last time. An address on the third bank. It was unclear what it was, there was no name or explanation. Engin was sure it had not been there the night before. And this morning that piece of paper was blank. Whatever had happened, had happened in his pocket.

But how was it possible for words written on a piece of paper to erase themselves and reappear reassembled in a different form? There had to be another explanation, other than that Engin had gone mad. He checked the page again, trying to figure out what material it was made of. It looked like nothing he had ever seen before. As he turned the strange page over and over in his hands, he thought of Deniz's smiling eyes. »If you need anything else, you know where to find me!« He heard her voice in his ears. Or was it someone else?

He couldn't let himself get more confused. He grabbed his jacket and left the center. He didn't tell anyone that he was leaving and left the files on his desk. He was going to take one of the passenger shuttles to the other side. He quickened his pace as he walked towards the bus stop. He didn't want to be late – he wasn't sure what he would be late for, but he was going to memorize the address on the flyer. In case it would be erased or something.

Just then, he was struck by a cargo vehicle. Witnesses to the incident noted that Engin had crossed the street without looking in either direction. The vehicle's automatic driving system recorded that everything had followed protocol, the accident was unforeseeable, and the pedestrian was at fault. As Engin lay bleeding beneath the truck that had hit him, he realized that the flesh on his hands had been stripped away, revealing metal rods and wires instead of bone.

-X-

»Contrary to estimates, the death toll is still undetermined after the meteorite struck in the North Hills near the coast instead of offshore in the Mara Sea. Hundreds of injured people were taken to hospitals and teams are still working to recover the bodies of the dead. Authorities said it was an unfortunate accident, but the necessary investigations will be carried out. All supervisory units have been called to urgent duty to maintain order ... It's 6:30 am ... The weather now; Ist, partly cloudy, 15 degrees ... An, sunny, 18 degrees ... Bul ...«

He reached over and turned off the radio. Part of him longed to rush to his post like the rest of his colleagues, but he was still on leave. He had recovered quickly after the accident; his wounds were healing. He had no problems with mobility, but his doctors and his supervisor had advised him to rest and get stronger before going back to work. As a rational individual, he would follow the advice of experts.

After doing his physical therapy exercises, he took a warm shower and put on his sweatpants. He ate a healthy breakfast and took his strengthening vitamins. He had just finished washing the dishes when the phone rang.

»Hello, this is Auditor Engin Kurt.«

»Hello, Mr. Engin. This is Dr. Sanem's secretary Deniz Saygun. The last time you were here, you asked me to let you know when the doctor was back, and I did, but I couldn't reach you. They told me you had an accident. I hope you get well soon.«

»Thank you. But how did you get my home number?«

»Someone at the center gave it to me when I said it was an important matter. I have been trying to reach you for a few days, I owe you an apology.«

»For what?«

»I was mistaken. I don't know how it happened, but there must have been a mistake in my memory. When I talked to Dr. Sanem, she told me that she had indeed instructed me to share the files with you and that I was with you when she left. Again, I can't remember much, but I apologize for giving you a hard time that day. If there is anything I can help you with, I would like to make it up to you.«

Engin did not say anything. To be honest, he didn't remember her or the doctor very well. He only knew that he had closed a case before the accident. It was the case of an unfortunate man who fell off a bridge, but it was nothing important. Order had been restored.

»Thank you, but there's no problem. It was a waste of your time.«

»So, did you find out why Mr. Mavi killed himself?«

»There must have been a misunderstanding. It wasn't suicide. Mr. Mavi died in an accident.«

The girl in front of him paused. »Oh. Is that so?«

For some reason, Engin thought she was smiling. A bright smile appeared in his mind, but he didn't know who it belonged to.

»OK then. I am sorry for the inconvenience. I wish you a fast recovery and good work.«

»Thank you. Good work to you too,« Engin said and hung up the phone. Then he stared at the telephone receiver for a moment.

The telephone receiver in Mavi Bayraktar's house, the photographs of him standing on the bridge, the piece of paper on

which weird theories and a mysterious address were written… none of it was in his mind. It was as if all of that had never existed.

Engin shrugged off the emptiness in his mind and returned to the kitchen. He saw that several cupboard doors and drawers had been left open. He closed them one by one. He rearranged the glasses on the counter. When order was restored, the inspector stopped and took a deep breath. Everything was fine.

He had no idea of the nightmares he would have at night.

The Showcase

NUR IPEK ÖNDER MERT

The ridges of Gomodos ... Its inhabitants were once again fleeing in panic from the hydrogen sulfide downpour that began at the summit, retreating into the shadowed corners of the city, while those already inside descended underground. Everyone did – except Hammer.

For Hammer, survival was only possible when everyone else withdrew into their shelters and those who could not were left to die. In an atmosphere where even the ringed worms, bursting from the heaving chest of Mother Nature's final breaths and piling up on the pavements, could not defy death, he owed his own continued existence to the bulge hidden beneath his parka.

With every rainfall, she would lean against the streetlamp suffocated by the khaki-green fog that descended upon the city along with the toxin-laden clouds, and observe her surroundings. When an approaching silhouette appeared, her eyes would slowly retreat into the shadows, like a panther smearing the darkness itself. Her mouth would moisten, her pupils would dilate. The breath of her prey, misting the night, seemed to blow straight into her soul – a shiver running through her like a breeze carried from long-forgotten summer evenings.

When the switchblade slid gracefully from her left wrist into her palm and snapped open, there was no turning back. Unless, of course, that nameless unrest – the one she could never quite crush – tightened around her chest and ruined everything.

You must live in order to keep living, Hammer. That's all, my girl. That simple. They made today's decision – all of to-



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day's decisions. And you endure this torment for them, to save them from themselves. You cannot stop. Not now. Not after coming this far.

To give up meant starving for days. Determination, on the other hand, meant accepting that the helplessness in her victims' final gaze would haunt her sleep. That was why she now attacked from behind – seeking to bring them down with the least effort, in the shortest time possible. She would quickly search their pockets and vanish into the darkness with the agility of a sewer rat, carrying whatever food she could find. She had hoped tonight would be no different.

The air had grown heavy with sulfur-saturated raindrops, and the stench of rotten eggs had fully claimed the streets. Even as a post-transgenic being with high cellular plasticity like Hammer, she could not breathe that toxic atmosphere for long. Nausea rising in her stomach, she pulled the gas mask over her face. Slightly staggering, she turned into the street where she would lie in wait.

With every step, the buildings seemed to lean over her, the ground rippling beneath her feet – as if something below was secretly tracking her trail. Perhaps the city, buried alive in its own soil, was writhing in its grave, trying to make itself heard. And Hammer – who would ever hear her?

She tore herself from the vortex of her thoughts and quickened her pace. *Whatever happens ... focus on your task, my girl.* When she reached the spot where she would observe her prey, the greasy glow of the streetlamp flickered – and died. Then, all at once, every building went dark. Silence fell.

From not far away, she heard metal doors being forced open, someone dragged inside. The Watchers?

When the sharp crack of gunfire ripped through the silence, she was certain it was their work. However, The Watchers were so afraid that at the slightest security breach they would cut the power to the entire area and empty a whole squad's magazines into a single person. And Hammer knew very well that someone who is truly afraid is the most dangerous of all.

She slipped into the piles of garbage with the stealth of a thief. Her stomach growled from hunger. The more she tried to

suppress it, the more sweat poured down her back, and the cold wind made her teeth chatter.

After several breathless minutes that felt like a lifetime, the lights finally returned. The power lines encircling the city began to throb again, humming at a rising frequency.

Hammer stepped out of her hiding place and drew as deep a breath as her mask would allow. She tilted her face toward the rain.

A line from a poem – she could no longer remember which – rolled from her cracked lips without effort: *»Grow more beautiful … for now you are alive – only until death …«*

She opened the front of her parka, now twice as heavy with absorbed rainwater, and shook it out. Her warm belly was exposed. In this life that felt like a living nightmare in every detail, the only undeniably real thing was right there – growing, fed by her blood and flesh. It was made of what she was made of. The same substance in a different composition – far better. However she looked at it, it felt like absolution; a second chance, the luxury of saying: *»It didn't work – let's try again.«*

She warmed her palm with her breath and let it glide over her belly. With a sharp twinge, the presence inside stirred. She warmed her palm with her breath and moved it slowly over her belly. With a sharp twinge, the presence inside stirred. She felt the small hand press back against her own, as if sharing the quiet sorrow of a visiting day from within. Though only four months old in body, it felt as though the child had arrived too late to the world in spirit.

»You're growing too fast. What's the rush, little girl? Couldn't you stand the hunger? Are you telling me to leave you be, that you'll take care of yourself?«

Anything was possible.

She had accepted being a *Carrier*, fully aware of what such a pregnancy entailed. Even the ending had not frightened her much. Extraordinary purposes demanded extraordinary sacrifices.

With the resolve of a soldier ready for duty, she zipped her parka back up. She pulled the hood lower over her face. Placing her right foot on the tire of a nearby wreck, she secured

the loose lace with a double knot – and her eyes caught the shadow growing on the wall of the adjacent building. A pregnant woman in a gas mask, head bowed as if waiting for someone, gently stroking her belly. *And where did you come from now? Are you begging for death, woman?* Hammer drew her switchblade while glancing over her shoulder and spun around. There was no one.

She looked from herself back to the shadow. The dress ending just beneath the coat she was lost in, the combat boots, the wet, matted hair – its familiarity was deeply unsettling. The shadow, realizing it was being watched, slowly straightened and turned toward her. It seemed less a shadow than existence itself. *Are you a ghost searching for a body to inhabit … or my devil twin, my doppelgänger?*

Lightning split the sky. Instinctively, Hammer wrapped her arms around her belly. The laughter of a child running away rang in her ears. Along the crack in the wall, the shadow-being's skin continued to grow – then peeled away like tulle lifted by the wind, drifting off. Its hair remained in the hands that had been touching its head. As if scraped clean by an invisible scalpel, the skull emerged; its trembling limbs began to break apart and fall away, muscles unraveling from bone strand by strand. And the thing inside its belly – no longer merely wanting to be born – was now clawing desperately, trying to tear its way free. Hammer shook her head as if to drive away a sudden pain. »What is this now? Is this part of the process too? I don't want this. I don't want this!«

The voice that had just faded with the distant laughter now whispered again, its breath against her ear:

»Mother … don't you want me anymore?«

Hammer hurled her knife into the heart of the emptiness.

»Who are you?«

The voice rose now from every alley at once, in different tones, echoing, overlapping, merging into a single rasping breath:

»Mother! Mother! … don't you want – … don't you want me?«

Alright. You're hallucinating now. Stop it, my girl. You're hungry, exhausted, under a toxic downpour. Just a mild shock

... Maybe a simultaneous cellular detox response to poisoning, or an energy-saving update. Calm down, Hammer. Calm.

It struck her for the first time that she was addressing herself by name.

When she thought about it – yes. Yes, she always did.

Is this you speaking, Hammer? Who are you? What is left of you? Looks like you've become just like them. What a shame ...

She found herself trapped at the center of a cacophony of cloned selves, stretching endlessly along the mirror-walls of her mind, each surrounding her sense of identity: *Forget it now, just try to calm down. Sure, sure – energy update. You're not poisoned. Sweetheart, how are you going to be a mother? You can't even feed her while she's inside you. Come on, don't stall – go find something to eat! You should never have abandoned sculpture. Embalming? What kind of art is that? You sold yourself for a few bones thrown at you! Hammer! Do you know why they gave you that name? You destroy in order to build, and build in order to destroy. But be careful whose hand grips your handle, my girl! When this child is born, those powerful friends you embalmed will regret both their birth and their death – and that day we will stand with everything that has fallen behind us and look up at the sky! Look at me – you don't look well at all. Is it going to be a premature birth?*

She had sunk into herself, staring wide-eyed at her shadow on the neighboring wall, when the sound of rattling tin pulled her out of the blind wells of her mind. »Who's there?« Between the trash bags, a large ginger tomcat was struggling, trying to push a can off its head with its paws. She released the breath she had been holding. She closed her switchblade and tucked it into her boot. »Was it you? Come on, come here. That's it ... you're free now.«

The cat disappeared into the night, leaving a thin memory scratched across her exposed knuckle. Hammer grabbed the pull ring of the can lid left in her hand and began to tug at it. »They always leave these half-opened, don't they? And then –« Her sentence was cut off as the owner of a massive shadow behind her collapsed to the ground like a sack of flour.

Hammer was panting. Blood slid from the smooth surface of the can lid – whose ring had cut into her index finger – carrying tuna scraps with it, dripping onto the corpse stretched out on the pavement. »I have no intention to get hunted while I'm hunting, sir.«

Hammer knew very well that someone who is truly afraid is the most dangerous of all. In times like these, if you lived in Gomodos – and on top of that suffered from anxiety – you could turn anything into a weapon, and kill with everything. And that night, she knew she would have to face her trial with the shadows one way or another.

While she searched the pockets of the corpse lying face down, its blood seeping from the throat and staining the rainwater running through the gutters, she secretly hoped to find not only food, but something sharp. *Yes, you were wrong, my girl. But what if you had been right? Being right after you're dead doesn't mean anything, does it?*

No blade. No decent food. A cup of fruit yogurt with its gelatin lid swollen, a piece of chocolate that had bled out its fat, sleeping pills, tobacco, rolling papers, and a soaked box of matches … »I hope you weren't approaching to ask for a light. Why would anyone ask a pregnant woman for a light? I'll never know.«

When she came up empty-handed like this, she would stand beside the body for a while – as if she were the only relative who had come to see it off. Since their only shared memory was hardly a pleasant one, she could not reminisce. Instead, she tried to imagine, based on the belongings left behind, what this person might have done that day had they never crossed paths with her.

Maybe he would light his cigarette with the flame he took from the book crematorium a few blocks away. From the pleasure in the way he exhaled the smoke through the cage of his palm into the dark, one could tell he had finally figured out how to place the birthday candle into the fruit yogurt for his little sister. Or perhaps, along the way, he would comfort himself with the recklessness of finally having found a job, convincing himself that buying chocolate instead of potatoes actually made more sense … Or he would go straight home,

throw himself onto his bed, and, until the sleeping pill took effect, imagine himself among the trembling silhouettes in the luminous halls of sky-piercing buildings.

It was this last scenario that disturbed Hammer the most. Once, she too had been one of the guests of those luminous halls – the woman people looked for at important gatherings of important people. Just knowing she was there made everyone feel better. Because no one ever knew when they would die. In Gomodos, you could die not only of hunger, illness, or as a security threat – but also on a night accompanied by clinking glasses, laughter, and smooth jazz, a night whose breeze alone would have been the most you feared. And you would not want your corpse to decay.

The procedures had to begin before *rigor mortis* set in. The earlier the intervention, the more flexible the body. Thus, in a far better appearance than you ever had in life, you could, inside a sealed glass sarcophagus, stand forever as a semi-organic monument erected in the center of a square you would only choose to be found in after death. And could be greeting those who had created you, blessing with your authority those rotting at your feet on the altars below. And only Hammer could grant you that. The corrupt sculptor. The self-taught society embalmer.

To abandon the path of immortalizing oneself through art and instead turn toward immortalizing authority could hardly be called a respectable career journey. And yet, in a system where art was reduced to product, the collective to the individual, and the individual to images, she had to admit that for a while it felt profitable in every sense. Until she left behind everything she had gained … From the moment she accepted becoming a Carrier, she no longer saw herself as anything but an interface writing the code of a new life. She knew she could not have endured even this much if she did not possess that urge to shape things, to give form to her amorphous existence. Once again, despite everything, she thought of how grateful she was for all that had happened. Leaving her old friend beneath that streetlamp, she walked toward the abandoned opera house she had made her refuge.

From the terrace with its panoramic view, she let her legs dangle into the void and spoke to her daughter while spooning the sour yogurt little by little. »I promise you. If not tonight, then in the very next rain, I won't come back without filling our stomachs to the brim.« Her eyes drifted toward the horizon. »You are a gift to me, you know that, don't you? I have never once regretted carrying you. If I had to, I would choose you again … Of course, I may not have thought this way at first – before I met you … I was defeated, bitter, angry. My fate was already sealed. On a starless night, hiding from the Watchers beneath a ledge, my belly full only thanks to the generosity of the noble family whose corpse I had restored the night before – while my soul starved – I would have left this world without a single one of my works ever being valued. With that acceptance, like everyone who could not truly be themselves, I was ready to become anything else. I didn't think long about joining the revolution program … Of course, the revolution is salvation for all of us. But beyond everything, deep inside me, there was a voice saying: whether you become immortal by subtracting or by adding, what difference does it make – giving life is also a form of art … And then there was you. You began to exist. As I carried you, I stopped being a burden to myself about becoming someone, my daughter. Day by day, with every cell, I felt that I was nourishing not just a single life, but life itself. Now there is peace in not taking myself too seriously. To hell with immortality … I feel weightless, and yet as if my lightness contains everything at once. The path reveals itself as I walk – I know that. And tonight, I need to feel exactly like this. Everything is as it should be …«

The warm wind blowing against her caught her skirt and brushed her knees. Her ears filled with the pressure of a sudden, dense silence. Then, a razor-thin sound pierced the air and stopped the heart of time. Everything slowed. It was as if the needle of a cosmic record had wavered and jumped back to the beginning. The soil lifted lazily, then settled back into place. Trees dripped into the sky, dissolving and tinting the clouds. And the sky cracked. From its widening fractures, sound began to glow. Everything was wrapped in audible light.

Everything was surrounded by everything. The birth had begun.

Hammer lay down among the weeds covering the mosaic floor of the terrace, cradled by the heralding contractions. With each pulse in which her body disintegrated into subatomic particles and reassembled itself, she trembled. Her dry skin flaked apart within the slowed flow of time. The contractions intensified. Blood and bodily fluids leaked through every opening they could find, while the inner walls, with peristaltic movements, expelled bones and organs alike. Her body reshaped itself from the lower regions upward, widening the birth passage.

Her muscles inevitably dissolved, bent, and reformed. Her chest collapsed into the abdominal cavity and connected to the birth canal. Her body had become entirely a passage. A passage that violated the boundaries between the mental and the physical. And through that passage, carried by invisible hands, the baby entered the world.

The baby did not cry. She looked around with conscious eyes. She was neither helpless nor fragile. She could hold her head upright – her spine as well. She straightened, folded her legs beneath her, and stood. And when her small feet touched the ground, time and space trembled. As she moved forward through the quivering wild grass, the given world blinked with momentary blackouts. Walking with such determination and fearlessness, she did not even notice when she tore her umbilical cord free.

At that very moment, the Watchers – pacing their usual routes among the derelict buildings – had gathered under an extraordinary state order and sealed off the surroundings of the opera house. They were ready for conflict, yet as always, they did not know with what, nor why, they were about to fight.

Soon the unit guarding the main entrance saw something moving down through the corridors behind the collapsed side walls of the building. Like an ominous shadow it drained the very energy of the spaces it passed through, creating loops within time itself. A flock of starlings that had struck a win-

dow it had just passed by was shattered – condemned to relive, countless times, the cycle of the glass breaking and their own injuries.

The Watchers, unable to make sense of what they were witnessing, took position and raised their weapons, pressing the stocks against their stomachs and aiming at the door. The squad leader stepped forward, lowered his visor, and reported to Central. »Standing by for power cut and suppressive fire, sir. Awaiting authorization.«

»Request denied, Watcher. Identify the entity.«

»Approximately fifty centimeters in length, humanoid form, but exhibiting non-human behavior, sir. It is about to breach the security line. Requesting immediate fire authorization!«

»Request denied, Watcher. Is it a human infant? Describe what you are seeing.«

Dragging her severed umbilical cord and leaving bloody traces behind, the baby exited through the main door, stumbled once or twice, then straightened again and continued walking toward them.

»Yes, sir. A newborn. But she walks, makes eye contact, and shows no sign of fear. She does not even cry.«

»No one is afraid of you, you fools! If she is not crying, why are you? Pick her up and bring her to us.«

»Yes, sir.«

The squad leader signaled for the weapons to be lowered. That day, in that place, the Watchers were seized by a strange feeling that everything was ending for them. They could not have explained to their families the peace that mortality filled them with. As the regime's fiercest apparatus, they could not have explained it to anyone. If death was inevitable, there was no fear; and if there was no fear, there was no obedience. They did not lower their weapons.

Under the rain whose drops evaporated the moment they touched their visors, they watched her approach without blinking, their fingers impatiently testing the softness of the trigger. When the baby crossed the security line, the lead Watcher fired the first shot. The moment the bullet left the barrel, time slowed. That familiar whistling sound dissolved

into a hum, and the bullet – like an abandoned thought – hung suspended in the void. Before it could reach the baby, it lost its reality and dispersed into dust, carried by the wind. The baby's existence had rendered the bullet's trajectory an unrealized possibility.

The Watchers opened futile suppressive fire. Yet it did not take long for them to accept that this being, capable of manipulating even the laws of physics, was the creator of a new possibility for them. Just as you cannot kill information, a thought, a memory – you could not kill her. And more than that, killing would never have been enough. One by one, they dropped their weapons. First a few, then all of them removed their helmets. For the first time, they saw each other's faces. They studied each other in astonishment. None of them looked like an executioner.

The baby passed by them and moved on, following the people who had poured into the streets with breaking news alerts. What the Watchers experienced was shown to the public again and again through fabricated street camera footage, accompanied by propaganda claiming that this apocalyptic child was the grim consequence of disobedience.

People, driven by the infectious fear within them, were flocking to the sacred sites to prevent the apocalypse. They prayed by touching their faces to the glass displays of the embalmed monuments of bureaucrats, politicians, and corporate magnates who had devoted their lives to making the world a better place. To appease their human gods, they laid all the food they carried in their hands upon the altars. Each new group reaching the square trampled over those who had died in the crush, racing one another to reach the monument.

Bodies, piled atop one another like the ringed worms clumped along the pavements, soon lost all movement – smeared with mud and food scraps. As the streets and the rain grew still, the baby reached the square. She could disrupt the information she focused on, breaking it into inconsistent fragments. The giant street screens looping the news dissolved into the wind with a single glance from her, and the space surrendered itself entirely to silence.

She climbed the display, slipping and falling over heaps of people who had died from being crushed, from hunger, from worship, from hope. She placed her hand on the glass – and the glass lost its knowledge to be glass. Suddenly, the wind flared in fury, howling over the dead bodies and striking the exposed mummy. The mummy's head fell, bounced where it landed, and rolled away. With a fragment of memory, the city's voltage surged.

The wind passed through the grass growing on the terrace of the opera house, licked every floor of the building, and rushed downward. It struck the visor of a Watcher's helmet lying on the ground in front of the building, then plunged into the side streets. It swept the trash, covered the corpse lying face down beneath a streetlamp, rolled open cans down the dark slope. Cats scattered in fear, fleeing into hiding. The wind lifted all the dust of the city and returned to the square as a whirling column. With all its force it unraveled the wrappings of what remained of the mummy's body on the monument. As the bandages peeled away layer by layer, hundreds of thousands of ballots scattered into the air.

Among the heaps of flesh swarmed by green-eyed carrion flies, those still alive began to shake off their numbness and rise. One of them caught a ballot paper drifting like a death's head hawkmoth, its outer surface stamped with a skull. He examined it curiously. Turned it over. Inside a black box, it read: »Yes.« He traced it with his fingertips – fine quality paper, truly. He put it in his mouth and began to chew with appetite. When he swallowed the paper, the gnawing in his stomach finally subsided. His eyes sparkled with joy. Those who witnessed this rushed forward instinctively to feed themselves as well. In collective hysteria they began stuffing their mouths with the papers they caught, eating them by the handful.

Ballots without the right to choose had never been so useful. And only Hammer could have made this possible – the late sculptor and society's embalmer. It had never crossed her mind that by immortalizing authority she would one day both feed the people and, with the chaotic visual spectacle she had created, produce her most important work, thus ending the an-

cient debate over what art is for. She had merely added her own style to the task.

When it was noticed that some of the actors in her living artwork had hoarded extra ballot papers in their pockets, tensions rose. Voices rose to claim what they believed was their due. Pushing and shoving gave way to a marketplace of survival where the stronger throttled the weaker. Chaos fermented and climbed to the heights of the city, splashing against the windows of the illuminated halls where entertainment continued in indifference.

As Gomodos was covered in blood, mud, ballot papers, and carrion flies, those above should have known well that the night would not go on with clinking glasses, laughter, and smooth jazz. Sadly, the only embalmer they would have wished to have beside them was on maternity leave. Hammer could now be found not at receptions, but in the squares – like the mothers of the other revolutionary children who were bringing down showcases across the world.

The Death of Yakut Hanub

TUĞRUL SULTANZADE



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When he received a call from the settlement in Crater Ansu, Yakut Hanub was on the open plains. In a velvet infinity... He felt that such places gave him a spiritual strength. Here there were only ghosts chasing each other and the puny atmosphere of Mars. Hanub had only been waiting for death lately. He had been meditating in the nothingness that stretched as far as the eye could see, but the call he received drew him to life. He had to see Joker Chief Kenimb urgently. He began a relentless march northward.

Ansu was an artificial crater. Many craters like Ansu had appeared in an age when nuclear fairies had flickered and faded on the red planet. Back then, humanity was younger and dreams were sweeter.

My only dream now is a quick death, Hanub said.

His life had been slow and painful. The gift Mars had given him was a tough, radiation-resistant skin. It trapped water, kept him warm and protected his body against gene destruction. But it made it harder and harder for Hanub to move every day, because his skin was constantly hardening. One day it would harden completely and Yakut Hanub would become a statue, unable to move, waiting to die. Knowing this did not frighten him; on the contrary, the certainty of his end gave him peace. He only needed to find a safe hollow and retreat into it. There he would meditate until his heart, too, was petrified.

As he walked north, his stiff legs reminded him that the end was drawing ever closer. The southerly wind brought spindly clouds of carbon, dropping snow on the velvet desert like a lament. Then the day closed and opened again. This cycle re-

peated itself three times. Near the end of the fourth cycle, Crater Ansu appeared in the distance. A broken dome of a lantern, skeletons of buttresses and snowdrifts.

A pair of Jokers standing guard at the mouth of the crater pointed their digital bows at Hanub.

»Take off your mask!« they said, »and identify yourself.«

Hanub removed the mask he had made from his own skin, revealing a face with a large eye and a mouth like a notch in the center. The guards recognized this face. »Come on. Our chief is waiting for you. He's in the North West Compound. Don't linger too long. We'll keep an eye on you.«

Outsiders were not welcome in Crater Ansu. Yakut Hanub was no exception. Even as a Joker, he was shadowy and sinister; an outsider. The Jokers of the Northern Plains had fled the massacres in the south. Now they had become isolated, scattered tribes. Hanub was not angry with them. Living in this crater would make one an enemy even to oneself. The sky was a web of shattered glass, the pale night indifferent. The North West Compound consisted of a few containers and a cucumber-shaped tower rising above them.

Except for the light of the Totemvision emanating from the tower, the compound was shrouded in darkness. Hanub passed through the entrance of the tower and climbed the stairs built with flimsy synthetic material. Three flights later he reached the Observation Room. Chief Kenimb sat cross-legged in front of the Totemvision. His balding head was full of wrinkles. Hidden among these wrinkles was an eye. Without turning his head back, the chief greeted Hanub with his third eye.

»Come on,« he invited. »Sit down.«

Hanub did as he was told, almost without making a sound. Like placing a dead man in his grave.

On the Totemvision screen were images of the Martian surface taken from space. But the images tingled. It was as if something had attacked the screen, half liquid, half gas, contaminating the images.

»Get some rest. You've taken long roads to come here.«

»My whole life is a long road,« Hanub said slowly, reverently. »My skin is getting harder and harder by the day.«

»My daughter has the gift you were given. She is like you, but I made her sleep so she would not die …«

»You have the means,« Hanub said. »You can give her gene therapy.«

»No,« said the chief. »My daughter is like a flower growing in a container between life and death. I am here, no different from her. This is our destiny. The gifts of Mars are the seal of our destiny. I will not change it.«

»I hate Mars and its gifts as much as I hate everything else.«

The chief laughed at these words. »I felt the same way when I saw the gift Mars gave my daughter when she was born, but I am an old man now, and my daughter is as peaceful as any living being can be… Hate will get you nowhere.«

»Humility, too …«

Meanwhile, the tingles on the Totemvision screen began to multiply. Velvet-colored deserts, ponds and plains that looked as if they were covered in blood dust, all of them collapsed under the tingling waves.

»What is it, chief?« Hanub asked.

»The storm is approaching. The images the Totem sends are melting away in the storm.«

»My faith in the Totem is shaken at times like this.«

»Alas. You have not understood the real issue. Even if terrible storms are raging here, the Totem is in orbit now, intact, and its size would frighten the Naked God. Here, on the surface of Mars, even if the gates of hell open and all the demons come storming in and attack us, the Totem will remain in orbit, scattering the memory of us into space with its sweet, mesmerizing light.«

»Forgive me, chief. The Totem is of no use to us after we are dead or while we are alive. Even the most miserable followers of the Naked God are superior to us.«

»They are not,« said the chief. There was irony and humility in his words. »They may hunt the Jokers in the south, but the Northern Plains are now in our hands.«

»And how long can the Jokers hold them?«

»As long as there is trade and perseverance. There's a scavenger market about twenty days from here. They sell high

quality parts they bring from all over Mars and even from the Belt. From there we buy the necessary materials and make weapons. Soon we'll fix the ceiling of the lantern... but we won't cover it with glass, we'll cover it with durable steel ... It will become a fortress and we'll tunnel deeper ... but there's a problem: that's why we called you. Someone is kidnapping Jokers. Especially young Jokers, by that unknown enemy. The only thing we know about him is that he is not one of the Naked God's followers ...»

»How do you know that?»

»They don't kidnap Jokers because they loathe us. But there are others who are interested in the gifts Mars has given us. They are more dangerous than the disciples. They want to scrape the gifts of Mars from our souls and bodies and steal them. This is one of the two things we know about the nameless enemy. He wants to take the gifts of Mars from us. And he keeps heading north. He's probably going to the Arctic. Maybe he's already there. With all the Jokers he's kidnapped ... We're pretty sure he's one person. Probably not a man. He must be a fleeing shadow emerging from the abyss. He wants to crossbreed the shadow of darkness with the shadow of the planet. He will create a mighty body for himself ...»

»You want me to make him disappear?»

»No,» said the chief. »I can't ask the impossible. I just want you to find out what happened to the kidnapped Jokers ... and, if possible, let the demon know we're ready to cooperate. If you come back with convincing evidence that the job is done, you will be rewarded according to the effect that evidence has on us. Maybe we'll give you a gear, for example. Who knows how tiring it must be for you to walk, whereas if you had a gear, you would be able to move about as you wish, and more easily choose the best place for your final meditation.»

Hanub savored this exquisite vision. A suicide kiss on the lips of Mars and the red earth trampled by the gear.

»I'll do it, you've given me a reason to live the rest of my life...»

Meanwhile, the screen of the Totemvision went black. It looked like a heart pumping blood into itself. The storm was

now wrapped around the tower. Mars was groaning. Everything was merging into the night and the night was roaring like a demon from eternity.

»Wait,« said the chief. »This storm will last a long time.«

Yakut Hanub left Ansu Crater the next day. The storm had subsided, the blue evening had lowered its cold veils. The night was growing silent. It was like the ghost of an ancient tsunami. Spectrums of light and clusters of dust migrated from place to place like living beings, creating bright visions. A dozen four-pointed stars. Then a headache. The endless song of darkness. Open like a roaring mouth, shining stars and the pale blue Earth like an ode in honor of them all. I would like to wake up there when I die, Hanub said to himself, but not in this body. Maybe in the body I had on the First Day.

The First Day was a hypothetical pre-birth purgatory invented by believers in the Naked God. There, souls awaiting life wandered in bodies that took their image from the reflection of the Naked God. Mars was like a mirror distorting the image. When some souls came to life on Mars, they broke away from the image of the Naked God and became contaminated with the vile »gifts« of Mars. This is what happened to the Jokers. They were unfortunate beings whose image and existence were raped by Mars. They were a blasphemy against the Naked God from the moment they were born, and they were all doomed to Mars, along with the gifts they carried in their distorted bodies. Their bodies were their coffins. They could only get off this planet when they died. And death was a mystery? For a Joker, it was both salvation and an enemy. Because life, even poisoned by Mars, struggled to continue to exist in every body. Hanub was aware of the lamp of life burning within him. He waited quietly for death without frightening it or provoking its flames.

But how far?

The mask he had created from his own skin was hurting him. His legs insisted on not moving. The shadows were pale and indistinct. The blue evening of Mars was as weary as a dying angel. The Pole would perhaps be Hanub's grave. But he wanted to die meditating, not fighting.

The further north you went, the more mournful, yet hostile, things became. The plains near the Pole were not velvet, they resembled ragged entrails. Was Mars a murdered god, bleeding incessantly, struggling to wake up ...

The walk, full of thoughts, nightmares and pain, went on and on through the myriad color changes of the sky. Finally, when the hills began, Yakut Hanub stopped and looked back one last time. There, against the red backdrop of nothingness, was his life stretching as far as the eye could see. It was as if she was crying for him, like a lover in love and heartbroken.

It took him two days to cross the hills that formed the last frontier. His legs ached with a pain that tried to take over his entire being. At the beginning of the third day, the sky, woven with fibers of light of various hues, gifted him his purgatory. Under the pale morning of Mars, a desert of white ice appeared. The glaciers were like the hair of a cursed goddess banished here millions of years ago. They reached in spirals to the foot of the hills, wanting to grab them and pull them into the goddess' doom. It was pleasant to walk on the ice because the ground was neither hard nor rough. It was unlike any texture on the surface of Mars. In this white inferno, Hanub could feel the breaths of time. The snow falling from the puny carbon clouds burned the suit he had created from his own skin. Life stretched on one side and shrank on the other, and Hanub drifted towards his truth.

He didn't even know what day of the walk it was anymore. He hadn't counted how many times the light disappeared and came back. He hadn't counted the darkness, because he couldn't see the light.

If he met the demon the chief had talked about here, he probably wouldn't be able to fight. He was too tired. And he wasn't going to rest. It would be useless. The savages were armed with the mightiest gifts of Mars. They were the misty devils of the red planet. The Jokers, leper angels.

One night, the haze dissipated completely. Space was naked. Rising from the horizon, Totem appeared in the sky. It was like a tear flowing against gravity. Totem's light was brighter than the stars. It was sending its powerful magnetic waves right

here, right now, above Hanub. It was as if it was blessing Hanub himself, not the planet. First came colors, then sounds; the sound of an angel crying. Hanub knelt down and thanked . One eye closed in pain. He lost consciousness.

It was daytime when he woke up. The wind was whistling, blowing dust and ice particles. But there was something else, an incomprehensible sensation emitted by an invisible alien being. The wind was not enough to disperse this eerie feeling that made the hairs stand on end. It was as if the invisible being was standing there somewhere, rigid, watching Hanub with judgement.

This cannot be death, Hanub thought, for the lamp of life burning within him smoked softly, with greater calm than ever. So what was this? Was it the demon that Chief Kenimb had spoken of?

»I am aware of what you are thinking,« the alien being spoke in a voice that vibrated the radiant airwaves, not leaving Hanub in suspense any longer. The voice was strong enough to bend the membrane of the sky.

Hanub looked around in horror, but he could see nothing. There was only a white void and spirals of sensation travelling through it.

»Come and see the truth,« the strange being spoke in a voice that echoed throughout the Pole.

»I have come to make a deal,« Hanub shouted, suppressing his fear and accepting the end. »I have no other intention.«

»I don't deal with the living!« the voice replied. »The chief already knows that!«

Hanub shuddered. »I'm willing to die,« he said desperately. »I live for the day I die, as long as it happens soon!«

»Are you willing to see the truth? The truth is more terrible than death…«

Before Hanub could fully digest either fear or astonishment, he saw an object buried under the snow shining with a sweet glow. It was a glass-covered capsule. It was a mirror that turned Mars upside down; inside it was Hanub the Yakut himself.

He recognised his reflection as soon as he saw it. This is my true body … bereft of the gift of Mars, as naked as on the First Day.

Blunt Impact to the Heart

TOLGA AYDIN

All of this is a confession of my own depravity. Unfortunately, this is not one of those ballads that end with a reunion powerful enough to pierce mountains and dry up tear ducts. Writers as bad as I am are only capable of confessions. At least this one has a relatively decent ending. If you ask my father – or twelve billion other beings – *happy* would never even cross their minds.

Speaking of my father …

Whenever I came home beaten up from the street, he would fly into a rage. He was short but broad, a thickset, powerful man. He sincerely believed that fear could only be dulled by violence. One time, when I came home with a split lip and sat down at the silent dinner table to ask for the soup I expected, he stopped my mother. I told them I had sent two kids to the hospital and only slightly scratched by them. He pressed a spoonful of hot soup into my palm and said it was better for me to be beaten by girls than to hear a lie from his son. That night, as I slept hungry on my grandmother's couch reeking of black cabbage, his lecture echoed in my ears: »We're not made to be the best. I want you to be strong. A man is only that much. One day you'll thank me for it.«

I was twenty-one the first time I smashed a someone's face in. He was originally an amphibian from the Koza Nebula, all head and legs. At the Malahay Stadium of Alpha Corpus, 184,000 spectators from every corner of the galaxy were chanting kill. It was the end of the sixth round. My left eye was swollen shut, and I was missing two of my front teeth. I wedged his hard, cartilaginous skull beneath my leg and



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punched again and again until the bare flesh softened. Before the referee could leap on me and pull me away, I was soaked up to my elbow in a warm, viscous fluid. As thousands screamed, a downpour of blue balloons rained onto the cage ring. The referee announced – into the ears of every living thing – that I was the middleweight champion of Cosmic Mixed Combat.

The strongest man in the known universe.

Thank you, Father.

It was 290 years after the step that was small for Armstrong but giant for the world, 193 years after fusion rockets – irrelevant to the universe, revolutionary to humanity – and just 32 years after my mother suffered through my birth, thanks to my oversized head. It was my fourth championship after moving up to heavyweight. In the meantime, I'd toured the galaxy by the parsec, cracking the heads and busting the faces of a few alien species along the way. Aside from one missing ear and bones that had fused and reforged into steel from repeated breaks, my reflexes were still intact.

After forty-five years spent competing in Earth time, there was no one left on the planet that I knew – but the planet knew me. An entrepreneur from Brazil had founded a respectable international combat academy in my hometown, Edirne Kırkpınar, where I'd won my first prize at fourteen – six kilos of extra-virgin olive oil and a quarter gold coin. There was even a painless childbirth foundation named after my mother.

I was living well. Shaking hands all the time, posing for photos in high-quality clothes that didn't smell of sweat – it suited me. Things were mostly uneventful, except for the occasional egg attack by blond, dreadlocked boys shouting that I'd sold out human dignity by turning myself into the galaxy's circus animal.

I was in Monaco with my new trainer, Aişe, for a sponsor party, staying at a summer villa. Despite all my insisting, Aişe had shown up in a tracksuit. When a young software billionaire, eyes half-glazed, told her, »A beautiful athlete like you dressing this way is an insult to other women,« Aişe didn't

hesitate. She pulled up her left pant leg to the knee. Faced with the silent reaction to her slim, polyurethane-alloy leg, the man settled for, »So you're a veteran.«

After arguing with a foundation representative who wanted an autograph for the moment and my corpse for the future, the party thinned out. I dangled my feet in the pool and watched the Earth sky, which never fully darkened anymore.

Aişe dropped down beside me with sleepy eyes. »I crashed for a bit in the billiards room.« Pointing at the bottle in my hand, she added: »Training's at seven. Don't push it.«

I didn't tell her it was the first beer I'd had in eighty-five years.

»Something happened an hour ago,« she said, handing me her personal screen.

It was the evening of May eleventh – two days after the birthday of my sister, who'd died of heart failure thirty-four years earlier.

The first species humanity ever made contact with was a micron-sized bacterium that spent half of its three-thousand-year lifespan in a cocoon. For people like my great-grandfather who had been waiting for continent-sized ships piloted by glowing-fingered, sexless grey civilizations, this was – put bluntly – a disappointment.

The Colonial Trade Pact and the others changed things. In an era where middle school exams included basic alien anthropology, contact with a third species was less a matter of curiosity than unnecessary paperwork. I hadn't cared much either, until the call from the colonial secretary.

The Ba'as species – later nicknamed Bonebreakers – had established first direct contact with Earth two weeks earlier. They were an advanced civilization from a distant corner of the Milky Way, from a region travelers called Star Dung. Three months earlier, when they'd said »hello« to one of our mining colonies, the colonists had responded humanely by shooting down two scout ships.

A notice arrived: official contact would take place on Earth. Up until the pre-contact briefing, I still had no idea why I'd been asked to join the delegation. In a conference hall packed

wall to wall with important minds, I stood like a freak next to the refreshment table while a professor holding a chair in Xenophilology mistook me for a waiter and asked what the canapé filling was.

»Mustard.«

As I was wondering what kind of mind could possibly need a word like »dialectical«, the meeting ended. The crowd dispersed quietly.

»Getting this many people together and hearing a sensible voice – outside of a match – isn't reasonable,« said a hand touching my shoulder. It belonged to a seasoned Russian woman. I shook her hand.

»Did they tell you why you were called?«

Before I could say no, she led me into a smaller conference room.

The moment I stepped inside, a two-meter-tall Arab wearing a cowboy hat pressed his forehead to mine and declared that I was the most blessed man he'd seen all day. While I was considering punching someone for the sake of a rational explanation, I found myself face to face with an indigo-skinned, bald creature my own height.

»Son,« he said, »we want you to take down one of these Ba'as bastards.«

Despite having fought abominations that not even a thing raised on the ocean floor with a lantern on its head would let into its home, I had never felt this uneasy. The Ba'as representative's videographic form stood before me. Its posture was tense. An elegant, African body – carved as if from inked marble without a single flaw – rose in front of me. It resembled something my ancestors who prayed when lightning struck would have worshipped …

»They look like us, don't they?« the matronly Russian said in a sorrowful tone.

Aside from Ahmed Ridz, the cowboy-hatted organizer, no one carried the pre-match restlessness of a sporting event. Eyes were fixed on me with uncompromising seriousness. It wouldn't be right to say they looked like us – more like a better version of us. Maybe.

»We've only just agreed to a mutual investigation for the finer details,« the Russian woman continued, »but to summarize roughly: they claim to be our genetic ancestors.«

A dismissive *pfft* escaped someone with Einstein hair, in his own language. The Russian went on:

»We've learned they're a warrior civilization with a two-million-year history. During a civil war in which they splintered into paramilitary statelets, a pacifist faction fled into hyperspace … In later periods of peace, they searched for them, but found no trace. Apparently, through a deviation, they were dragged all the way to the Milky Way and – «

»And found us?« Einstein finished.

»More precisely, they likely found the ancestor of Homo sapiens. In any case, they wish to reestablish contact with us and engage in shared cultural exchange.«

»Is that all they want?« Since I asked the question, everyone fell silent.

»Despite us shooting down their ships at the colony, they've made no attempt to attack us. They haven't violated Outer System Trade laws either. If they wanted, they could have tried occupation before first contact. They're peaceful – once we saw their defense vessels.«

Nearly all species were subject to the Outer System Federation, but only a tiny minority cared about social interaction beyond trade. Advanced civilizations looked down their noses at watching a few fusion-drive-equipped species beating each other on live broadcast.

»If they're that advanced and that peaceful,« I said, »why do they want to arrange a fight?«

»…They think they're the scrawny cousins who come over for family visits and twist your wrist for fun. Shared culture … 'A symbolic beginning to a common past through combat sports, the exuberant ritual of humanity's anthropological essence and evolutionary struggle' –«

Aişe wedged a sentence between each punch as she hammered the leather heavy bag.

»So they come all the way from the butt of the universe to wrestle?« she went on. »First they will put on a show of force, then see what shit happens to Earth … My corporal used to say: don't ever grapple with anything whose blood doesn't run red.«

»I guess I already grappled,« I said.

She threw one punch wide. »What?«

»I accepted the fight.«

An objection swelled at her sweat-polished temple.

»How much time?«

»Six months.«

»That's not much.«

What could I say? I nodded.

»We don't even have footage of the matchups?«

»Nothing. My opponent's name is Es'me. That's it.«

»Your conditioning's low, your opponent's probably better, and they know it. You're going to take a beating for nothing. You can say 'the amputee bitch has told you so'.«

She started shadowboxing. »Go warm up. Let's get to work.«

If she'd been less angry and I'd been less out of shape, I would've hugged her.

A Mediterranean southwesterly was blowing over the hill west of Mora. Behind us loomed two colossal statues of ancient Greek wrestlers, inflated with air, staring motionlessly into the distance. Aside from being slightly shorter, he was indistinguishable from his videographic counterpart. Ahmed was busy delivering a syrupy answer to a question about what the bout would bring to both worlds.

Are you afraid? No, I told myself.

The clarity of my mind surprised me. It almost had a sound. Six months of zero-gravity training and mass enhancers had wrecked me.

During the photo shoot, when I struck my hardest pose with clenched fists, he stared blankly at my knuckles. One of his kind whispered something to him. He mirrored the pose, then shook my hand.

It left a strange, sweet ache in my palm.

As I tried to slip into a meditative state in the zero-gravity chamber, Iceland drifted past the window. I gazed into the lightless pallor of ice-colored arthritic bone. The vacuumed room completely insulated the roar of thousands staring into the cage inside the lunar dome. Aişe came with a referee to wrap my hands. She didn't waste breath on a pep talk.

»You go there, you take him down, we go home. Or … we go home … Don't open your left side. If he cuts high, drag him down. Let him climb on top – play the ring.«

She removed my headset. »We'll listen to this together.« She tapped her screen. I felt the chill at the nape of my neck before I understood the sound.

»How do you like it?« she asked, then simply held my hands and closed her eyes.

We listened to the late-afternoon rain spilling from Edirne's tin roofs onto the soil.

Ahmed pressed his wide grin into my face again. »Kill that bastard and never let those feet touch the ground again. I'll make you such a powerful man they'll say: 'Is that the Mahdi walking on water?'«

I showed him my mouthguard in agreement. The bronze scream of the bell plugged my ears.

I stepped into the ring for the last time as a mortal man.

… Pain was an ice cut. A colossal migraine was tattooing its art into my body with a needle gun. I struck the creature's strangely unsweating head. It staggered. Despite its long arms, its guard was low. The right elbow it drove into my kidney sent a tremor straight up to my skull. I could vaguely hear Aişe shouting, »Take it down, take it down!« When I took two steps back to defend, it threw a kick – and I caught it. I trapped its leg against my body and struck its upper abdomen and chest three times in quick succession. Forced to free its leg, it threw itself onto its back, and I dropped my full weight onto it.

Punch. Elbow. Left uppercut. Elbow. Elbow. *IT huRTSsss. I know. iiit… HURrtss. Stop now. Give up.* Tap the ring. Tap!

When it raised its arm to shield its face, it was my moment. I crushed until a hollow formed beneath the right upper ribs – deep enough to seat my fingers. FATHER, forgive me!

A spark stone struck in my head. I sprang off him. *Get out of my head.*

The voice, freed from the throat, was a distant waterfall. When the frightened sound left my head, the crowd's roar crashed down on me. Aişe was pressed against the ropes with her whole body, screaming for me to finish it. Her body quivered on the canvas, deflating like a balloon expending its last breath.

This was the moment I was supposed to think about its father, right? Or its mother.

Instead, without questioning my own strangeness for even a second, I stared into the eyes that hid thousands of stars, into the face smeared with red blood.

My God, it was beautiful. Beautiful. Beautiful. *You are beautiful. I'm going home. End it.*

I didn't realize it at the time. Later I saw on the footage that I was shouting: »Give up!«

I can't. Knock me out. The crowd's noise turned to unease, then to booing. I went close to it and dropped to my knees. I took its hand and slammed it hard against the ring. The referee pulled me back by the shoulders. The bell rang, ending the match – and my proud championship history.

As I accepted the boos along with a few joyless congratulations in the ring, Ahmed leaned into my ear. »That didn't suit a champion at all.«

If I'd had any strength left in my arms, I would've broken his crooked nose. I settled for spitting blood to his face.

Of course, that was the final nail I drove into the coffin called a career.

Even if humanity's memory-less history boasts far more meaningful excommunications than mine, mine might rank in the top three for speed. My last two titles and my national athlete status were stripped. I was banned for life from every match in which I could represent Earth.

And no, none of this happened because of a fight I won – or because of a bit of spit. It happened when Es'me decided to stay on Earth and it became known that we were together.

I suppose, despite all her surplus masculinity, I can never repay Aişe. The night I fled to her place from the crowds burning my action figures outside my building, she pulled me aside and stared hard at me. »I needed to be sure it wasn't just perversion – that you really love Es'me.«

»So are you sure now?« I asked.

»You seem sure enough. Works for me,« she said.

When I tried to mumble something in gratitude: »I wish I could explain it in a few words, but I just …«

» … fell in love,« she finished.

Were Aişe's eyes misty? Clearing her throat theatrically, she added, »By the way, how did you two sort *that* out? Don't get me wrong, it really is beautiful, but I thought they were genderless …«

Tapping my temple with a finger, I smiled. »If you only knew what's been done with this.«

The young woman made it clear with a look that she did not want to know.

That's how people go astray, bit by bit. The Ba'as species decided to postpone the idea of cultural exchange indefinitely. My civilization – spread through solar systems like ants by fusion drives – collectively erased the love story of an earless fighter from its history.

The lifespan of my dream of introducing my family to the woman I loved was about as long as that of a cancer-ridden fruit fly.

It's unsettling, but it still circles my mind sometimes: If my father were alive, what would he say? After nightmares that leave me waking drenched in sweat, every time I rest my head against that indigo chest, I ask myself.

And the answer – its calm voice echoing in my head – lets me sleep:

You're the strongest man I've ever known.

Crawling Things

ONUR SELAMET



Onur Selamet was born in Istanbul. He graduated from Marmara University, from the Faculty of Arts – Cinema and Television Department. He worked on various short and medium-length films. In 2017, he received an award for his movie Mayk, which he wrote and directed, and was screened at various festivals. His stories have been published in magazines and fanzines. He works as editor-in-chief for the culture and art website Kayıp Rıhtım.

I

Is red mullet the most delicious fish in the world? I don't know. I've never tasted it. But you should have seen it with butterfly wings. It couldn't fly. Couldn't swim. Probably died on the second stitch. If you'd seen it, you'd understand.

The momentary spark at the top of the lighthouse attracted the attention of the distracted boats at sea. When the commotion was over, the old man put the fish back in the bucket. He was hopeless. I hoped for the first time that day. He cracked his neck and bought another fish from the counter. *But God knows, even if the fish doesn't know.*

He tried again. His finger, repeatedly caught in the Singer sewing machine, bloodied the butterfly's wet wings. The red mullet squirmed a few times. When the wings were sewn to the fins, the fish died with a flick of its tail. This time there was no spark.

Dead fish with wings in a bucket is the menu of the day. Even cats won't eat them. But I'd give it a try.

I don't remember when our frequencies matched, I'm too old to remember much. I was sleeping in the void until the day I felt I was being watched. He woke me up with his curious eyes. He was young then. He had a home, a family, friends. The cheap spyglass he pressed over his blue eyes to stare at me somehow interrupted my dreams. I jumped out of my cosmic sleep as if my tail had been stepped on. I don't know how he sees me, perhaps as an overly bright star. I don't mind if that's

what he wants to believe. All day in the same spot, waiting for the future to materialise.

If he'd stopped watching me every night, some things could have been prevented … At least the dates would be off. Apocalypses might have been delayed. But no, he didn't. He persevered. He looked and looked. He used all kinds of telescopes. He lost his home, his family, his friends. His bushy hair fell out. He had dark circles under his eyes. His teeth rotted. He became lonely. I didn't try anything special to increase the attraction between us. I couldn't. There are laws. But laws can be bent. I couldn't figure out in which book he read them, who he learned them from. My vision was blurry back then. He started acting like he knew what he was doing. Things got interesting.

He moved to a small island and started working as a lighthouse keeper. He had no friends left to say, »What's a doctor doing as a lighthouse keeper?« There was no one else on the island. He worked until he retired. He took care of the lighthouse on that barren island where no one visited. He lit the light on starless nights and did nothing but watch me. When he retired from his post as keeper, nobody new was sent to the island. The lighthouse was closed and forgotten over time.

Just like me.

That's when the doctor really started working. As he watched the sky, he compared his notes with those in his books. One day he carried a hand-me-down sewing machine to the top of the lighthouse. He set up a low-production laboratory. The laws were no longer so impenetrable. I guided him through the stars, and as he practiced my teachings, he was a match for my thousand-year-old disciples.

II

I was in a cold sweat as the motorboat pulled up to the shore. They remembered about me. They would take me away and put me in jail for squatting on state property. Then I would waste all the years I spent here. I couldn't fall into this simple trap. I couldn't let them take me. They had a pack of dogs with them.

Where would I run to, on this tiny rock? Or would they take me to the arena and feed me to those beasts? Was I a man who should be wasted like this?

In my makeshift room at the lighthouse, I was trying to understand what was going on without making a sound. When three men in police uniforms jumped out of the motorboat and lowered the cages onto the shore, I realized they didn't intend to stay long. They removed the locks with one pull. I could sense their hesitation to open the cage doors. I counted nine dogs in six cages.

The animals must have been seasick. Although they could hardly stand, they glued their heads to the cage wires and growled. One of the officers tried to open the lid. Big mistake. The dog lunged at his hand with unexpected agility. When it became clear that it was not wise to release the animals, the officer waiting at the engine restarted the vehicle. They lowered the cages on the shoreline swept by the waves and set sail without looking back.

The smell of gasoline carried by the wind sobered me up. At high tide, the waters would wash the cages away. My first emotion, towards these men who couldn't even do a decent job of leaving me to die in peace, was anger. Then came gratitude. For the first time in years, I pointed my telescope not at the sky but at the land. So close were the slobbering teeth. I thought they were going to snap my hand through the lens. But it wasn't just drool. There was foam, too. Those crazy eyes with split capillaries dimmed my gratitude.

I could have used the animals, but not now. I didn't need to leave the lighthouse. My purified water and salted fish would last me at least two weeks. I looked at my sewing machine. I didn't want to stop at that moment. I heard a violent tipping sound outside. I could feel the dog growling on the gravel, pointing its compass directly at me. For a moment I imagined that I might have left the lighthouse door open.

I hadn't. I had closed it. But how long could that old wooden door withstand a rabid dog frantically charging at it? My lungs did not stop wheezing as I took a breath three floors below. I made a big pile of tools behind the door. I could not

help but empathise with the animal digging furiously in the dirt outside. Which one of us was the prisoner, which one the crazy one?

All but one of the dogs managed to escape from their cages. That last one was already dying when he was brought to the island. He didn't have the strength to take a step. The tide is not very strong on this side of the Mediterranean. Nevertheless, it took two hours for the waves to pull the cage out to sea. When the cage lid was finally opened, the animal had already lost consciousness. Before it could taste its brief freedom, its heart stopped.

The rest howled all night long, adding colour to my experience. After years of watching the sky in absolute silence, the change felt good. It was cloudy. But a small clearing was enough for me. We were *both* thinking the same thing. A blessing had come. We could finally speed up the program. The books I'd spent years trying to understand weren't just quackery. She was there. Our love would transcend the stars.

I went to my desk and lit the kerosene lamp. Since the lighthouse had been shut down, I lacked the fuel to replenish the generators. I had gotten used to living with no electricity. Candles and lamps were enough for me. I drew another fish from the bucket. So far, I had only worked on sea creatures, a few seagulls, some insects, and two hedgehogs, which I had been hand-feeding since I'd found them in my first days on the island, when I'd started the experiments. Sometimes I would work on living bodies, sometimes on dead ones. But always in search of the perfect harmony. A gull with spines or a caterpillar with gills. A combination that would upset all balances and confound the laws of nature.

I didn't just perform vivisection. I also had a primitive laboratory where I studied gene mutation. Most of my pension went into the equipment. And by some divine intervention, I found a way to get thousands of dollars' worth of equipment on the cheap. Playing with genes was more complicated than dissecting animals. The old books and the stars provided the answers.

As I pulled the perch's eye out of its socket with tweezers, I looked at the spider in the jar, its legs twitching. It was the size of the palm of my hand. I had the cure for his eyes, tired from spinning webs. It would only have to obey me.

Whistling through my broken teeth, I accompanied the dogs as they howled and fought with each other. I was in a good mood. The spark won't ignite tonight either. But I'm so close, there's no way those animals won't start a fire; sooner or later I will reach my goal.

It was painful, even for me, to witness the desecration. I had hoped they would die of rabies before resolving to eat their own kind. There were only three dogs left whose bodies were intact. It took four more days for them to die on my doorstep. I thought the last one would never die. At one point I had to grab my shovel and drive it through his head. His squeal froze my heart. Despite the distance between us, I felt the animal's last breath on my lips. As I ran to the sea and rinsed my mouth, I tried to understand the reason for my recklessness.

It was ironic that I came face to face with my prize as I sprayed the sea water from my mouth. The cage which had been washed away was back ashore. Here was another specimen. I was on the right track.

The stork whose nest I had kept for a rainy day rattled its beak at that very moment. The omens were showing one after another. The combination in my mind began to take shape. I had enough canine teeth to fill that long beak, not to mention wings and stubby legs. I was drunk with excitement.

My burning nostrils and stomach couldn't discourage me. I covered my nose with a rag. I put rubber gloves on my hands, discoloured with dirt. I carried the dogs inside and leaned the ladder against the roof.

On the day it all started, I never thought I would find myself putting my hand in the slobbery mouth of a dog that had died of rabies. My girlfriend and I were on the roof of the university, watching the stars in the sky. One of them was shining so beautifully that I didn't realize I had stopped listening to my

girlfriend. She was talking about making a joint wish. But my mind was focused on the shimmering lights. It was as if the truth of the universe were being exposed in front of me. I made another wish. First my lover's wish came true. We tried to build an ordinary life together. Then my other wish began to blossom.

I watched my star almost every night. I was proud to find it as if I'd put my hand on it. I didn't show it to anyone. I told those who asked that it was nothing more than an ordinary hobby. I didn't know if it shone as brightly to everyone as it did to me. Sometimes, when I slept, it would enter my dreams and speak to me. When I woke up, even though I couldn't remember what it said, I felt like there was someone waiting for me in a galaxy far, far away.

Now I'm in the middle of a bloody experiment that will bring those galaxies closer. I'm stuffing sharp teeth into the dead stork's beak.

III

I didn't send the dogs. I used all my energy to delay the stork's migration schedule. But it seems I'm not alone. Others too await my return. I feel more naked now, more than a bright star. There are people I want to illuminate with my light. To wrap them tightly in my arms. People I want to become one with.

The old man makes me think of the days of Olympus. The tiny world bowing down to the big mountain. Those who believed in me then knew that one day I would leave. They told about me not for themselves, not for their children, but so that their great-grandchildren would not give up on me. I don't remember much of what they told about me. I'll have to study that book hard when I get back. If only I could remember what I looked like. Maybe then I can do more than just shimmer and shine.

The light catches my eye too.

Besides, I feel there was a time before. Before Olympus. And before people. I remember things crawling. Under the ground.

Putting dog teeth in a stork's beak is a bad idea. Still, I don't want to stifle his creativity. Whatever he saw in his telescope that night, he felt validated. I admire the nonverbal communication between us. I just shine and he knows where to tie the next knot. His work with the dogs has strengthened our bond. Not only did he become a dentist, but he also made some genes change. Now it's his own kin's turn. Animals alone are not enough to break the law. But when animal and human breathe in the same body, things change.

I'm not talking about a human with a pig's heart; I want them all to walk around with pig heads.

IV

The sunset shows all the imperfections on the child's face. Scabs, snot, boogers, burrs, pimples that won't heal. The habitat in the bushy black hair is cheerful. I don't know his age. I don't want to make a connection. He must have just entered puberty. He's sitting across from me on the boat, dozing. One of those people who don't care where they sleep. I picked him like fruit from the garden.

Since the lighthouse went out of use, I only visit the mainland a couple of times a year. I buy what I need on a seasonal basis and don't show up much. I don't want to remind anyone of my existence straight after a visit from the police.

It didn't take me half an hour to convince the boy to come with me. He was sitting on a bench on the beach, eating doner kebab. I asked him where he got the doner and he said some guy gave it to him. Enjoy your meal boy. Was he looking for a job? What kind of job? As an apprentice at the lighthouse on that offshore island. What's an apprentice? Think of it like an assistant. Does it pay? Yes. Transportation? He'll stay there, he'll have a room. Eyes that light up when they hear about the room. Will his parents let him? He had no one. For sure? Sort of. Every now and then, someone leaves food and drink. He should have asked *what in return*. He didn't. I'd have liked to

know why he limped when he walked. I didn't ask. He was just right for my sewing machine. I didn't think about the rest.

As the oars dipped in and out of the water, my mind was focused on this new experience. I still hadn't decided on the other component. Before leaving the island, I had set an old-fashioned trap in the ground with the dogs' blood which I had collected in a pan. Whatever animal had been attracted by the smell of blood, I would use it. There were not many living creatures left on that rock where I had drained all natural life.

The boy didn't wake up until I pulled the boat ashore. I wish he would always sleep and not ask questions. I didn't have more than a few doses of tranquilizer in my medicine cabinet. But for an operation like this, I'd probably need litres of sedatives. For the rest, I'd have to resort to violence.

Upon leaving the island, I had normalized the surroundings as much as possible. The view wasn't bad at all. The old lighthouse towered before us, a ten-meter stone structure. I had buried the twisted bodies of the dogs I had worked on and put the pickaxe and shovel in the storage room on the ground floor. The rocks, the lighthouse, and my small barren garden were a peaceful picture at first glance. If it weren't for the north wind that never tires of reminding me of the past. The smell of rotten meat wafted in and out at irregular intervals.

Except for the sounds of struggle coming from the trap pit, all was quiet. I smiled as the boy curiously approached the pit, ignoring the smell. Then he asked me why a lighthouse keeper needed an assistant.

For stormy days, I said.

He helped me neutralize the snake in the pit. He was more skilful than I expected. He didn't ask too many questions and followed my commands without hesitation. Despite looking skinny, he was strong. As I locked the animal in the wire-mesh cage with sticks, my attention inevitably turned to the sky. I no longer needed the telescope, my star winked at me.

The snake boy was the final blow to lift the veil.

V

The operation hasn't started yet. But I can see the lightning flashes, the dawn will break in a storm. The veil will not only be torn open, it will be riddled with holes. Those who remember the old laws will return to the earth.

My brain is filled with hisses that feel familiar from antic times. There is more than the excitement of a snake trapped in a pit of blood. It's as if I'm listening to my whole life story told in the language of snakes. When the seemingly endless symphony ends, I stick out my forked tongue for the first time in centuries. The emptiness has no taste. I hiss, the sound is still only in my mind.

On the stall where many fish, dogs and birds have passed by, now lies an adolescent boy. Next to him, a dark green snake the same size as the boy.

The sewing machine is shelved. No more barbaric cutting and slicing. At least to a certain extent. Perhaps we can reserve the right to sew for cosmetic touch-ups. Now the genes will do what they are supposed to do. My teachings will shed light on how to fuse the genes of two different species into one. Despite the poor conditions at the lighthouse, it is possible to create the mutation. It's not like stringing canine teeth on a stork's beak. It's not appearances, it's code distortion. That's what's driving the legislators crazy.

I don't know how long the child will live. A few minutes will be enough for me to cross the threshold.

Day three of the operation. He's feeding the boy intravenously. I can hear his heartbeat slowing down. The snake is already dead.

I hear other things too. The crackle of the storm is no longer the sole ruler of the night. The island's new guests are already on their way.

The orphaned street urchin wasn't so orphaned after all. The secret love of a tycoon... He couldn't take the boy in for fear of his wife, but the asshole took it upon himself to watch over

him. He didn't know what was going on until his lust was aroused again. When he found out that the old madman had taken the boy away, he reported the case to the authorities.

He thinks the boy's body belongs only to him. He is determined not to share his love with strangers. But the boy is not the same teenager anymore. If he knew what was happening, he would never ask for his toy back. The boy's forked tongue would destroy his appetite.

I place the image of the tycoon in my mind's eye. I will cut off his appetite once and for all. Now I must warn my old man, who is oblivious to the world. He has been very distracted lately.

VI

I was trying to silence the bells in my mind. This was not the time. Just a few more little touches. He'd live. He'd hiss at me with his sharp tongue and call me Papa. The first fruit of our love that blossomed across galaxies. It won't be the last. First a nursery, then a whole forest.

My dreams were interrupted by the child's urinary catheter popping out. The probe slipped between my trembling hands. The intense smell of ammonia hit me in the face and had a sobering effect. This was no time for daydreaming. I ignored the urine on the ground. Although the storm hadn't hit yet, it had already started to rain. Looking at the waves through the narrow window of the lighthouse, I caught an unusual sight: boats approaching fast. And they didn't look like the small vehicles of the police.

Did they realize I kidnapped the boy? I thought he had no one. To start such an operation with a storm coming, it must be something very serious ... The alarm bells in my mind made sense. My wife was warning me.

I needed time. I wished for the storm to start before the boats arrived. Something inside my head informed me that it would. One must be careful with wishes made at odd times. First the oil lamp light flickered. Then lightning began to split

the sky. It was as if someone, inspired by my butchering of the animals, were putting scalpel strokes on the clouds. The waves surged in seconds and all sea voyages were cancelled.

Three of the boats rose out of the water and clung to the rocks, while two were thrown directly onto the shore. The impact was so violent that the lighthouse shook from its foundation. The oil lamps on the table fell to the ground and shattered into a thousand pieces. The window opened wide, and the wind blew out the candles, celebrating an early birthday. I took crooked steps backwards until I got used to the darkness. Two yellow eyes split the pitch of the night. When the moonlight brightened, I noticed him. He hissed. Then the whole night lit up.

The security forces that had survived the accident were regrouping downstairs, their chief trying to speak through a megaphone. The wind was determined not to leave the man alone. The sky had split so deep that it was impossible not to be blinded by the flashbulbs going off every second.

The boy stood up from the operating table and looked at me. His pupils were elliptical, the yellow irises hiding his thoughts behind them. The next flash revealed scaly skin and a forked tongue dangling between his lips.

He was born. He was alive.

There he is, officer, the outlaw.

When my eyes got used to the dark, I looked out the window. One of the soldiers noticed me and gestured to the floor I was on. The other one said something over the radio. The rest of them were on the beach, helping their wounded friends. Fortune, that had laughed beside me when I kept the rabid dogs out, would wish to forget my name if they stormed the gate.

All I hoped was that the Lady in the Sky would interfere again. The boy was still in the same position, trying to understand what had happened to him. I didn't care. He ran his tongue over his lips and looked at his scaly hands. He was startled to see the dead snake next to him. He tried to get up. He failed and fell over. He needed a mother.

A mother who wasn't there yet, who might never come.

The soldiers started banging on the door. That's when the apocalyptic scenario unfolded in front of me. What if I had made it all up? What if what I had seen in the sky was just schizophrenic visions? But the kid? That monster piece? Who am I to fuse a brat with a snake? Alone, in the dark rooms of a fucking lighthouse?

When they came through the door, they looked at the boy and at me. They would take me and shoot him. The whole sky would laugh at me, my name would be in the news for two weeks and then I would be gone. Forgotten.

The downpour continued but the storm had calmed down. I heard the lighthouse door break. The boy was in the corner with his head between his knees, staring at the floor. My body stopped listening to my commands. I was frozen, shivering.

When they reached the door of the room, I heard whispers. They counted to three. It shouldn't be this easy to take doors off their hinges. When the dust settled, torchlights shone in. Gun barrels and sharp eyes scanned the room. I was told to raise my hands. But my body wouldn't listen to commands. It was the last warning, they said. They would shoot. Let them shoot, if there is no Lady to come.

When one of the torches shone on the boy, their confident attitude quickly vanished. Now they were all inside, blocking us completely. My hands remembered the order they had been given a few seconds ago. As the shadow of my surrender fell over the boy, the snake child turned his head towards me.

»Papaaaasssssss…«

The curtain tore.

The next moment, no one was left standing. As the situation was balancing out, gunshots were fired. There was a shooting. I threw myself next to the boy. While I was trying to understand what had happened, dust began to fall between the stones of the lighthouse. Some pieces fell inside. A huge figure passed in front of the window. Something was moving outside the walls. Then the roof above us flew away. First I saw the eyes, then the forked tongue. My Lady had come.

The soldiers who managed to come out of the debris collapsed on the stairs in terror. Then they gathered themselves and tried to climb down, crushing their comrades in arms. I fell to my knees. The boy got up from the corner. His face was calm for the first time since the operation. The raindrops burned my skin, sobering me up. I wiped the saliva from the corner of my mouth, but it came out again. My fever was high, and my vision blurred.

My Lady's appreciative gaze flickered between the boy and me.

I expected thanks and declarations of love. A very clear voice echoed in my brain.

»Ah ... Why did you do this to yourself?«

What had I done?

As my skin got wet, I lost my peace. Above me stood my beloved distant galaxies, next to me stood a crossbred snake-child who called me father. But these drops of water were driving me crazy.

I kept collecting saliva in my mouth. I wiped the saliva from my chin with the back of my hand. I tried to focus. Now I could find a new snake and make myself one with it. The boy would help me with the experiments.

The brightness of the flash of lightning caught my eye. I realized how close I was to losing my mind. I tried to be strong. Rational. However, I had to stand up in front of my lady. The day of our meeting would go down in history. I thought of the epic scenes the books would present as they described me.

The admiration in my mistress's eyes had already faded. The lighthouse swayed again. The walls groaned as she shifted. She dipped her huge tail inside. With a rattle, she enveloped the child. I waited for my turn as she picked and pulled him up. I was as full of anticipation as a baby who is used to being held every time he cries. It was time to go. Our child waved at me as he was taken up into the sky. He was hissing something. I couldn't hear him. Getting wet was straining all my circuits.

My Lady came back. She swayed from side to side, looking at me.

»The dogs have corrupted you.«

I didn't understand. How could the dogs have corrupted me? Without them, it would have taken me years to find my way. It's just as well you're here. Take me with you and let's go. Let's get out of here before anyone else comes.

The fear in me grew and grew. She was only sad. The lighthouse shook for the last time as I retreated. Only a rainy sky remained above me. I had no place in her story. My Lady would rule the world with our son, and here I would stay, to accompany the ghosts of the dogs abandoned by the municipality.

My breath caught. My heart began to strain my rib cage. Despite the wind biting my skin, I was sweating. I would have given anything to escape this rain. I thought of jumping over the corpses and taking shelter in the storage room downstairs. I could hide forever among the forgotten things. Then I saw the gun in the dead soldier's fingers.

I wiped my chin and placed the cold barrel in my saliva-filled mouth. My tongue touched the tip of the gun. It was real.

I surrendered in the name of the law.

VII

The ground broke. I was reunited with my children.

The Unknown Ratio

ÖZGÜR HÜNEL



Özgür Hünel is from Ankara. He is an academic, graphic designer, and writer. He currently works as a lecturer in the Visual Communication Design Program at Başkent University. Alongside his academic work in graphic design and visual communication, Hünel is also interested in literature and writes short stories, particularly in the science fiction and fantasy genres. In 2018, he won first prize in the Science Fiction Short Story Competition organized by the Informatics Association of Turkey (TBD) with his story "Bilinmeyen

»Now let's examine the striking physical features of this 'alien species'; A tall, slender neck, a head disproportionately large for the body, eyes without pupils, and a body that oscillates as if it had no fixed form and could change it at any moment. Isn't it really an alien form? This 1919 portrait of Amedeo Modigliani's greatest love, the young and beautiful Jeanne Hébuterne, may evoke a feeling of aesthetics and romanticism for many of you, and it is true. But in this lesson, we will learn to look deeper. Although it is aesthetics on the surface, there is another concept underlying it: Foreign intercultural interaction! Now let me explain you what this interaction is ...«

When he got to this part, the monotonous voice of old Professor Ramin always reflected some excitement. Before starting this part, which he enjoyed telling, he wanted to adjust his glasses and took a quick glance around the class. The classroom was empty ... After a while, he headed for the exit as if he were finishing a normal class. As he left, the classroom lights and holo systems were automatically turned off, and the floating portrait slowly disappeared.

Hold on, this is not happening right now ... This is an old memory ... This planet weakens my sense of reality, everything is colliding ... I am very old ... And my mind ... I am so tired ... I have to focus ...

Ramin focused on the aliens in front of him–the native species of this planet, the »Speculoid.« Today was the first day of his class and he had decided to start with the art of painting; Although the Speculoids communicated telepathically, Ramin was using oral communication by habit and as they were still

at the beginning of their communication, he thought that starting with a visual art would make things easier. With the holo-player on his arm, he showed many basic works, talked about movements, periods, masters. However, he was not there only to teach art; but to learn the concept of art in them as well. After all, it was an 'exchange program'.

Does the golden ratio have an equivalent for them? The height of human is not coincidental; it was formed according to the Earth on which we evolved. The perception of perspective was formed according to height. Our concepts of big and small, aesthetic values, ratio and proportions are all specific to us, and in this context, unique to our world.

Speculoids, on the other hand, had a form that was constantly changing even though they were basically humanoid. Ramin had seen that their height can range from 30 cm to 4 meters. Such is the case, how could one talk about ideal proportions or aesthetics based on bodily form?

After Ramin finished his lecture, he turned to Jeanne, his guide –this was the name he had given to the Speculoid who was his guide on the planet simply because it reminded him of Modigliani's portrait of Jeanne with her thin and long neck- and asked the Speculoids to show him what was their equivalent of the art of painting. The Speculoids communicated with each other and eventually told Ramin that they wanted to take him to the »northern light« so he could see and understand what he asked for. Ramin, too afraid, nervously refused, then left them and headed for his pod. His mind was starting to drift into the past again.

Jeanne is not just the name of a painting ... Or the name I have given to my guide ... There is another one. There should be another one...

Ramin and Jeanne met thanks to a strange incident that happened to Jeanne while they were studying art history in the same class. Whenever her teachers showed Modigliani's portrait of Jeanne, bearing her name, in class, the girl fainted. Ramin thought he had figured out why.

When was this? Jeanne ... Why was she passing out all the time? I'm having trouble remembering...

Oran" ("In the Unknown Ratio"). His short stories have been published in anthologies in Turkey as well as in Italy, France, and Germany.

Ramin retired to his pod, stripped off his protective suit, and for the first time had the courage to pick up Jeanne's diary and read it:

Jeanne's Diary,

Lisbon, 2038

*...My fainting mystery was solved by my new friend Ramin. In addition to the fact that fainting is only happening when I look at the portrait of Jeanne, he has uncovered it thanks to the expression of indescribable happiness on my face when I fainted. As he said, I suffer from a condition called »*Stendhal syndrome.*«* It's the first time I've heard of it, but it's the syndrome of falling into unconsciousness when one is too impressed with a magnificent work of art...

*... I chatted with Ramin for hours that day about that portrait. Since I can't look at my namesake portrait because of my »*condition,*«* just as Dorian Gray, the Oscar Wilde character, who couldn't look at his own portrait, I asked Ramin to tell me everything he knew about that painting. For Ramin, the portrait of Jeanne symbolized intercultural interaction: At the beginning of the 20th century, European artists began to be inspired by African culture, and thus new schools of modern art, including cubism, emerged. For example, the slender and long necks in Modigliani's paintings were inspired by African women's lengthening their necks by wearing rings in accordance with their understanding of aesthetics. Ironically, western art was reaching new dimensions by taking its inspiration from the Dark Continent...

...At the end of the day, I could not help but ask myself: If intercultural interaction would work miracles, why do I succumb to inaction?

In the next lecture, Ramin talked about architecture. However, problems based on the difference between two species, the speculoids and humans, made his job more difficult. Architectural structures in the Earth were built with a variety of materials available to Earth, Earth-specific measurements, and most importantly, they were anthropocentric. Whereas the Specu-

loids basically always used the same material–a marble-white substance that looked like a mixture of glass and stone (hence the name »Speculum-Petram«, meaning »glass-stone« in Latin), and somehow, these structures were also in a state of change, like the people living in them! Ramin thought that structures moved in harmony with the movement of the planet, like the seasons, and the day-night cycle. But it was the job of other experts to uncover the secret of these stones and the technology they contained. Ramin, through Jeanne, had asked the Speculoids to share information regarding the design of their architecture with him, hoping that they would take him to a building or show sample images, but when the Speculoids tried to take him to the northern light again, he realized that he was wrong. Again, he had to decline the offer. He was beginning to think that he would return to Earth without learning anything from them. Moreover, his memory was getting weaker and weaker.

Jeanne was trying to persuade me ... to go with her...

Ramin and Jeanne had their first quarrel when Jeanne decided to leave her education and go to the Middle East, the region where the Unification Wars blazed with all their violence. Jeanne wanted to join the volunteers there and help innocent civilians suffering in the war. No matter what Ramin said, he could not persuade her to stay, and he also turned down Jeanne's offer to accompany her.

I should have stayed and finished my studies ... I had responsibilities ... Ah, come on, who am I kidding? I was just afraid ...

Returning to his pod, he continued to read the diary:

Jeanne's Diary:

Lisbon, 2041

... Ramin told me about another interesting topic today: Designer immigrations from Europe to the USA during World War II. The designers who fled the Nazi persecution made the USA their new home and not only lived the golden age of their careers in these foreign lands, but also paved the way to world-class schools that still stand today in graphic design and advertising. The spark in my brain with what Ramin

talked about African influences turned into a fire after this conversation. I believe that »foreign cultures, foreign territories« are my destiny! ...

... I decided to go to the Middle East, to the war zone. I've already contacted one of the voluntary charities. Of course, it was very difficult to explain to Ramin. Thanks to his Iranian origin, he knows the dangers of the Middle East. I know I broke his heart. But what I believe is true. People must follow their own path. What would he think if he knew it was something he told me that pushed me down this path? Can I be useful to humanity by standing here and studying art, or by helping the needy there?...

... I offered for him to come with me. But even quoting Picasso wasn't enough to convince him:

»What do you think an artist is? An imbecile who only has eyes, if he is a painter, or ears if he is a musician? Far from it: He is also a political being, constantly aware of the heartbreaking, passionate, or delightful things that happen in the world, self-reflecting completely in their image.«

Ramin talked about literature and fiction in the following lessons, but fiction written by a human for other humans could only trigger something in the human mind and be effective; like a name that is uttered again and again, elements repeated within a certain pattern, or a layered narrative. He tried to play music, but while he was listening to Beethoven with contentment, towards the end of the piece, he realized that because of the difference in frequency range of their hearing, the Speculoids could not hear anything. Finding himself in a dilemma even with the most basic of art genres, he didn't dare to consider discussing more modern and complex genres like comics and video games. Ramin had now admitted that he had failed. He was not sure that what he was telling them was understood by them, nor had he learned what art meant to them, because every time he was invited into that goddamn northern light, and he ... He couldn't go there.

This idea was wrong from the start. Ramin had come to believe that the concept of art was not universal but human-

specific. It was kneaded with the Earth and the people on it, and it was born as the child of these two. It didn't have to emerge in other civilizations.

To assume that a peculiar phenomenon is a universal value is just for a smug species like man.

By the end of that day, Ramin was back in the pod in frustration and anger.

I spent my childhood in the Middle East. I had seen enough for a lifetime, and I didn't want any more. Was it God's sense of humor that Jeanne wanted to go there, and moreover, wanted to take me with her?

It had been years since Jeanne had been gone, and Ramin hadn't heard from her at all lately. Finally, his longing and curiosity for Jeanne overcame his fear, and he decided to go after her and find her.

Why did I wait so long to go look for Jeanne? Maybe if I had gone earlier …

He continued reading the diary, nearing the end:

Jeanne's Diary,

Afghanistan, 2046

… Ramin and I chose different lives. He was happy there, I am happy here. And the more I helped people, the better I understood what the right decision was. Not only did I find my purpose in life and fulfill myself, but these foreign lands had also given me a life partner and a sweet little baby girl. It must be God's sense of humor that Ramin came to find me just now…

… I could see from his face that he was disappointed when he saw that I was now a married woman with a child. I never doubted my choice, but he seemed to doubt his …

*… He said he wanted to stay with me for a while as »*just a friend*«* and help me. I agreed. I liked that he was a little bit idealistic and adventurous in the end. We spent days together, taking care of the wounded in the town, entertaining children and delivering food. He deftly concealed his fear until I warned him never to approach the north of town, where the bombs explode…

The diary ended here.

Ramin could barely read the last sentences. By the time he was finished, he fainted and collapsed to the ground. His mind couldn't take it anymore because he had stayed on the planet for too long. He was about to lose all sense of time, and memories flooded his mind chaotically:

The year is 2112. I am 94 years old. When did I get this old? I'm lecturing in an empty classroom …

»Whatever happens, don't go to the source of the northern light, Professor. We determined that that was the source of the magnetic anomaly. Possible effects on the human mind -«

A woman who says she is Jeanne's daughter came to visit me. She was working on a government project called Serpo. She had heard a lot about me from her mother and asked me to take part in an alien exchange program? Aliens? What the heck is an exchange program? If it's not technological nostalgia they're looking for, what can we offer them?

»Never go outside your pod without a protective suit, professor. Your suit will bring the gravity to the level of the Earth, so you will be able to move comfortably. At the same time, the suit will purify oxygen, preventing you from contracting alien viruses.«

I am at Serpo facilities. They educate me about the planet I'm going to and about its people. I can't say I'm very focused. I'm too old for this job. I overhear two employees talking. They didn't care who was sent. An old man would suffice to say a word or two about art. Their only concern is the alien technology they will acquire through the exchange program.

»Project Serpo was an alien exchange program secretly run by the US government in the 1960s. It has been revised and reintroduced.«

I want to turn down the offer, but the woman leaves something on my table. It was Jeanne's diary. She saved her best bet for last. She says that if her mother were alive, she would have asked me to accept this assignment. That I should have done this for her.

On the pod there is a relief inscription: »Made on earth by humans«

»The gold record attached to the Voyager spacecraft, which was launched into space in 1977, contained a lot of information about human civilization. The Speculoids somehow got the data. Only the artistic content caught their attention.«

Ramin was starting to come to his senses. He crawled towards the exit of the pod. He hadn't even thought of putting on the protective suit. It was nighttime, and it was raining. Raindrops looked like brushstrokes on Van Gogh paintings. Gravity was greater than on Earth and the air was very cold. Ramin collapsed to the ground in agony. Light years from home, all alone, trapped in the fading memory of an old body.

»I couldn't stop you from leaving. I didn't come with you when you left. I was late when I was looking for you. I couldn't save you when I found you. Besides, I was the one who made you leave in the first place,« he said, and finally he cried out, »It's my fault! My fault!«

After a while, he saw a long-necked humanoid figure standing beside him. This was his guide, Jeanne, the Speculoid. Jeanne lifted him to his feet with her outstretched arms and held him tight so he wouldn't fall. Ramin looked at Jeanne, trying to stop crying.

»Please, forgive me,« Ramin said in his struggling voice, »please.«

»I forgive you,« Jeanne replied.

One night in the rain a human and a Speculoid hugged each other tightly.

»I want to go to the northern light,« said Ramin determinedly, »I'm not afraid anymore.«

And they set off.

There was the sound of a child crying from the north of that town in Afghanistan. Jeanne couldn't stand it anymore and rushed forward for help. Ramin could have run to stop her in time, but instead just shouted after her:

»You said not to go north. Bombs! Jeanne! Where are you going!?«

As Jeanne approached to the sound of crying, the last thing she saw was a suicide bomber standing over the child. What followed was a deafening explosion.

Ramin arrived at the source of the northern light with Jeanne. As he walked into the light, he seemed to hear Jeanne's voice behind him saying, »Stay away from the north,« but he didn't care.

Ramin had finally realized. The answer was: meaning.

Meaning does not manifest by itself in the universe; it must be manufactured. Life becomes meaningful only if one gives meaning to it. Art was the way to produce meaning for humans. And for them … It was this.

An indescribable happiness settled on his face as Ramin's consciousness withered away forever. His last thought was:

»Stendhal syndrome … So this is how it feels.«

Science Fiction in Turkey: A Journey Through Time

ÖZGÜR TACER

Especially since the early 2000s, we have witnessed science fiction occupying an increasingly visible place on bookstore shelves in Turkey. Over the past decade, we have also observed a growing number of Turkish authors appearing on these shelves. With high-quality bindings, professional cover designs, and engaging back-cover texts, we are now faced with a body of work that, in terms of formal standards, is virtually indistinguishable from its Western counterparts. Does this landscape represent the happy ending of a 150-year struggle for existence in Turkish science fiction? Or is it merely the beginning? Before reaching a conclusion, it is necessary to examine the development of science fiction in these lands and the stages it passed through before finding its own distinctive character.



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Science Fiction in the Ottoman Empire: Entering a Dream

To trace the roots of science fiction in our geography, one must go back slightly further than the proclamation of the Republic, to the turbulent and crisis-ridden final years of the Ottoman Empire. In her study *Ottoman Science Fiction: Fenni Literature* (2013), Seda Uyanık notes that science fiction in the literature of the period was referred to as *fenni roman* (scientific novel). Considering that a large number of Jules Verne's works were translated into Ottoman Turkish between 1875 and 1905, it can be argued that the scientific content of these novels was a defining feature, and that these translations simultaneously became foundational reference points for Ottoman *fenni* fiction.

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The pessimism into which the country was plunged by the Italo-Turkish War of 1911–1912, the Balkan Wars of 1912–1913, and ultimately the First World War found its reflection in literature, marking one of the first major phases of Ottoman science fiction. During these years, Utopian works were produced in Turkish literature with an intensity previously unseen. Although whether these utopias belong strictly to the science fiction genre remains debatable, it can be claimed that they contain elements of the genre insofar as they reference science. A motif common to many of these works is the use of dream narratives.

The earliest known example of the dream narrative that shaped science fiction as a mode of expression is Ziya Paşa's »Rüya« (»The Dream«). Published in *Hürriyet* newspaper in 1869 and written in the form of a dialogue, the work depicts a conversation between Ziya Paşa and the reigning sultan, Abdülaziz, taking place within a dream. In this dialogue, Ziya Paşa conveys to the sultan that the country is being poorly governed, laying out his reasons. He informs the sultan about the true aims of the society known as the Young Ottomans and emphasizes the importance of constitutional governance and the will of the people. The text ends with Ziya Paşa awakening from his dream. Namık Kemal wrote a similar text under the same title while in exile in Famagusta: in his dream, the author addresses the people through the voice of a character named the Fairy of Liberty (Hürriyet Perisi), urging them to act against oppression and captivity.

Although neither text can be directly classified as science fiction, it may be argued that both function as precursors to Ottoman *fenni* fiction. Produced during the early years of Tanzimat literature, when efforts toward literary modernization had begun, these works serve as guiding texts that shaped *fenni* literature by instrumentalizing literature as a vehicle for political debate and by employing the dream form as their narrative framework.

Ahmet Mithat Efendi's *Fenni Bir Roman Yahut Amerika Doktorları* (*A Scientific Novel, or The Doctors of America*, 1889) explicitly carries the concept of the *fenni* novel in its

title, presenting one of the earliest examples of the genre. Rejecting materialism and warning against the harms of »excessive civilization,« this work establishes the fundamental debate of Ottoman science fiction through its stance: maintaining a critical distance from the ideal of progress while nevertheless acknowledging the necessity of keeping pace with the age.

Just as there was no single, uniform Tanzimat intellectual, the science fiction writers of the period were by no means of one mind. As a time when new political ideas were being disseminated throughout society, the Tanzimat era enabled the formation of a strong connection between thought and literature. In the works of the period, literature was almost instrumentalized as a means of conveying political messages, leading to its evaluation not primarily through aesthetic criteria but through its political propositions. Categories such as Westernization, enlightenment, civilization, Islam, and positivism–imbuing *fenni* narratives with political content–served as sources for authors' attempts to construct visions of the future or alternative histories, thereby forming the nucleus of Ottoman science fiction.

Celal Nuri's *Tarih-i İstikbal* (*History of the Future*, 1913), for instance, is a secular fantasy that narrates a journey through time undertaken after death and satirizes elements of Islamic belief. In Yahya Kemal's short story »Çamlar Altında Musahabe« (»A Conversation Beneath the Pines,« 1913), the journey to the future Istanbul also takes place within a dream. While portraying a reconciliation between tradition and technology, Yahya Kemal characterizes the Istanbul of the future with aircrafts, futuristic mega-structures, and monuments to heroism. The story even notes–perhaps with a touch of irony–that the Galata Bridge has been made free of charge! In Molla Davudzade Mustafa Nazım's »Rüyada Terakki ve Medeniyet-i İslamiye-i Rü'yet« (»A Dream of Progress and Islamic Civilization,« 1913), the dream journey extends to the twenty-third century. In this vision of the future, the Ottoman Empire has adopted Western technology while discarding Western morality. As a result, it has achieved prosperity without severing its

ties to its roots, whereas the West – unable to nourish technological innovation with spirituality – has collapsed entirely. In Ruşeni'nin Rüyası (»Ruşeni's Dream,« 1914), Hasan Ruşeni Barkın once again constructs a *fenni* Ottoman utopia: in response to Western colonialism, the Young Turk (Jön Türk) movement establishes a techno-Islamic utopia centered on Islam and science (Uyanık, 2013).

The rhetoric of revival, ascent, and awakening shared by the works discussed above is certainly not coincidental. What is at stake is the transmission, through literature, of prescriptions believed capable of leading a disintegrating empire back to an age of felicity (asr-ı saadet). At the same time, an exclusionary and often negative stance toward non-Muslim populations within the empire is markedly evident across these texts. The »West,« technologically advanced yet devoid of spirituality, is portrayed as an adversary destined to lose in the face of the Ottoman revival. The equation that associates Western culture with advanced technology, mechanization, and, consequently, moral decay proposes Islam and tradition as the conditions for the success of *fenni* ideals. Technology (the West) and tradition (the Ottoman world) are thus treated either as being in absolute conflict or as parties to a conditional collaboration. In other words, these two categories are imagined as either incapable of coexisting at all, or – should they meet at a middle ground – capable of giving rise to a Utopian society.

The journey of the main characters into an advanced future – most often through dreams – constitutes the primary motif used to construct a form of witnessing the future. In Ottoman science fiction, imagined science and technology are never attained through practice, nor are such achievements presented as ordinary, evolutionary stages of history. Rather, they appear almost as gifts bestowed upon the Ottomans as a reward for national consciousness and spirituality. The future emerges as a sequence of phenomena observed and interpreted from the outside, by means of a dream. At the same time, despite a certain degree of realism, there is also a realist stance that underlines the fictional nature of *fenni* imagination, guiding the reader through an imagined world only to

return them, at the conclusion, to the reality they inhabit. The dream narrative, with its clear beginning and end, delineates a sharp boundary between reality and fiction. Moreover, by shifting responsibility for what is narrated onto the unconscious, it enables authors to establish a line of defense in the face of potential censorship or investigation.

The Early Years of the Republic: A Long Silence

Science fiction, which had displayed a certain vitality during the period of Ottoman disintegration, fell into a profound silence following the proclamation of the Republic. After all, the debates carried within those earlier texts had largely lost their immediate relevance. The approach that privileged political messaging over literature itself, instrumentalizing projections of science and technology as vehicles for ideology, proved incapable of leaving a lasting mark on literary history. In the Republican period, the only science fiction work we can identify up until the 1950s is Dr. Vedii Bilgin's novel *Rüya mı Hakikat mi?* (*Dream or Reality?*), published in 1943. In the novel, the narrator somehow travels to Mars. There, encountering an advanced civilization, he engages the Martians in discussions on health, longevity, science, and technology, before eventually returning to Earth. As customary, the author awakens and realizes that the experience was a dream. Although little is known about the author himself, it is quite evident that the novel draws inspiration from pre-Republican science fiction and is thus recorded in our literary history as an individual experiment with the genre.

By the 1950s, a craze sparked by the Flash Gordon films led to the localization of Gordon as »Baytekin.« Despite the popularity of these films, science fiction was not regarded as a genre in its own right, but rather as a form of entertainment for children. The ten-volume novel series published consecutively by Çağlayan Publishing House bore the subtitle *Yeni Dünyalar* (*New Worlds*, 1954–55). Çağlayan introduced into Turkish a randomly assembled selection of novels produced

during what is considered the Golden Age of American science fiction in the 1940s and 1950s. Presented to readers through translations that involved inserting fragments and/or excising sections deemed unnecessary, these novels were published entirely for commercial reasons. Priced very cheaply, they came to constitute the first examples of pulp science fiction in Turkey. Packaged alongside similarly disparaged neighboring genres such as detective fiction, horror, and adventure, this series neither succeeded in raising awareness of science fiction nor achieved a level of quality capable of conferring prestige upon the genre. Indeed, what followed was yet another period of silence, lasting nearly twenty years.

The 1970s: As lonely as a sci fi reader ...

The second half of the twentieth century, as is well known, was marked by the space race between the United States and the Soviet Union. Likely propelled by the global dynamism generated by this rivalry – and ultimately by the excitement of setting foot on the Moon – Okat Publishing House launched a sixteen-volume science fiction series. Much like the earlier Çağlayan series, and in some respects even worse, these books were published with poor translations. In the 1980s, Baskan Publishing followed with its own science fiction series. Printed solely for commercial reasons, without any sense of responsibility toward authors, readers, or literature itself, these novels – some of which would otherwise be counted among the finest examples of the genre – were wasted. As a result, science fiction never quite managed to shed the label of »low literature.« Nevertheless, even their cover designs alone succeeded in drawing a considerable number of readers into the orbit of science fiction.

During the same years, science fiction television series and films, most notably Star Trek, began appearing on screens and exerted a leverage effect on science fiction literature as well. Young people eager to read and watch more science fiction formed small subcultural islets clustered around a shared defi-

nition of the genre. There were deep rifts between these circles and mainstream literature and cinema. More importantly, they were lonely. So much so that among science fiction enthusiasts there were those who, before taking a novel they had read to a secondhand bookstore, would write their name, address, and phone number inside the book in the hope of meeting its next owner.

Undoubtedly, the only remedy for this loneliness lay in the formation of platforms that could bring science fiction fans together. Yet the Internet was still thirty years away from entering daily life, and distances between cities remained considerable. Turkey's first science fiction fanzine *Antares* emerged precisely under these circumstances.

In October 1971, Sezar Erkin Ergin, then a mathematics student at Middle East Technical University, duplicated a nine-page stencil and began distributing it through his own means. Circulating like a message sealed in a bottle and cast into the sea, *Antares* managed to reach as far as a science fiction convention in Italy and even returned from that convention with an award. Functioning simultaneously as a fan club, the magazine also began organizing meetups in Istanbul and Ankara. After a brief hiatus *Antares* returned in 1974 with more pages and richer content. Over the course of its thirteen-issue lifespan its circulation never exceeded 150 copies per issue. Yet through its bilingual Turkish–English content, its inclusion of both translated and original stories, its news from the science fiction world, and – most importantly – its reminder to science fiction fans that they were not alone, it secured a significant place in the history of Turkish science fiction.

Subsequently, in 1976, Selma Mine launched another science fiction fanzine in Istanbul titled *X-Bilinmeyen* (*X-The Unknown*). Gradually improving both its print and content quality, the magazine continued to be printed professionally and reached circulations in the thousands. At one point it changed its name to *Evren* (*Universe*) and ultimately ceased publication in 1981 with its sixty-fourth issue. *X-Bilinmeyen* featured not only domestic and foreign stories but also various essays and articles. Reader meetups, of course, were an indis-

pensable part of the process, and through these gatherings the Turkish science fiction community began to grow richer.

Even as a readership began to take shape, the fact that local science fiction in the 1970s was still in its infancy can be inferred from the absence of even a settled name for the genre. Initially entering the language as *fenni roman*, »scienctific novel« it later found equivalents such as *kurgu-bilim* (fictional science) and *bilimsel roman,* following the language reforms (*bilimsel* is a more modern word for *fenni*; it still means *scientific novel*). Finally, the term *bilimkurgu* (finally they reached science-fiction!) was officially registered in the January 1973 issue of *Türk Dili* magazine. The person who formalized the term was none other than journalist-writer Orhan Duru (1933–2009), who would later become known for his own science fiction stories. Around the same time, the first examples of domestic science fiction began to appear: in 1970, Metin Atak wrote *Gezegenler Savaşıyor* (*Planets at War*), arguably Turkey's first space opera. After producing several science fiction novels aimed at children, Selma Mine began serializing two new science fiction novels in *X-Bilinmeyen*. Alongside science fiction stories published in magazines, a domestic science fiction inventory for Turkey had effectively begun to take shape.

To convey the state of local science fiction in the 1970s through a firsthand account, we may turn to journalist, writer, and critic Zühtü Bayar:

»... this is now, for Turkey, a new art form, a new branch of literature. Such a new subject, tool, or method arriving from the West – whether in the arts or in science and technology – may initially be met with certain reactions precisely because of its foreignness. But over time it is possible to warm to it, grow accustomed to it, benefit from it, even contribute to it and surpass it. [...] Moreover, if science fiction is to be produced in Turkish literature, it must be original. The stories smell of translation right now. They are largely under the influence of the West. The names are foreign. For instance, you and I – including myself – still use foreign names; because we perceive science fiction as part of a foreign culture. But this will change in the future, and

original science fiction will begin to be produced in Turkish literature. We will see this in the near future, within the next few years« (*Antares Magazine*, Issue 4, Autumn 1974).

It can be said that both Zühtü Bayar's observations and his predictions were remarkably accurate. What stands out here is that science fiction was constructed not only through Western codes in terms of subject matter, but also as a mode of expression, rendering the process of localization particularly arduous. Meanwhile, the literary climate of the period and prevailing literary orientations continued to exclude speculative genres such as science fiction, fantasy, and horror. In Turkey, perhaps until the 1980s, those engaged in literature seemed to be offered only two options: realist literature or socialist realist literature. To strain one's horizon in search of a third option was to invite disparagement, to be labeled a bourgeois intellectual or an escapist writer. When combined with the thoroughly diminished prestige of translated science fiction, this situation further narrowed the space of representation for science fiction literature in Turkey. For science fiction to gain acceptance, the mentality, the mood had to change–and this change would, in one way or another, once again come through Western science fiction.

The 1990s: Good Science Fiction Is Good Literature

In 1995, under the editorship of Bülent Somay, Metis Publishing launched a new series of translated novels with the slogan »good science fiction is good literature.« During the same period, publishers such as İthaki, Sarmal, and Altıkırkbeş introduced a broad repertoire of major science fiction works to Turkish readers. Although the quality of novel translations remained inconsistent, a reservoir had begun to form that could nourish science fiction enthusiasts in Turkey with the genre's most canonical examples.

Multichannel television, the increase in movie theaters, the widespread adoption of English-language education in higher

education, the arrival of the Internet into everyday life … While the 1990s witnessed a bottleneck in Western science fiction marked by the rapid rise and fall of cyberpunk, science fiction in Turkey was more popular than ever. Fans encountered the most distinguished examples of the genre and began to be influenced by them. Readers confident in their English no longer had to wait for translations and could read science fiction in its original language. As traditional prejudices against the genre began to fade and the number of publishers willing to take the risk of publishing science fiction increased, many aspiring science fiction writers found the courage to try to fly on their own wings. The new millennium would belong to them.

The 2000s: The Age of Multiplicity

The contemporary dynamism of local science fiction must be understood through the widespread adoption of the Internet. As noted earlier, science fiction production in Turkey has functioned less as a purely literary endeavor and more as a means of social interaction. Internet forums and similar virtual platforms that entered our lives in the new millennium intensified interaction among individuals occupying the same segment of the popular culture spectrum, granting them a renewed sense of belonging. The sense of multiplicity generated by this interaction signaled that writing science fiction was no longer a futile endeavor – that there existed an audience ready to discover and internalize local science fiction.

The Türkiye Bilişim Magazine Science Fiction Short Story Contest, Turkey's first continuously held science fiction competition since 1998, can also be counted among the factors that increased the visibility of local science fiction writers. In subsequent years, the growing number of such competitions continued to support science fiction production in both quantitative and qualitative terms by creating a competitive field.

All of these motivating factors led to a leap in domestic science fiction production. Indeed, according to the inventory

research of the science fiction scholar and archivist Bülent Akkoç, whom we lost recently, the total number of science fiction works published between 1990 and 2000 is equal to the number of science fiction works published during the Republican period up until 1990. Although the figure – yes, it is twenty-three – is cause for concern, the post-2000 acceleration, resulting in a volume of production that has become impossible to document individually, points to an entirely different orientation: I read, therefore I can write.

Before opening this explosion of production in local science fiction to discussion, it is important not to overlook the fact that many works written in the 1990s and early 2000s reveal an at times overly explicit interaction with Western science fiction. Although the number of local productions increased, there were few signs of genuine localization. Variations on commonly used themes of modern science fiction, pastiches, and fan fiction inspired by popular films and novels were abundant. It would not be incorrect to describe this period as the »import-substitution era« of science fiction, for rather than forming an internal voice, many writers preferred to adapt a beloved body of literature to themselves.

This situation points to an important issue that is seldom articulated: just how local is local science fiction? The problem of »foreign character names« raised by Zühtü Bayar in the quotation above has largely been overcome. Yet a writing style reminiscent of foreign television series, the uncritical reproduction of generic science fiction themes, and the use of Turkish merely »well enough to get the point across« rather than to create a literary aesthetic remain persistent issues in local science fiction.

Identifying such problems in Turkish-language science fiction does not, of course, require overlooking opportunities. Especially over the past decade, domestic publishing has brought with it entirely new possibilities, one of which is self-publishing. In an environment where publishers receptive to science fiction are few and aspiring writers are many, increasing numbers of science fiction authors have turned to a system that allows works otherwise unable even to secure a reading to

find a place in literature. Through this system, science fiction can be produced in ever greater numbers and across an expanding range of diversity. Moreover, in an era where social media is used with increasing effectiveness, science fiction writers can reach a far broader readership than ever before simply by utilizing the right channels. That said, when the growth in science fiction readership fails to keep pace with the increase in local science fiction writers, it becomes more difficult for readers to discover their own tastes and orient themselves within this multiplicity. Furthermore, the abundance of science fiction works that have not undergone editorial processes undoubtedly hinders the genre from attaining a certain level of quality.

It must be acknowledged that in every branch of literature there exists a quality spectrum that tapers off toward both mediocrity and excellence, and truly outstanding works – regardless of genre – are always in the minority. Will local science fiction, over time, attain a distinct originality, literary competence, thematic diversity, and a characteristic tonal palette? Will readers be able to recognize and embrace this palette, distinguishing it from its foreign counterparts? The future history of local science fiction will likely be shaped by the answers to these questions.