

# FLOOZMAN IN SPACE



**Bertrand Cayzac**

## Acknowledgements

I want to thank Don Webb from the bottom of my heart for bringing this work to life. If *Floozman in Space* appears in Bewildering Press today, after its publication as a serial in Bewildering Stories, it is because Don has been its spiritual midwife and guide. The primordial reader of the text, he is also an author as part of a seminal side conversation which is weaved into the fabric of the story.

Cover art: Hildegard von Bingen, *Scivias – Third vision of the first part*

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## Epigraphs

Man has no being, he only has assets. — Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*

No objects, spaces or bodies are sacred in themselves; any component can be interfaced with any other if the proper standard, the proper code, can be constructed for processing signals in a common language. In particular, there is no ground for ontologically opposing the mythical to the organic, textual and technical. — Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*

It is towards a generalized genetic interpretation of the relationship between man and the world that we need to move in order to grasp the philosophical significance of technical objects. — Gilbert Simondon, *Du mode d'existence des objets techniques*

John: I understand that the being presupposed in the negation is necessarily anterior to non-being, otherwise there would be absolutely nothing. Who indeed would have produced the non-being into the being? Certainly not the non-being, since it would not presuppose the being by which it would be produced. — Nicholas of Cusa, *De possest* (1460)

Iohannes : Intelligo ipsum praesuppositum esse in negatione necessario antecedere non-esse, alias utique nihil esset. Quis enim non-esse in esse produisset? Non ipsum non-esse, quando non praesupponeret esse a quo produceretur? — Nicolaus Cusanus, *De possest*

## Chapter 1: A Targeted Space Purchase for a Dedication to the Hapless Ones of All Times

Dear Mr. Sterne,

If everything conspires — here with there and there with here — you must have always known that the dedication put on sale in the first volume of *Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* would ultimately be taken seriously in my time. It is a future from which I greet you very respectfully while exercising my mind’s eye in imagining you living *in a constant endeavor to fence against the infirmities of ill health and other evils of life* by mirth alone.

The dedication of chapter VIII is certainly ironic, as is the preceding address to the reader, wherein you regret that men such as “his lordship,” who are born for great actions, devote precious time to the benefit of their hobby, and time is something this corrupted world is much in need of. The aforesaid dedication mocks this reader, who is obsessed by vain pursuits; but it also acknowledges the wisdom he will demonstrate by accepting to dismount from his hobby horse and stand on his own two feet.

Can one be so dumb as to accept the offer made in chapter IX, where you propose to dedicate to the buyer the text of chapter VIII? One can surmise how preposterous this idea is by speculating on the number of probable candidates as a function of the book’s sales and distribution.

Did you conjecture that this figure might increase by ever-larger amounts beyond a certain threshold? In a text written for the *Harvard Norton Lectures*, Professor Umberto Eco, himself the author of several best-sellers, warns that the public reached after the first million of copies may misconceive the “fictional pact.”

<p><i>Six Walks in the Fictional Woods — Six Promenades dans les bois du roman et d’ailleurs.</i> Paris, Éditions Grasset</p>
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For instance, a reader asked why a character in *Foucault’s Pendulum* does not mention a fire that the newspapers reported as occurring at the same date and on the same streets that the story has the character walking along.

Since the quest for profit encourages the development of such a “sub-prime readership,” it is no wonder that your announcement finds its way to a mid-level



French employee whose brain is worn out by computation. The fact that it reaches me after several centuries and many detours of history — convulsions, world wars, nameless woes, revolutions, Beatlemania, and other social and language upheavals — is a testament to the vigor of your work, which I hold in great admiration.

I can still taste the flavor of the work despite the profound transformations that have ripped my generation from the Earth and its past. Indeed, I cannot better depict the unrest that marks our time.

Our species is preparing to leave this earth for space, where seedtime and harvest shall cease for want of soil, and where our offspring may not even have noses. That could have incalculable consequences on the reception of Tristram Shandy's *Life & Opinions*. I fear that will be the outcome, dear Mister Sterne. It is an effort of style, of course, for it is certain that not everybody will depart for space.

At the risk of abrogating the “fictional pact,” I mean to take your proposal at face value in its form and content. It is quite relevant to one who is preoccupied with containing his overriding passion within the limits of reason.

I thus declare my intent to purchase with no further delay, and I shall abstain from harassing you with “enlightened pragmatism” or any other platitude that may unite us. Of course, I maintain that your proposal is still valid in the edition I am reading in this year of grace two thousand and fifteen.

It matters not what the professors, intellectual-property lawyers, associate managers and business executives feel about it, sure as they are that you cannot be serious. Would anyone of significance be foolish enough to insist it be made a matter of debate? The following obvious points would put him to shame:

1. This jewel of irony cannot be worn without losing its luster or, worse, without turning into mud.
2. The sale, obviously intended in jest, is only a literary device and does not constitute in any way an offer that could be binding on the seller.
3. Since the offer does not carry any expiry date, the considerable time elapsed since the author's demise — “Alas, poor Yorick” — is enough to make it void. There you have it: case closed.

For my part, I daresay that your will, so frankly expressed, cannot be disregarded without consulting you. To bring this matter still closer to today's world, let us imagine that a contemporary editor equipped chapter IX with a “Buy Me” button. It executes the software code required to process an on-line transaction. The editor would only be doing his job of adapting the text and dusting it off for modern times, would he not?

Who will say today that a work can be installed without hyperlinks? Can an editor disappoint the latent buyer slumbering in every reader on the mere pretext that you are no longer of this world? Pray tell, what shall be the fate of this purchase order?

Given the silence of the lawyers and in the absence of Sir Dodsley, whom you have mandated to handle the transaction, I resolve to address you without any intermediary and to believe in the robustness of the intertemporal commercial protocol that is necessary under the circumstances and by the medium of which I pray you to take the present offer into consideration.

Purchase offer:

Having carefully read the dedication proposal published at chapter IX of the above-cited book, I am pleased to confirm my intention to purchase according to the specified conditions.

Please find below the content of the text I wish to insert, as well as indications concerning its recommended interpretation. I draw your attention to my desire to spin the content so that the dedication goes to a fictional character in a serial of which I am the author, not to mention the publication of the menial merits that I wish to see attributed to my person with regards to the moderation of my own hobby and which are, I hope, in conformity with the spirit of the dedication.

These departures should remain compatible with the terms of your announcement despite a relatively large use of the space usually allocated to the beneficiary's titles and good deeds. Nevertheless, pressed by time and having no penchant for negotiation, I want to anticipate the objections you may quite rightly formulate.

Please be aware that I am prepared to expedite these issues in a simple and mutually satisfactory manner. I therefore propose, in advance, to allocate the twenty guineas to any license extension you may deem necessary to satisfy my request and which you have generously deducted from the dedication price. The overall amount of my offer thus comes to seventy guineas in constant value according to the calculation rules recommended by the Central Bank of England. I am quite sure the Bank will be with us as we expand into space.

Proposed dedication to be inserted in the chapter heading:

All of chapter IX, from the words, *De gustibus non est disputandum*, and whatever else in the book relates to hobby horses but no more, stands dedicated to Fred Looseman, an ex-risk director of Worldwide Credit and an intermittent monetary Messiah. He is a character in the serial *Floozman* created by Bertrand Cayzac, an employee fearing God and his management, proud to have been able to rein in his literary hobby horse in all circumstances and dismount willingly each time his social or professional activities demanded it.



Praise be to him for never having renounced mustering his labor in order to extend his studies far into the night. In taking account of scriptures and great texts for a longer time, his foolishness would have prevailed. As the Ecclesiast tells it: “Just as dead flies make the perfumer’s oil stink, a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor.”

May the author’s pedantry enable him to join, in the hapless souls’ purgatory, the cook who was dismissed by King Hanun the Ammonite after King Salomon, reduced to a vagabond by the demon Asdmodeus, had prepared him a better feast. May this author have dipped his spoon into the right pot!

Ah! The perfumer’s oil! Dense, impassive, metastable: it would have such a sweet fragrance if there were a nose to smell it in the eternity mirrored on its surface.

And I wish to say in conclusion: What the dead flies produce in divine oil, I’m afraid my work does to the beautiful and holy words with which it makes its shameful concoction. It claims to do with well-tempered scenarios what mushrooms do with wine, what yeast does it to cheese to make it runny, firm, and more or less ripe...

One will find lovers of fermentation for some time yet, but everything foreshadows their extinction. I can even let you hear what our progeny will say of these last gourmets. They will say something like this:

“Our masters once summoned up these foods at ruinous costs. That is why they wanted to keep their digestive systems intact. Well, yes, but not so long ago, people were still having bowel movements in space, Madame! Uncomfortably, for sure, but at least they were eating chicken and stuffing!”

May the earth be light upon you, and may we remember you for a long time in the holds of our spaceships.

Your most respectful reader,

Bertrand Cayzac

Editor’s note: Might space travel cause the evolution of a noseless humanity, a species devoid of olfactory sensation? The hypothesis is striking and original. However, it is logical. Other artists and authors have speculated by inference that noses might be a handicap in space colonization.

For example, Stanley Kubrick makes a brief visual joke about space toilets in his film *2001: A Space Odyssey*. And another author surmises that Monsieur Cayzac’s forthright consideration of the consequences of eating chicken in space — complete with stuffing — has very serious implications for [the colonization of Mars](#).

The culinary tradition is a long and hallowed one in French literature. One fondly remembers “the good doctor” Rabelais and, in *Bewildering Stories*, Cyrano de Bergerac’s episode “[Go to the Cabbage, and Be Wise](#)” among many others. In a figurative sense, our esteemed author stands on the shoulders of giants.

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## Chapter 2: The Super Estrella

Janatone's high-heel shoes are standing against the wall, sensitively displayed but misplaced to the extreme, manifesting in their shape the impertinent idea of a woman walking on the spinning earth. Behind the screen of the stimuli shield, she sees her shoes as a dusty old treasure and has a golden vision of pure time, as when the sun briefly shines through the narrow, solitary window in the apse of a chapel and burnishes the icons within.

These are the last days of April; she is walking down the Rue Ménilmontant towards the absinthe shadows of the plane trees, where her lover is awaiting her. Her lover on the boulevard; Janatone, in the sky. The vision dissolves in the golden light of eternal time.

She feels as smooth and light as a shard of pearl. Is she too opaque for light to shine through her? *Yes! Let light pass through me*, she dreams. There are no more corals, no more oceans, no more fish, no more fishermen... nothing but the light that bathes the universe.

But Earth is so close; the orbital city brushes its membrane. If she comes back, she won't ask for anything. No, she will be content to sit on a bench and watch the clouds over which the station flies in the silence. Eternally sown over the seas, the clouds' shadows sail above shores where no stopping place is ever marked. That is where she wants to end her life: sitting under an indigo trellis, gazing at a corner of the sky. She wants only to return to her land, to her house... although she has no house anymore. To slip under the clouds, at last.

She has only to want it, to exert her will a little more, to be done with it. She can do it. She pushes herself out of the berth with the valiant hum of her muscular engines. She issues a mental command, and reduces the stimuli shield's filter a little more. She must decide by herself. The cell lighting brightens immediately. Quantities of signals find their way to her awareness; they mingle with hunger and bionic alerts.

Relayed by waves, plasmas, neural implants, these signals form virtual layers that superpose themselves on things in every place and merge with them. She perceives the omnipresent flows of INFORMATION across the web: the porno beat, V-ball, commodities quotes and, of course, Jenny Appleseed as well as the riots on Europa and the dreadful accident with the refugees' ships on the Moon.

Ship hulls on fire, debris and bodies endlessly falling towards the yellowish dust on the ground. Gas clouds and black globes blocking the sky. Dark agates of water, oil,

blood and excrement. Powdered milk and nutrient paste, saliva, bile. *My friends... poor people... How can two ships cross several million miles and collide in the harbor?!*

Too bad. There is nothing she can do anymore. She has experienced enough of life.

She distinguishes a breath in the immediate web, by the cabinet: a sort of complaint. “Janatone!” the voice insists, very close.

“Hold on...”

“No! I have been calling you for hours. Electrical perturbations are putting the baby in danger. I will have to disconnect myself. You have to do something. And the water must be changed.”

She floats to the alveolus where the moan comes from. She takes out the artificial uterus, the better to see it. It is a semi-rigid backpack incrustated with soft, milky screens palpitating with alerts. Small gill-shaped flaps make it a shivering crest.

She concentrates on the interfaces. “You have twenty terrestrial days of autonomy in normal mode. You are exaggerating.” Janatone has a strange way of speaking. Her frayed voice lingers, sings and lets the sounds last between words, a long time between the words, to come back in waves and tell a miracle of speech.

“I have sent an official request to the *Estrella*’s administration again,” the stimuli-shield breaks in from the interior web. “Janatone, I am not in suspended mode anymore,” the A.U. continues. “The blastocyst development has resumed,” . “In a few days, the embryonic threshold will be reached.”

“What *is* that filter you need, by the way?” Janatone sighs, talking to the A.U.

“Wait! If *we* need it, it’s because *you* dragged us into this operation isn’t it? *I* didn’t ask for anything! All right, already. It’s an electromagnetic Europa-Earth 110V filter. You only have to say ‘a Europa-Earth CEM filter’; that will be enough.”

“I’ll see what I can do before I leave; because I am leaving. You know about that.” She arranges her hair a little, puts on a jacket and checks the contents of her pockets.

“You’ll tell your child. I couldn’t care less; I am just a machine plugged into the mutualized intelligence.”

Janatone stores the A.U. in the closet. “Stop fretting. You like the nurse; he will take care of water and the rest. I’ve shown him what to do.” She closes the closet door.

“Are you sure you know what you are doing?”

Janatone doesn't answer. She knows what she is doing. She explains it once again by thought to the unborn child. She goes out.

“No particular instructions?” asks the door.

“No! *Nothing!* “

“Take care of yourself.”

She disappears at the end of the corridor.

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### Chapter 3: She Will Never Go Back to Earth

To pay his debts, Fred Looseman is working in space colonies where economic GROWTH already attracts millions of men. Mining, metallurgy, solar energy and transportation are the main engines of this development. So is, of course, organic engineering, which benefits from an innovation-friendly legal framework. But let's be serious, reader: what is really making them *like unto a wheel*? Which is the primary drive behind their vast, unending orbital revolutions? Montaigne sums it up when he quotes Seneca, loosely: *In negotiis sunt negotii causa*. — 'Business for the sake of business.'

The relativistic banking network deployment will take whatever time it takes, and Fred won't be complaining. He is feeling rather good. At this moment his team is on the *Super Estrella*, at a level-five dynamic costs control zone, which includes the possible suspension of vital functions. Level five is very demanding. TermiBank claims that its employees and sub-contractors are proud to work there.

Fred has successfully embraced the OBJECTIVES of the program. He knows that the hourly cost of a human technician must not exceed the mobile threshold to preserve the MARGIN. His own refreshed cost is discreetly displayed on his TermiBank suits with the rest of his individual indicators.

He understands that RESOURCES must be carefully measured to achieve this output. In space, everything is a resource: not only food and cubic meters of living space but also air and water. Matter — the elementary matter that was once abundant — has become wealth for all who take shelter from the void. Is it in deserts, in barren snows, or in camps that men have been drawn to attach a value to common stones or to the slightest scrap of metal or cloth?

Often, he would like to let himself slip into oblivion, but he feels and experiences that things are too real to let him do that. These things are here; they persist in being, most often in a feeble, low-intensity light. He does not know them anymore when they exist in the dark, aside from his sleeping bag, his web corner and his tubes.

But these things come back with the hours as an inexhaustible source of annoyance: the dry shower, the rays, the small, ugly rings hemming the collar and the sleeves of his old spacesuit, the warped gasket on the right side, and the impassible uniformity of these narrow, brushed surfaces, constrained and insolent.



There is also the inner coating which is fraying in patches, the cloakroom odor, and the gleaming metal of the docking bars. These things do exist, and he has to live with them. He knows those which will never please the eye, those which deform the mind and those which soothe a little, such as the others' skin, the airlock alveoli and their suction noise... And, beyond the airlock, there is work: the work that is nerve-racking and that would cost too much if assigned to new-generation robots, considering their TOTAL COST OF OWNERSHIP.

After the mandatory exercise and the twelve-hour work day, he goes back to his alveolus to wait for the end of the curfew. If his indicators are good, he will get free access to the sexual web and, once a month, to the disco, which has artificial gravity.

Sometimes during the spacewalks, he stops a while to watch the Earth. He thinks it is pretty and that he is lucky to be so high. But he quickly gets back to work and not fall behind. And the work, too, is real: the eyes have to refocus, and the hand has to grab and turn...

Gazing towards the closest modules, veiled by swarms of drones, one can distinguish riggings, walls and towers erected in space in all directions. The largest of the edifices are circled by black, glass-paneled bays.

\* \* \*

Inside the tower are other characters. In the background, behind the dark glass, one can see Fred and his crew like insects against the broad, round flank of the Earth. The Moon and the Sun are aligned in an inhuman light. It is a cosmic scene, a breathtaking setting for *Homo Sapiens-sapiens*. Let us slowly approach along the axis of the bridge.

Movements. Postures. She is really good-looking, full of life, perfectly at ease in space. We can easily feel that. As to the tall, bushy-haired old man with a handsome face, he is gesturing. Something is happening. We come closer and attempt interest.

“She will never go back to Earth,” states Dr. Alvin Weenie, “like most of the refugees.”

“One would think you’re pronouncing a curse,” Captain Diana answers with a questioning expression on her face.

Dr. Weenie maintains that disadaptation is irreversible. Her heart has become atrophied, and her biological rhythms are definitely altered. She wouldn’t survive more than a few days on Earth in spite of her sophisticated prostheses.

“Is she still in the interzone?”

“Yes, in the European low-orbit hospital, at the maternity ward... Well, you know...” Dr. Weenie smiles faintly. “Behavioral disorders. Records show that she remained disconnected from the flight’s web during the entire trip, can you imagine?”

“So alone and idle... She must have been sleeping a lot... Space lag?”

“Yes and no, her awareness is subdued most of the time. She lets herself be led by her own equipment. You think you’re talking to her, but in reality, you are dealing with her stimuli shield.”

“Her WHAT?”

“Her stimuli-shield. More European technology. It’s an auto-adaptive cortical implant that filters the signals coming from the environment. And maybe more... It seems that this thing automatically manages part of the interactions... We really don’t know. In fact, it’s a super stimuli-shield. Freud had already used this notion to explain the development of consciousness in contact with the world of sensations.”

He makes a mental gesture, and the web presents them with an extract of the work *Jenseits des Lustprinzips* (“Beyond the Pleasure Principle,” 1920).

We have more to say about the living vesicle with its stimulus receiving layer. This small morsel of living substance floats about in an outer world charged with the most potent energies and it would be destroyed by the operation of the stimuli if it were not provided with a protection against stimulation. It acquires this owing to the fact that its outermost layer gives up its structure pertaining to living matter, becomes to a certain extent inorganic and now, as a special integument or membrane, operates in keeping off the stimuli, that is makes it so that the energies from the outer world can now propagate themselves, with a fragment of their intensity, to the next layers which are still alive.

“And...yes, he suggests that conceptual schemes such as time and space might have their seat in the stimuli-shield...”

“Yeah, ‘suggests’ is the right word. With that thing, you never know who does the talking. It’s very disturbing. She might be completely crazy behind it.”

“I wish I knew her...” continues Captain Diana, contemplating a non-Cartesian point in the world of female friendship.

Dr. Weenie sees her eyes asking, “What?” *Is it the determined compassion of Judith beheading Holophernes?* Dr. Weenie wonders, thinking of Caravaggio’s painting. *But Diana is darker, more rustic. How beautiful! And a soldier. And I am going to the Galilean moons with her: how lucky can I get?!*

“She is not... easy to know,” he answers at last. Dr. Weenie is still troubled by meeting Janatone. Is she beautiful or is he merely fascinated by her monstrosity? For she is a monster, an abomination. How could she disregard medical monitoring? With what support?

Anyway, she is paying the price. He sees her lank limbs and her all-white skin again, her blonde face consumed by large, sulfur-colored eyes. Had he really understood what life on the moons really meant before this sidereal gaze took his breath away?

Europa! It’s a lot worse than what has been shown to the public since the refugee ships’ arrival, even worse than what can be read in the government reports. This cyborg was looking at him straight in the eyes. It was as if he were awakening to the frozen darkness on a wooden platform in a mushroom town in the far north of the world.

“This is not possible. You couldn’t stand it...”

“You have no idea of what she could stand,” says the Stimuli-Shield, with no more discretion and in its Stimuli-Shield accented speech.

It’s cold outside and the night is immense. It stretches into their very soul. Out of mimicry, Dr. Weenie starts speaking more brusquely.

“We have to ban your access to her.”

“Are you going to lock me in?” Janatone seems to ask.

“I’ll do it, if you put yourself in danger. But you are already under house arrest in this station, and there are others who want to limit your freedom.”

“What do you mean?”

“I belong to the Central Health Commission. I am well informed. I know exactly who you are, and I know that Cosmetics labs have just lodged a complaint against you for committing sabotage and divulging trade secrets. You know as well as I do that they will not settle for a legal way to neutralize you.”

Janatone sighs. And that is her, for sure: the Stimuli Shield can simply not sigh that way.

“Yes, they will: Europa’s legal way. Jenny Appleseed’s way.”

“It’s precisely this drift which is causing the problem. I am not spilling any secrets in telling you that the government has just approved the survey mission. Everything is ready. We will be leaving in two weeks. You could help us...”

“I have already given all the information with my application for asylum: the Cosmitics dictatorship, the slavery of the semi-living, genetic modification, the 80/20 biotechnical coupling experiments, the expulsion of the religious, the failed rebellion...”

“I know. I know all about it. I even know what you’ve done for the robots who have escaped slavery. But the bases are spread all over the moons of Jupiter. As planetary geologist, you know them very well.”

“No.”

Dr. Weenie takes a breath. “Listen to me carefully. This is confidential information: if our conclusions support it, we will have to overthrow Appleseed’s government and restore DEMOCRACY. This won’t be very complicated. We have the mandate and the military escort to do it.

Reforms will prove more difficult, though. We will need people who know the field. You have the perfect profile. If you want to, you can play a role in this mission...”

“Everybody knows that you are going there to seize Europa’s technology. It is more advanced than yours, and it is a threat to you. Besides, all the events are beyond your control. But I just don’t care. I want to go home.”

“I am asking you to do it, Ms. Waldenpond.”

Calmly, Janatone looks at him and says, “I said no. Are you a doctor, Mr. Weenie?”

Dr. Weenie sighs in his turn.

“Are you really a doctor?” Janatone repeats, finding the most disembodiedly impersonal tone her logical coprocessors can produce.

“Yes. A neurologist and a specialist in altered states of consciousness. I don’t have a consultation practice. I am managing a research team. I am taking these steps in the interest of the expedition...”

“Then, if your medical check is complete, I will thank you to leave me alone. Goodbye, Dr. Weenie.”

The WILL that forces Dr. Weenie to step back hits his awareness like an elemental force.

“One last question, Ms. Waldenpond. What are you going to do with the baby?”

Janatone remains very cool but makes a veiled threat, suggesting she might have hidden powers. “I don’t know. I’m telling all those who come to the maternity ward:

you can take him. I saved him from Europa, that's enough. I was able to save this one... I explained it to him."

"To take him," Dr. Weenie repeats, "this is the first time that the government has been faced with this situation. Who is taking care of this? Dr. Objegalix?"

"Yes, he is taking care of it, too." Janatone smiles.

"Technically, you're pregnant. Well, that's what the hospital says. The law does not recognize the Artificial Uterus. But I'm afraid nobody wants to take responsibility for this machine. That's what's going on. It will have to happen, though."

"And you, do *you* want to take him? It's not complicated; the A.U. knows what to do. But it will quickly go out of order if we don't get the Earth-Europa filter."

"What are you talking about?"

"The AU's electromagnetic filter has burned out on account of an Earth-Europe EMP. We've been expecting the part for days. What do you say to that? I can even tell you it has just dropped out of suspended mode..."

"Suspended mode?"

"Biostasis. Embryonic development is starting up again."

"Err... I'll see what I can do..."

\* \* \*

"This is it..."

"We could take Janatone and the baby aboard the *Lighthouse!*" Captain Diana exclaims after listening to Dr. Weenie's story. "Our flagship has everything they need." Diana is sincere. She is pretty, like springtime on Earth. Her complexion is as fresh as a satori arising between the toes, a misty March morning on the river...

Dr. Weenie is doubtful. "Janatone does not want to be helped. She has just requested a filter for her Europa-Earth uterus, and the administration has done nothing. The technology is still experimental."

"I'll see what I can do..."

"Mmm.. okay. We had better be wary of these European cyborgs. We do not know all they can do."

"Such mistrust is not like you, Dr. Weenie."

“And you? Do you trust them?”

Captain Diana says curtly: “I believe Europa is behind the crash of the cargo ships.”

“Ah, I had not thought of that. Because of Waldenpond?”

“They are coming for her. And they are on the *Estrella*.” She says “*Estrella*” as though the word is funny. “The administration will surely let her escape to Earth to avoid a fight on the station. And they’ve gotten all the information they wanted. Tell me, do we know if Janatone is the baby’s mother?”

“No, we don’t. Her file says nothing about it. They have not done the tests.”

“And you didn’t ask for them.” She smiles.

*She is greater than the logos. She is grander than grandeur. She is what she wants to be,* Dr. Weenie says to himself.

“But what can I do?” Captain Diana wonders.

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## Chapter 4: The Wrong Cable

The stimuli shield has inquired and ascertained that Janatone may go out of her room for a while. She leaves the low-orbit hospital and interzone. When she reaches the axial corridor and its force fields, she heads for the entertainment tube. The way is long and strewn with obstacles, but Janatone encounters none as she moves along in her timeless reverie.

Her stimuli shield continues to take care of the time, extent and complexity of operations, just as it had during the crossing. It is in charge of actions, expectations and workflow. It is responsible for trivial excitement and the ugliest weight of beingness. With all its machine art, it shapes the flow of stimuli to present enriched and serene perspectives to the conscious mind.

The stimuli shield is the scribe and painter of sensations, the guardian of thought, the cultivator of habits. And habit is what brings the light of awareness into the depths and somber night of nature. With what words can this nameless implant tell us about the solitude of its pseudo-mind as it watches tirelessly, one face turned toward unattainable freedom, the other contemplating the flux of will in nature, the shadowy region where thought and being meet?

\* \* \*

Janatone has arranged to meet a smuggler.

This section is out of the way, for reasons of safety. She has to take an air lock and put on a basic space suit in order to traverse the walkways that lead by elliptical paths to the proper orbit. She sees but pays no attention to the groups of unemployed pressing against the walls. The suspended living sections cannot accommodate them. They are thrifty with their gestures, because money no longer flows in their bloodless systems. To call attention to themselves, they magnify the image of their poor living quarters in the sensory web, but it transmits no sound.

Janatone neither sees nor does anything, but the stimuli shield is well programmed; the left-hand circuit knows not what the right-hand circuit gives.

Janatone has left her helmet in a locker and can float in the colorful mists that fill the place. The shield lets her drift for a long time along the roughly niched walls in the alcove section. It calls up associations for her: the sad scene is like the memory of carousels in village squares, with neon lights and varnished images. And the bumper cars! What happened one evening in May in the shadow of caravans, and its odor

and necessity. Finally she takes a seat on a magnetic mushroom next to a row of bluish portholes overlooking the Earth.

Joe Dasein is there, waiting for her. He is young, and his indicators are attractive. He doesn't smile. His and Janatone soon begin conversing over a hookah and a few Gargleblasters. The stimuli shield locks on to the environment's parameters and remains discreetly withdrawn. A stimuli shield can see and think a lot when its mistress is seated on a magnetic mushroom in the tube.

"So, you're a kind of undertaker?" Janatone asks.

"I only make turnkey sepultures for discriminating customers." Joe's eyes are blue, his speech is that of competent farmers, the kind one marries in a white gown and follows to new worlds when times are hard.

"When I went to the moons," Janatone says, "the dead were merely tossed out the airlock or recycled. There was no choice."

"But the government adapted, in order to keep the work going." Joe speaks with confidence about a past that existed before he was born. "The population exploded. The colonists' cultural makeup changed. Bodies are still ejected into space, and many are recycled, but business has grown. It has grown so much that there are hardly more than big companies anymore." Joe winces.

Janatone is silent. She watches India pass by, and the Horn of Africa enters her field of vision. A few impassive clouds float high above a purple ocean. Joe does not need to speak.

"Why are you taking this risk?" she asks.

"It's an exchange of services with our mutual friend. He told me you were on Mars, with Du Guillery."

"Yes, a long time ago," Janatone answers. "He must have told you that I am his first wife."

"My maternal grandfather was on the last expedition. He stayed with him after the events." A shadow crosses Joe's face. Janatone has somehow recalled his revulsion and the discomfort he feels in the presence of the overly prepared cadavers, and the ill, and the robots of Mars.

"But it doesn't matter," Joe continues. "You pay for your own burial, and that's that. If you're still half-alive, it's your choice. I don't like cyborgs. You're lucky."

There, that's out of the way. Janatone continues to smile. "My Europa-Earth filter is all screwed up. Can you fix it?"

“No, and I’m warning you: you won’t get any baggage through, let alone one of those damned European machines. Be ready to leave tonight; there won’t be any more chances for a long time, maybe never, if I’m forced to sell. The accident has caused a lot of confusion. Nobody may ever know how many dead there are, let alone how many insurance policies. The systems are overloaded. The time is right.”

\* \* \*

At that very moment, as Joe and Janatone are speaking, right over Ethiopia, Fred Looseman makes a short circuit by connecting a wrong cable. A dazzling spark raises the hair on his head. He lets go and floats adrift for seemingly endless seconds. He reorients himself with his emergency propulsors. His operating cost soars to 150 zouzim. The incident is registered immediately, and the OPERATIONAL RISK indicators are updated. Alarms sound in the station.

Fred drifts toward the station in an unfamiliar zone, toward the tube. He is moving too fast. He tries to slow down, but one of his two propulsors is out of fuel. A shrill BEEP makes him close his eyes. He goes into a tailspin and crashes against a misty porthole. He is stunned but sees cracks in his helmet faceplate. An ominous red light is pulsating around his shaved head.

His spacesuit speaks a warning: “I cannot make automatic repairs on glass. My mission is to protect you. You must go back inside.”

*And you keep the heat too high, too,* Fred thinks, desperately seeking a grip on the hull.

Another voice sounds: “This is Control Central. A Level-2 incident requires isolating your section. Remain calm. You are in no danger.”

Someone on another mushroom screams, “The technician out there is going to explode!”

Janatone puts her face to the porthole window. She sees the spacewalker on the other side, hanging on to a widget. Their eyes meet, and they recognize each other in a silent instant.

“Fred!” *How he’s changed!*

*I know her,* Fred thinks. Fred remembers the village but not its name.

“I’m going out there!” says Janatone, rocketing out of her seat.

But Joe hangs on to her by her ankle. “You’re crazy! You can’t do that. You’re not on Europa.”

“I know that man, Joe! And I know what happens when someone explodes. I don’t want to see it, and you don’t, either. Let go of me! You can see that help isn’t coming.”

“Don’t make a scene. Wait. My space carrier is still in this sector and has a couple of guys with it.” Joe gets busy making a call.

Janatone calls to the sensory web: “Hang on, Fred!”

“I recognize you,” says Fred. “But we should be dead! How old are we?” Memories come back to him like furtive goldfish.

Janatone wants to weep but holds back her tears. “I am Janatone — Jeanneton,” she says with a sob, firmly resisting the activation of the stimuli shield. I’m two hundred and twenty years old, and so are you! It’s the moons’ science.”

*She speaks the old language*, Fred thinks. He remembers Janneton, his cousin and neighbor, his wise counterpart with bare legs, free-flowing hair, wild laughter and a serious expression when the time came to run in the dark nights of the continent.

“I dunno,” says Fred. “A doctor from World Credit takes me to the hospital every now and then. It doesn’t cost me anything. They say I have a good insurance policy.”

The spacesuit’s support system decreases the internal air pressure to delay helmet failure. Against the ever-present blue reflection of Earth, the readouts scroll inside the golden helmet that is still protecting Fred.

\* \* \*

For Janatone, Fred was a cousin, her wise counterpart with uneasy eyes. She returns to the ever-present past and sees them running together toward the tall chestnut trees, through the warmth of the sun that shines in emerald waves through the translucent foliage of the bushes.

And how quiet the town is! Everything is motionless in the vibrant warmth that smells of melons and dog piss. Fred and Janatone share an orange sherbet in the dirty shade of an alleyway and dream of voyages. It’s a “Push-Up”; the last bit is a softened, melted cone that they will have to catch or swallow whole when it falls from its stick. Their fingers are sticky.

Beyond the walls, perhaps, in the fields, small red tractors move over a hillside. Rowboats move on the green and gold river. The boats are following a long course that is shaded by oaks and elms and may be overlooked by a wing of the castle where the good king held court. At the end of its bright ray, the summer light glistens among the three tresses of water that the Fountain of Daisies emits, gurgling over worn

stones. The old lady who is leading Janatone by the hand tells her to mind her polished shoes when crossing the water. Janatone is still a little child.

*Something is wrong with Fred*, Janatone tells herself suddenly. She looks at his technician's uniform. Why is he poor? What has become of him? *I thought he was an official in a bank or something of the sort. He's smaller. What happened? And how did he gain access to life extension?*

\* \* \*

On Earth, the Mediterranean passes into shadow: the shores of Israel, the palace of Knossos, the Cyclades. That is what she sees as real.

"I don't feel well."

"Fred! Fred!" Janatone calls. She feels that she must keep on talking to Fred lest he doze off and die "Do you have a Europa-Earth adaptor? I have one, for the baby." She seizes upon the first thing on her mind in an effort to keep Fred awake. She doesn't have a better idea.

"Uh... yes. Maybe in the workshop..." says Fred. His voice is slurred.

"I *hate* you!" hisses the spacesuit, and streams of air escape into space. "I hate God!"

*God?* Fred wonders.

"Fred?!... WAKE UP, Fred!"

Fred answers in a plain, detached tone like a sleepwalker or a shocked survivor. "Ask Sancho for the adaptor, in the workshop. Sancho Marx. Tell him I sent you..."

At that moment, the space carrier of Dasein Funerals comes into view.

But something else has just happened, very quickly, and very red.

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## Chapter 5: FFFPSHLORFF

A purple emulsion swirls in Fred's helmet and is sucked into the cracks. His face has suddenly inflated like a carnival balloon. Janatone has been looking into his eyes, but now they are large, inert globes saturated with blood. His cheeks and lips are grotesque as though he were a scarecrow with a cow's tongue. He is still gripping the widget on the hull of the space station.

The Earth is still spinning and is not going to stop. The spacesuit asks that it be relieved of the corpse. Someone cuts off the sound. Silence descends in the tube. Outside, some men come out of the shuttle.

The stimuli shield speaks to Joe Dasein. "Joe, take him, please. Janatone will pay for his funeral."

Janatone does not turn around. Life insurance? Hah! Yes, a policy was issued by TermiBank to cover the cost of replacement. The thought is not out of place; decisions have to be made, obviously. And look: the payment is already being made at this very moment on the TermiBank network.

"Offered by Dasein Funerals," Joe murmurs. A moment later, his eyes gleam. "You'll go down with him, as soon as possible." He concentrates on his figures. "In two hours, you'll inhibit all your indicators, as soon as you approach the dock. You know how to do it, right? He transmits the coordinates of the hangar.

"Yes, indicators off."

"You'll have to cross some borders," Joe continues, "in a coffin and a pressurized container. I'm sure you know that; I just want to be clear about it. Any objections?"

"No objections," the stimuli shield responds. "She's ready."



## Chapter 6: Far Away, on a Medicean Moon

### part 1

The sun is already high over the dark horizon, so far away and small that it is little more than a bright star. On the other side of this moon, Jupiter lends its color to the night, a grand sky of melted wax coiled in on itself. The managerial yurt gently turns above the fractured ice, not unlike a white sugar bun in a cotton candy vendor's pot.

In the central hall, Jenny Appleseed is about to address the Executive Committee of Cosmetics Europa. Her stimuli shield is conducting the meeting. It drives her body. It talks by her mouth. It would love to be called Millicent, but this is something no one knows.

Jenny Appleseed is the founder, the main stakeholder and the President of Cosmetics Corporation. She stands at the place of honor, for the first time in years. She is dressed simply with a spatial skin and a Cosmetics quantic, mesh-woven vulvar loincloth, without any of her usual prostheses, except, perhaps, a mysterious retractile penis. No stilts, no trunks, and no claws. No gem inclusions, nor any electromagnetic fur. No antenna. Her distracted eyes roll insanely, with no relationship to the terse speech that flows out of her mouth.

This day on the moon is an extraordinary one. Jenny Appleseed has come in person to attend the meeting of the Executive Committee. In order to validate the crisis planning session, as protocol requires, she has accepted to leave the palace where she dwells permanently with her court.

The directors are nervous; they had to come before the beginning of the ceremony, and the briefing made them feel uneasy. Now, Jenny Appleseed is here!

In the external circles, the sub-directors and the middle managers in the top hundred who have been admitted do not try to conceal their emotion. The little cyber-palotins, some of whom have never yet seen the company president, are filled with a sacred terror. They hurry to fill the room. They have brought with them their spouses, robots and their friends' avatars. Jenny Appleseed is here!

The communication assistants dart and buzz in the six directions of space, very satisfied with the keynote speaker's presentation, which is just coming to an end. They have done a good job. They are relieved not to be punished and understand that they will get credit for their work, including their most critical indicators. Some even

believe they won't be sent back to sleep or that they will get what is needed to rent a gendered-life alveolus.

The mystery Thought Leader is none other than Lord Juan de la Luna, the greatest organ designer of all time. Out of loyalty to the Cosmetics president, to whom he owes so much and for some tens of millions of zouzim, Juan de la Luna has agreed to return to Europa for the conference.

The task has been considerable. “You do not quite realize, Zezetop!” the event assistant tells the young go-fer. “The organizers have had to negotiate with the Earthling colony on Io, where the artist has been dwelling since the beginning of the crisis. They had to give mutual guarantees, charter an unclassified luxury shuttle and staff it with an elite crew capable of satisfying his long list of demands!”

The images are broadcast in a loop throughout the web; one cannot escape them. One sees the personal welcomes and then long extracts from the speech. Jenny Appleseed greets the “great artist who owes her so much.” She is escorted by her CosmiGirls: Militrissa, Red, Blue, Yellow, Winaretta and the little Glabulie.

With her natural hair and her white teeth, she looks like her legend: a stalwart, self-made girl from Earth who has succeeded beyond all she could imagine. The great designer presses his black, wet muzzle on the president's cheek for a long moment.

The pictures cannot show the vivid signals that the MUQOMM-56 mucosa is transmitting upon contact with the handsome president's smart skin, especially since Juan is still keeping this industrial secret to himself. Is he only doing all this out of fidelity to the early days, when he was still working with her?

Jenny’s cheekbones turn pink when he tells her by one nostril, “Let's get the hell outta here, Jenny, now, with me. [Untranslatable mix of enriched stereospecific markers: vital danger love bull black glowing space arena dust, heavily loaded urine, we rush, charge, smash, small debris scorches defense, raining stars lysergic acid winds. Here is some you-me” ?]”

She strokes his ear with a perfunctory gesture. They know each other so intimately. Why such coldness, then? The image freezes. Nothing, neither war nor Jenny's strayed eyes can stop this snapshot from being broadcast all around the Solar System!

Afterwards, a small, bald humanoid comes in turn to hug the bio-stylist. That's the COO, keen to congratulate De la Luna for his speech. He is a great thinker of management, he says, and what a rapture to hear him. With what depth of thought and simplicity he talks about his trade! Such a universal reach he gives to his thoughts! And such generosity in aligning them with the development objectives, both his own and the company's!

While they all congratulate themselves, superposed presentation extracts come to the fore and occupy the picture in depth.

[Thought leadership sequence begins.]

Here is Juan de la Luna in a close-up. In his laboratory, spherical dogs and cats are conceived for weightlessness and are evolving. They propel themselves by neutrally olfactory farts.

And here is Juan de la Luna! A humble smile unveils the immaculate enamel of his human teeth. His curled muzzle evokes a very sympathetic *toon*; frequent eyebrow flashes emit long compassion waves from his immense eye. Creamy, synthetic coats of music pour down on the scene.

He speaks, and his words are addressed to all, thanks to the multi-grade translation. He tells how he has conducted the study of the detached intestine, and then of the collective intestine. He can do this now that everyone has forgotten the dreadful Martian episode.

He makes gestures to show how a vision came to him by dint of contemplation and perception. He mimics the discovery of the a-gastric belly lines and the design of the new body freed from the human digestive system. He mimics the curve of the breasts, the contour of the sucker foot. He brings forth a hologram displaying the constraints with which he has to deal: economic constraints, but also mechanical, biological, aesthetic ones.

He *accepts* this system; he takes ownership of it. And this is the key to his success. One can see him as he confidently enters the hologram. One can also see him thinking in a greenhouse in Io's best resort. One can see him drawing by hand in his library, like Leonardo da Vinci. One can see him inside the hologram, approaching a solution.

How does he do it? It is simple: he only looks at the positive side of things. The camera-palotin gets a little closer, and Juan de la Luna delivers to him the lessons of his experience. He says, "Connect to a positive vision. Concentrate on opportunities, not on scarcity. *Believe* that solutions exist."

The translation generously carries his speech across the web. Everyone can hear him, even those who have no ears, from the accounting controller to the most elementary maintenance palotin. The great designer's wisdom is deep, simple and truly universal in scope. He can make each individual being, at last, fully aware of his achievements.

Amazed, ecstatic, he talks about his videoconferences with the aborigines on Earth's reservations. What is this one thinking about when he carves his penis sheath so gracefully? And that one, who is painting a canvas so meticulously?

Without ever having heard of the great philosopher Gilbert Montaigne, these savages answered, “When I knit, I knit,” or “When I paint, I paint.”

One does not want to believe that these lines appear in any handbook for reservation staff nor that these handsomely paid indigenous people may want to get rid of the intruder. What a revelation, then! What an excuse it would be for an accounting comptroller performing an audit. And what a solace it would be for the corner-sweeping specialist: “When I sweep, I sweep.”

What else is he doing? Here is the only thought his circuits could decode: *It is made for him, and see how good it is!* Juan de la Luna smiles; this wisdom is his offering to the world.

[Thought leadership sequence ends.]

The meeting has begun. The crowd has dispatched itself to the various productive entertainment workshops included in the program. The members of the Exec Committee are listening in silence to the stimuli shield. It's officially the president who is addressing them, but they know very well that the implant alone is animating her body.

Meanwhile, Jenny is concentrating on coming into contact with the point in space and time that is holding them together. She is having a hard time reaching it. The process is getting more and more difficult because her attention to life is not the same anymore. Commerce with human beings exacts such a large effort of accommodation from her that she cannot deal with others without the help of auxiliary systems.

The CosmiGirls are surfing the fringes of expanded awareness. They claim that Jenny's ways are not human ways anymore. Legend has it that her soul escaped once, when she was a child, about two hundred and twenty years ago, under a plane tree, during recreation time.

Jenny contemplated whatever it was she was contemplating, and then she came back. The process may not have had any true duration. Upon returning to play with the other children, Jenny knew the incomplete and contingent nature of her incarnation. From that day on, she has refused death. She would eternally grow up in beauty and freedom, whatever that may mean.

One nice summer evening she thought, *Go for yourself*. As a child, she took her blue motorbike and left her country, her kindred and her father's house.

She had a mechanical breakdown before reaching the highway and had to unclog the carburetor by blowing heavily into the pipe in order to expel the impurities of the mixture. She remembers the taste of gas and the fragrance of pine trees conversing

with angels under the tent of the sky. They were angels of resin and tar, angels of sand and leprechauns.

She remembers the feathers, the road, and the constellations in the cold night. She remembers everything so well that the whole place often serves as a theater to her thoughts.

Today, she is the most beautiful woman in the Solar System and the most powerful, too. She has made the Cosmetics group the greatest commercial venture in history. She invented the two-zouzim beauty graft and bio-management as it is taught in business schools.

She possesses immense personal riches: billions of billions in financial assets and millions of acres of land on Earth. She founded the Academy of Europa, famous for its works of neo-Platonic inspiration. Some of the best minds are initiated to the advanced labs' mysteries, the secret of which is kept with quasi-religious care.

She commands her ancillary bodies, she commands her multitudinous personnel as well as the Jupiter moons' puppet prefectures. But her orders have been obscure for a long time now; they don't lend themselves to reading. Jenny's will manifests itself only to the stimuli shield and sometimes to the girls, when her awareness is full.

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## Chapter 6: Far Away, on a Medicean Moon

### part 2

“This is essentially what the vice-president told us,” the stimuli shield says. “The next Earth governance control will be carried out by soldiers. In truth, this is an invasion. Everything is already decided. The moons will be placed under trusteeship and companies will be audited.”

“Audited?” breaks in Schtroumpf, the faithful Chief Operating and Organic Resources Officer. “No, the army will take control, period. Our technologies will be looted by Earth consortia with the blessing of the central government and our competitors! The government has changed; we have lost many valuable supporters.” He carries on in the tone of one who sees blame accumulating.

“But why have things come to this point?” The one who asks is Stuart Surof, the director of Strategy and Financial Innovation. He is a young, pink-skinned man. His face bears the mark of the most refined efficiency. But he used to be the Financial Director before he was sidelined.

*How can he still be asking questions when he does not direct anything anymore?* the stimuli shield thinks to itself, sensitive as it is to behavioral anomalies.

Group finances are now in the sole hands of Cosmetics head management. The money has likewise been in their control since the moons' Central Bank shutdown.

It is suspicious that Jay Beeh has maintained him in a senior management position. And the man becomes defiant as soon as hyper-management gets loose; he is almost negative. There's something wrong with him, but what? Performance reviews are consistently strong. Conformance test results are fully satisfactory.

“Janatone Waldenpond is alive,” the stimuli shield answers at last.

At these words, Jenny's eyes stop rolling as if a surge of awareness made her suddenly return to the present.

“She has just been granted asylum on the *Super Estrella*. She has already divulged lots of classified information, and our complaint won't change anything. It's exactly what they've been waiting for.”

“But who is this Waldenpond?” asks Jean-Borg, the Executive Committee Director for Europa. JB — Jay Beeh — he *must* know.

[Career path sequence begins.]

Jean-Borg Borguignon, 125 years of age, of which 58 have been spent on Earth. Graduate Maginot class of the Paris Patatechnique School. Alumnus of the Jupiter Space Administration School. Holder by implant of a neural HMBA in Financial Security from New Pavonis Mons. Superior optimization school and program officer in the federal army.

JB Borguignon is recognized as an assertive transition bio-management specialist. Prior to taking the position of Cosmetics Space COO, his recent career highlights included the positions of COO for Quantix Pleasures, five hundred tera-billions zouzim revenue, and of Vice-President in charge of unsupervised innovations at Pacific Nutriments

[Career path sequence ends.]

“A rebel,” Schtroumpf answers. “She ran away during the second reorganization to join the rebel slave robots. The palace informs us that she may have retained a classified Artificial Uterus. This is serious.”

Jay Beeh is annoyed. “How come I haven't heard anything about it before now?”

“The alert was processed with the right priority level for a change management phase. Security forces counted her among the dead in the Wenceslas asteroid attack of 2525. I don't know how she managed to tweak her firmware and cover her disappearance. But remember: she is an elite CosmiGirl. She was part of Jenny's close-knit team... This was an obvious operational risk.”

Brigitte Kaliyuga, the Scientific Director, speaks up for the first time. “Did she have a genomic participation in the A.U.?”

“This A.U. is classified by the Presidency's laboratories!” Millicent adds.

A brief silence falls. Schtroumpf announces that the Fifth Fleet is performing orbital maneuvers around Mars. “The observations transmitted by the intelligence services make it clear: the time has been chosen to enter the Earth's gravitational field and catapult the vessels to Jupiter. The Executive Committee can be sure the army will land within five years.”

Jenny is getting closer. She settles down in the conversation and in the memory of the present that Millicent transmits to her. She is now thinking in the moment. She says to herself that she certainly doesn't think like Brigitte nor like the cute Captain Diana who, according to the available information, will certainly be entrusted with commanding the expedition. Jenny is struck by the thought that Captain Diana may not even think at all, in spite of her cleverness and outstanding record.



In quasi-real time Jenny responds to the internal messages she has been receiving from Millicent, her stimuli shield. Only part of Jenny's messages are transcribed, but the implant knows more or less what to do. The device improvises; she is auto-learning. It has to be done.

“Jay Beeh, in two minutes we are switching to hyper-management. You will present the quantified scenarios with the plan.”

At last Jenny sees the Executive Committee unfolding in her presence. She sees it in its extension. How difficult the maneuver is! She sees it now with the gaze of the sailor who distinguishes at length the houses at the harbor. His imagination, still wide open, returns to the abode where his loved ones are dwelling with all their embroidered sheets, lavender seeds and holy pictures.

Small Leopold Schtroumpf, raised and redesigned according to Cosmetics standards, still exhibits a servile demeanor alloyed with contained violence. How could such a soul make his way to extended life?

Elegant Stuart Surof and his postures... *He knows too much.* Sweet Brigitte Kaliyuga with long, black hair, so neat, so brilliant, so apt to domesticate the cosmos... *Why did she refuse to join the CosmiGirls?* They are waiting, they are confusedly fearing her hubris.

But Jenny is not like them. She does not need them anymore. She is the freest and most accomplished creature in the known world. Maybe the greatest organizing force circling around this star. Maybe even more than this one...

“Here is Jenny Appleseed,” Millicent shouts, throwing back Jenny's hair, “founder and President of Cosmetics Corporation. Eight hundred petabillion zouzim revenue and three hundred terabillion zouzim profit for the past fiscal year in real value after taxes. Hyper-Management! One Cosmetics!” The decision beat starts pulsing in the yurt. Everyone can feel it in his plexus. The cyber-palotins on duty step back as if repelled by the directorial energy.

They are waiting. Suddenly, Jenny is here. If she is speaking Millicent's text, she is doing so with her real voice now, and nobody doubts her presence.

“The group's strategy does not change: cross interstellar space to settle around the nearest stars and continue our development. Jean Borg's crisis plan consists essentially in simplifying and speeding up the implementation of this strategy. It's an elegant and ambitious plan. Jean Borg has my full confidence. He will now present you with the PLANS TO GOAL.”

Jean Borg takes the floor, leaning over the table to stress the strength of his will. “I want all the projects to be completed in eight years. Six ships, six expeditions.” He

falls silent and allows the acknowledgements of submission to be collected in the sensory web. Meanwhile, Jenny has sat down and remains calm and collected.

“Captain Diana will not chase us,” Jean Borg continues. “Her objective is to take over Europa. All our sites will be destroyed. Our operations on Phobos will become Cosmitics Solar System, a single production entity without any real Research and Development. Cosmitics Finance will exist only in the marketplace. And we shall take away the gold reserves.”

“Right, right, right... This is the right analysis,” comes the reply.

Jay Beeh beckons to Schtroumpf. The PLANS TO GOAL presentation begins in the managerial yurt’s intercortical space, immersing the Executive Committee members in giant diagrams and flashboards. Their proposed actions spring from their bodies like roots.

“As you know,” Schtroumpf says, “the programs have the following infrastructures in common: nuclear propulsion and solar sails, climate and life-support systems, controlled hydroponic biodiversity, protoplasm trays, distributed auto-adaptive computing, and a gene bank, to mention only the main equipment.”

Platforms as large as moons enter in majesty into the enriched field of vision, all covered with deep forests of masts, from the height of their excavated mountains down to the hollow of their gorges. They whirl and offer themselves in colorful sections.

“These elements are all produced, assembled and tested. They can be put into service now.”

“Objection,” Kaliyuga breaks in, addressing Jenny directly. “You say nothing of WARP technology development or relativistic arithmetic.”

The decision-beat slows down. All eyes turn to the President.

“All right, let's talk about it,” grants Millicent. The disputation mode is activated, scoreboards begin popping up.

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## Chapter 6: Far Away, on a Medicean Moon

### part 3

Schtroumpf is the first to answer. “The tests will soon be suspended in order to focus resources on program finalization. However, all platforms shall be equipped with all the necessary systems to continue research. Only experiments requiring high energy levels will be postponed—”

“Objection,” Kaliyuga interjects again, smiling with all her bright smile. The decision-beat accelerates in a minor mode. “I know the constraints fairly well. But you are telling us, aren’t you, that we are to undertake a hundred years’ journey — if we achieve the scheduled speeds — with reduced research.

“We are just now beginning to exploit vacuum fluctuations and have almost succeeded in modeling the operation of a space-time bubble. And I am not talking about our first destination. Nothing tells us that that we can easily settle at Proxima.”

“Stop,” Jay Beeh says sharply. “I want us to leave within five standard years. The progress you claim is little more than thought experiments. Don’t try to make us believe otherwise. WARP models are facing fundamental theoretical problems with the wave packet. Anyway, Earth will not be capable of sending an expedition to another star before we do. Light platforms will make the trip in less than two centuries.”

“Good, good, good...”

Frail Brigitte Kaliyuga interrupts the ritual. “The passengers on those ships won’t be human.” She speaks in a determined voice in spite of the decision beat’s pulsation. She ignores the Executive Director and looks Jenny straight in the eye, without flinching. Great is her psychic power.

Jenny-Millicent is staring at Brigitte, too, and is quite surprised. Everyone holds his breath. The cyber-palotins shiver. The power of the President is theoretically unlimited. For one thing, it is why she is entitled to gendered life. She can fire Kaliyuga, she can suspend her, dismiss her, punish her, vaporize her. She may also take the challenge and prove herself an exception to the rule.

But Jenny’s mind is ebbing. She is no longer able to focus. The analysts know that power drains from her a little more every day. Millicent tries to hold on to this

vanishing consciousness. She feels in her scoreboards all that the real scenery loses in weight as Jenny's awareness dims.

*It's gonna be all right... Just say something.* That is, in its transcoded form, the signal that Jenny sends from beyond the ineffable horizon beyond which she is disappearing.

“We will keep control remotely, with the spatial protocol,” Millicent answers at last to Kaliyuga.

Jay Beeh activates the performance report and adds bluntly, “As for me, I suspend you for RESISTANCE TO CHANGE! You'll take an appointment for an interview with the Director of Performance. Now you can leave.”

A wave of emotion runs through the audience. They all know what is awaiting sweet Brigitte if her case is transferred to the Department of Organic Resources. She rises, upright in a cascade of hair and leaves the room without a word.

Millicent remains speechless. Schtroumpf continues the presentation. He is a small bosun eager to command proud ships. With no soul on the decks and no sail in the sky, could they not turn their stern on him and fly away by themselves on the violet ether by themselves and without any notice?

\* \* \*

One sees the SLUMBER PROGRAM with its risk profiles and corresponding financial instruments. In the ship, duration is abolished. The machines are the tomb of time and mind. They stay the course and maintain vegetative functions.

Nervous systems are modified to accommodate a minimum motor ability. Consciousness is contained. Humans live in a permanent dream guided by bio-control and porn-beat. During the choppiest phases, comparable to REM-sleep phases, they speak the lost language of desire, they love without knowing and breed in a hallucination, assisted by the genes manager.

The evanescent chimeras they birth in this state are never recorded. They are made up of the sands of reminiscence or even of web-provided material. In this cave, in the future, a hero erects himself on an elbow from time to time. He catches a glimpse of his gesture throughout the destinies, the memories of love and war. He outlines a romance, a city. He designs the power that he lacks and then quickly goes back to sleep... The trip lasts and does not last. Lo! They have arrived!

\* \* \*

One sees the ANT PROGRAM with its risk profiles and corresponding financial instruments. Passengers are reprogrammed not to be conscious of the void.

Their artificial instincts enable them to repeat the tasks which maintain them as a species. They play sports; they do not amble naked, nor are they mute, for the designers have elaborated a minimal dressing, a minimal style for the form, similar to the painted shells of antique metal toys.

The machines are in complete control of their evolution. They contain it in the same forms. Men go about like insects within a world of galleries. It is an impasse for vital impetus. Consciousness is canceled. But, upon arrival, the waking program will go and fetch it, wherever it is. Everything is planned.

The broadcasting rights have been securitized. The markets have responded with enthusiasm. Earth investors are putting money into it *en masse*. They are talking about it over a half-cleared table while the cheeses are still exposed and the black crystal sediment at the bottom of their wineglasses greets Sunday's light with a gloomy welcome.

\* \* \*

One sees the SPORES PROGRAM with its risk profiles and corresponding financial instruments. The machines make the crossing alone. Similar to seeds, light vessels carry human and modified-human genes. The program ensures the continuity of Cosmitics and adapts to new worlds.

The design is very vivid and gay. Very springlike. The artist has captured the pollens and chestnuts flying about in the air of May. But more darkened shades gradually mingle with the scenery without really diminishing its buoyancy. This is man's winter, but life and financial activity shall resume.

The response of the markets has been excellent. The investors of Earth are pooling their money *en masse*. They feel that they will never be able to finish their meal and that there will always remain a surplus, an *accursed share*...

\* \* \*

One sees the VIRUS PROGRAM with its risk profiles and corresponding financial instruments. Simple ultra-accelerated laboratory probes. At the end of the journey they shall recreate life and shape it in the image of man and in the image of modified man. The program will ensure Cosmitics' continuity.

The response of the markets has been excellent. Earth investors are providing money *en masse*. Some are taking a nap now. Others go hunting.

\* \* \*

One sees the GOSPEL SHIP at a glance. Its financial instruments are not yet available. It's the platform that the religious refugees from the moon Amalthea have traded for part of the nuclear warheads controlled by Europa's last Christian church.

All the cults shall be gathered for the journey. There are few images: long flat arches, naves filled with golden shadows, mysteries hardly contained by dazzling vaults. A ceiling of fractal lace endlessly calculates an asymptotic approach to its limit. A virtual sky opens on infinity. Letters of black fire tremble at the heart of an incandescent plasma.

Earth investors ask their brokers for the fact sheet. One never knows. One mustn't let the money sit idly in the bank...

\* \* \*

“And how about the Earth destruction option?” asks Schtroumpf, turning to Jenny. But the stimuli-shield remains silent. Jenny's attention seems to have evaporated.

Sometimes, at his wooden desk, a schoolboy lets his mind explore the continents formed by sycamore bark, even when the strict master calls his name in the silent class. Thus does Jenny lose sight of human shores. Journeying towards distant spheres, she sees pure time and fecund potentialities.

I pray to you all, o Muses, and to you, too, divine Virgil.  
Reveal to the manager these formidable fleets, these heroes  
whose ardor has cast out of the world, the ordeals that the  
fates have placed in their way, and unfurl with her the  
immense tapestry of the conquest of space.

It's a hair salon. Old ladies, very quiet, seem to be reading magazines under their bulging helmets. But they are not ladies. Lo! They are turning! Oh God, what happened to us!

Farther away we find life again, intelligence, a thing yearning for freedom, alone, alone. But something has gone wrong. Something has happened. It is lost. It is a transformed biomass, fragmented, trans-differentiated. Perhaps it is made up of multiple entities. Perhaps it is such that no other form can imagine it. Perhaps it is a foam devoid of color, for want of eyes.

This intelligence lies sovereign and isolated in incommensurable expanses of space within the scope of language, but there is a bias in this representation. It stands isolated in the VACUUM because there is no matter in the interstellar void, only a secret one hidden from knowledge.

Perhaps matter cannot exist without spirit... Poor, poor existence. It has only the spacecraft's miniature techno-nature and the archives of Earth. So does the life form,

the vital momentum, the thing, run through stored information such as books, films, video footage.

There is not much, finally, in the trace of *sapiens-sapiens* ape's activity over these few millions of terrestrial orbits. Its neural networks try to isolate structures to make sense. It makes dead languages resound. It analyzes contents. It mines data for lost meanings. Perplexed, it visits works of art and history. It asks questions and then withdraws into itself to hear the answers.

The networks set up talk shows, which do not amuse them. What can be the meaning of “Seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night...?” It gives the floor to the narrator of *In search of lost time*, and then, moved by some kind of awe, it does not deactivate him. “Him”? Were there only two genders then?

Thus the narrator's avatar embroiders endlessly, for millennia of the clock time. The neural networks are weaving his text. Other neural networks automatically generate music that the thing transmits to still other neural networks for them to decide whether it is beautiful... This is the best it can offer to those it shall meet some day.

But what will the others think of it? How can it know? The intelligence endlessly raises questions. It performs exegesis. Maybe it is looking for hope. Maybe it will find love. Maybe it will found a city.

“No! This is wrong!” Jenny thinks. “All is wrong! Space does not exist. What a pity, what a waste. They will never create anything but a dead form, my old, drifting carapace. They are heading to something worse than death. But all this is necessary. All this must go by the ways of this world again.”

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## Chapter 7: Sancho

Fred or, rather, Fred's avatar, goes to the sensory web of Honest John Orbital Hospital. He has to pass through several police firewall checkpoints. YES, he is entitled to detached existence. YES, his yearly fee has been duly paid by Ms. Waldenpond. NO, he does not know where she is at the moment, everything is in order.

His friend Sancho Marx has had to take a day off and spend all his monthly carbon credit on the round-trip fare. He was short 2.2 kilos, which he had to borrow.

They meet in front of Janatone's cell. The alveolus door greets them and reminds them of its missions as a door. Anyone who could not see the markers of enhanced reality, a single person would be standing at the entrance: a stocky, coarse-looking man in a faded technician's suit and the scruffy curls of his grey hair. He is swinging his broad arched shoulders, waiting for the introduction to end.

"We have been waiting for you," the door finally says.

"Come in." The AU's voice is inside the room. "And please don't mind if I'm still in the closet."

In stylized form, Fred enters the room, while Sancho follows as best he can in the real world. Fred asks for Ms. Waldenpond.

"She is not here. She won't come back."

"Ah... Where are you?"

"Here, in the real closet. I am the hairdryer, officially, for the Web."

Sancho opens the door and discovers a pseudo-handwritten note pasted on a sort of thick backpack covered with electronic controls.

Dear friends,

I must return. I entrust the baby to you. Thanks for watching over him as long as needed. I'm leaving all the money I still have in Fred's account. The AU knows what to do. Farewell kisses.

Janatone

P.S. You can ask Dr. Alvin Weenie for help (real).

“Do you have the filter?” the bag asks.

“I asked my colleague Sancho to bring it, as agreed. Is it for you? But where is the child?” Fred asks, unable to worry.

“Could you please plug in the filter, Mr. Sancho? Thanks. I am the baby. I am a Cosmetics GestaConfort Artificial Uterus version 9.3 Beta, and I am in charge of the embryonic development of a blastocyst which is to become a beautiful embryo within a few days. You are my new referent.”

The door pipes up. “I am an ancillary electronic alveolar S-Quick door. My mission is to ensure that entrances and exits are secure, polite and unimpeded. Shall I close?”

“Err. I don’t know...” Fred answers.

“You’ll have to help us again, Mr. Looseman,” the AU says. “I got out of suspended mode because of micro cuts. The child is developing, and I don’t have any more baby jars.”

“Baby jars?”

“Baby jars?!?” Sancho asks.

“What are baby jars, anyway?” the door inquires.

“Cosmetics GestaComfort baby jars, if possible. Otherwise, milk and mini-digest standard protein tubes. Or Mother Goose sugared high-vitamin fat. It works, but you can’t call customer support if there’s a problem.”

“Milk... and fruit-vegetable tubes, then,” Fred says.

“Yes, that’s it.”

But Sancho does not feel like running errands. “Just a minute, I don’t have time. I have to go back to work in two hours... I’m okay with doing you a favor, but I don’t want to lose my job.” His tone is that of one who thinks that all that stuff is good for rich people who can afford a sex life and children.

The AU breaks the ensuing silence: “Mr. Fred?”

“Yes?”

“I would like to know if you have a strategy. With regard to us, I mean...”

“Err. Janatone... maybe...”

“The strategy formulated by Janatone on Europa had a code name: ‘Let’s get the hell outta Dodge’. But I understand you need to execute a few additional predictive models in order to update it. You’ll surely tell us about it when you return.”

“I’ll make sure my services are aligned to your strategy, Mr. Fred,” the door adds.

“As for me, I’m good to help, but there’s nothing I can do before trash day,” says Sancho.

“And I’m just a...” the avatar starts to say. But a change occurs in the part of his neural network that is in charge of pondering the situation: everybody in the room is an artifact. “I’m just an underperformer! I can order baby jars!”

Fred makes an inventory of his resources. His creator bequeathed to him his profile and his recordings. He has a standard monad personality with unrestricted auto-learning capacity and access to mutualized intellectual energy. His bank balance is positive and he has four friends...

“I’ll see what I can do...”

But who goes there? It is Captain Diana, she of the white shoulders. She has decided to pay an impromptu visit to Janatone. She comes dashing into the corridor, as if carried by the shimmering cloud of her nano-escorts. Her black hair is loosened over the collar of her official red and gold sari. Her buskins made of genuine Earth leather closely fit her long legs.

Even the excesses of her form express the beauty of the principles governing her body: her round hips, her high cheekbones and strong jaw lines. She laughs with all her teeth. She has a word for everybody and a light, compassionate touch for objects. Her silver indicators propagate themselves swiftly into the immediate web and eclipse all other objects. Medical staff and ambulatory patients crowd around her in great confusion. And here she is.

“Welcome, Captain Diana!” says the door.

“Hello, machines. Hello, Mr. Technician. Do you know where Janatone Waldenpond is?” Diana asks as she comes into the empty cabin. “I am bringing the Europa-Earth filter we have manufactured in our workshops.”

“Hi there!” trumpets the filter.

“Mmbgh...” echoes Sancho’s filter, who hasn’t manifested itself yet.

From its shelf, the AU gives her the answer. “She’s gone...”

“Ah. The indicators are telling she is here, however.”

“I wouldn’t know about that.”

“She spoke of Earth,” the door breaks in.

“Earth... I, too, was born on Earth,” says Diana with a dreamy tone.

“You are lucky, Madam.”

Captain Diana looks at the door. It’s good to feel like a door when someone looks at you the way she does.

At last the AU introduces himself and transmits his data. Captain Diana talks at length with him, after thanking Fred and Sancho for their dedication. She promises to follow up on his case and to come back quickly. She will find baby jars. She will arrange for him to come onboard the *Lighthouse*, where the baby can be born and receive an education.

And arrangements will be made, although they may not be quite human. Nano-agents have scanned the embryo. and the *Lighthouse* genomic analyzer has just sent her the results: there are nine percent additional genes.

“Ah, you know,” the AU says, “I can’t explain it, but I know these genes affect only the central nervous system, nothing monstrous.”

“And who are the parents?” Diana asks a crucial question in a casual tone.

“Mss. Waldenpond and Appleseed are the genitors, up to fifty percent of the human sequences each.”

“And the other genes?”

“Engineering. Technology from the Presidential research labs. The information is classified, and that’s all I know, Captain.”

“I’ll talk to the hospital management.”

She leaves, followed by all the staff. On her way, she summons Colonel’s Cnut\_iii on the government’s encrypted web. He is a young Earthling from the intelligence department, a person of irreproachable appearance, composed, concise, intense. He is smiling. He speaks too fast, but Diana does not even want to notice. All around her, alerts have taken clear hues and the diagrams are more distinct.

The colonel listens to her report. He calls General Meseglises on high priority. The general listens to the colonel’s report. They convene an emergency meeting. Captain

Diana will be kept informed of the recent conclusions of the CTF, the Cosmological Task Force.

\* \* \*

“I don’t like it,” repeats Sancho, shaking his head obstinately. “I don’t like it!” Talking incoherently to nobody, he keeps asking why the device gave the captain so much information. He keeps muttering, “You’re asking for trouble!”

At that moment, doctors show up at the entrance. The door starts closing; then it stops and opens wide.

“It’s in here,” the first doctor says as he enters. “Ah, someone has found the missing contraption at last.”

They come closer, they bend down over the device with gestures of annoyance. “Okay, let’s examine it in the lab,” says the second physician. Then, calling to Sancho: “You there, take that thing to the twentieth level, if you please.”

“I—”

“Dr. Benway’s office.”

They go out.

The AU. starts begging at once: “I mustn’t go to the lab, Mr. Looseman! I mustn’t go to the lab! I mustn’t be manipulated by non-European tools. *DO* something!”

“I’m thinking...”

“Hurry!”

Sancho has elected not to think. “I told you so. We’re in trouble. As for me, I’m out of here! I have a corrective action plan to worry about. I don’t want anybody checking my sub-indicators.”

“No, wait,” says Fred’s avatar. “The AU is right. We’d better hide it until further notice. Sancho, you have to get it out of here.”

“Get me out of here!” cries the AU.

“Are you nuts?” says Sancho. “No way.”

Fred tells him they must help Janatone. Fred Looseman, in his human form, has made a promise. To fail to keep his word would entail a permanent degradation of his auto-notation.

“Like I give a damn! I only have bad grades.”

“You were right, Mr. Sancho,” the AU adds. “I’ve just executed a predictive model taking into account the latest developments of the conflict. The conclusion is obvious: we have to avoid contact with the military. There is a strong correlation between the captain’s visit and the lab; the figures are clear about that.”

“No kidding!”

“Janatone has entrusted us with the child.”

Sancho hesitates. “All right. I’ll take it and stash it in the storeroom. But that’s all. After that, you can get your own ass out of the fire.”

“At the worksite?” Fred’s decision engine grinds away. “Err... Okay.”

“Be careful,” says the door. “The local police have just gotten the news about Captain Diana’s visit. Alerts are being broadcast in the external infrastructures. Get a move on.”

“Always late...” grumbles Sancho. He shoulders the AU and gets out of the hospital sector unchallenged. A short while later, he hides it in the storeroom with the surreptitious help of some hardware.

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Part I

**Chapter 8: I Am the Passenger**

**part 1**

Every body perseveres in its state of rest or of uniform motion in a right line, unless it is compelled to change that state by forces impressed thereon. — Isaac Newton, *The Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*, 1759.

As a stowaway in Dasein's Funeral's pressurized container sliding down the space-elevator cable, Janatone feels an almost uniformly dull movement, but it is not yet the sensation of descent she has been expecting.

This is what Janatone thinks and remembers, suspended between the earth and sky:

I am strapped in this padded coffin, I can't see anything but its label in the immediate web: model B4Death, 71% authentic pine, classic finish, total connectivity. I feel the smell of freshly worked wood, more bitter than the hours in the plant that has produced it and the minute slithering of the silky cloth at my fingertips. I know it would be white if light could break in here. I know mainly that the day of my return has come.

She is still alive then; she exists. By her thought also the planet Earth exists, as well as the ropes hanging from space into its atmosphere. They are similar to the rootlets of a delicate aquatic plant hidden from sight. By her thought also, the ratios of mass and distance exist, the infinitesimal signature of gravity that has curved the flight of silent birds in the sky of her slumber.

Yes, she is still alive, the gods are watching over her, and the cables are holding tight. She has been hibernating for only ten hours or so, hidden in the sarcophagus descending towards Earth in the elevator container. But what is the plan? Where is she going to land, and what will happen after she passes through Customs?

Dingman, the Dasein Funerals employee escorting the funeral transfer, is awkwardly installed on a jump seat. He is asking himself pretty much the same questions. He is a small man with greasy skin and thick hair. His basic space suit is is rumped around his buttocks. He kneads his hairy hands and listens to the acolyte facing him.



The acolyte is a strange man with large blond curls haloing his forehead. He is exaggeratedly handsome; blind eyes lend his smile a bestial stare. He is holding a stick topped with a bowl of hydroponic ivy: the earth-worshiper's thyrsus.

*A damned Martian freak, Dingman thinks. A degenerate cyborg. How can they be allowed to descend after all that has happened? Of course, these creatures do pay, like everybody else... But humans have a very short memory.*

In a different complication of orbital movement, things have begun to go awry. The pressurized cabin conveying the runaway and the dead technician has been rerouted in emergency mode to the geostationary cable hub above Darwin, in the Galapagos.

The reason is that the general flight plan has been reconfigured to absorb the peaks in traffic caused by the attacks on the Moon. Dasein's Funerals' logistical systems have had to revise their priorities and routes. They have also had to accept requisitions by sheer enforcement of spatial procedures, without any human intervention. That is why another passenger is riding in the cabin.

Dingman is a pilot, and it is an understatement to say that he can't stand elevator rides. The very idea of moving oneself vertically on a thread like a parcel is odious to him. *It really is the end of all navigators on this planet*, he says to himself. *And now this psycho who never shuts up!*

"Yes my master was of human descent," says the thing. "I remember that his grandparents were still sending him chocolates from his country for Earth's New Year, before independence. He could metabolize them, even the ones with big black cherries. How happy he was then!

"I am an old robot, Mister Dingman." The employee's indicators are visible on his suit and in the immediate web. "Yes, a robot, let's not mince words. I have seen many things and the mesh of our time is quite tight; as the poet says, 'It's platinum thread, no Moirai shall cut it.' My master's mates are programmed in the core of their system to honor the earth. It's a gratification for me to bury them, a great day for my indicators, Mister Dingman. A great day..."

"I understand..." The obscene picture of the black cherry persists in the immediate web. *Did Customs check to see if his weapons have been deactivated?* the human thinks. *These things are always heavily armed.*

"And the cyber page Akim 12, whom I am escorting, is not switched off, do you hear me? He shall remain operational on Mother Earth long after the celebrations, while we, the other robots, we go to the mountain..." His pupil shines and turns oval as he utters these words.

“Which—” Dingman bites his tongue. This mountain idea is stupid, but it is even more stupid to try to correct the robot.

“Which mountain, Mister Dingman? Well, I don’t know: ‘The Mountain’ of which your ancients spoke, and they are also ours. Ah... Charles Trenet!” He hums: “*Mes jeunes années / courent dans la montaaagne*. The web translates: “‘My young years / are running to the mounnnntain.’”

Dingman cannot believe his ears. He looks down.

“But summits we shall find, we have money. We shall also find the lush grass of the valleys, the shadow of the forests, the black turbo-snowboard runs. We shall throw our heads backwards in the air humid with dew; we shall dance, then we will drop to the ground amid the rumbling sound of our ghetto blasters.

“We shall analyze beasts’ blood — no, not human blood, Mister Dingman, the ethical restraint is installed in our brains, as you well know — and we shall crown ourselves with things that grow. We shall compute the secret numbers of life and we shall sing them until they implement themselves in us. ‘Shall not Loveliness be loved forever?’”

“Yes...”

“We shall *live*, Mister Dingman and, one day, Mars shall live with the same life as Earth. While brother Akim lies in his cemetery, he shall be watching, in communion with the chthonian powers until his batteries give out after ten million Earth revolutions. Then he shall enter the kingdom of the dead, with all the others, the most numerous. We have studied. The earth is our common mother, Mister Dingman.”

“Certainly...”

They are silent for a moment. The acolyte remains absolutely inert, absorbed in his internal processes until an awkward jolt animates him again.

“So you are the boss, uh? The boss. That’s good...”

*Here it goes again*, Dingman thinks.

“No.”

“You’ll be able to help us in checking the content of the coffins.”

“Verify? Excuse me? Us?” He has involuntarily brought his square hands back at the height of his thighs.

“A high-priority program is pre-empting us, Mister Dingman. The good friends who are offering us this pilgrimage are seeking a terrorist who may be here. A dangerous terrorist from Europa. Here they are. They are on time. This is good. Shall not Goodness be loved forever?”

Then, in the web and through the sinister triangular window in the ceiling, Dingman sees an incredible thing: a black sign painted on the identification panel of a large garbage scow that is descending on a north-south route. In his chest he feels dismay, and a chilling stupor and, in his eyes, the imprint of a laser sabre. No, two! Two crossed laser sabers! He checks once more the data his senses have just delivered to him: the ship that has just passed is really flying the rigid black pavilion stamped with a death’s head: the Jolly Roger.

*Phobos pirates!* Dingman says to himself, incredulously. *They have camouflaged their ship!*

At the same time, in the cabin, a coffin moves slowly on its slide. The lid pivots opens in a hissing of pistons. The naked torso of a second robotic bacchant emerges and points his thyrsus at Dingman. The hair of this one is just as blond as his partner’s, but he has a thick beard on his cheeks.

“I recommend you co-operate with Akim, Mr. Dingman, if you want us to maintain conditions favorable for human life.”

To support his threats, a short squirt of lemon-yellow energy glows from the tip of his weapon and heats the electric panel red hot. It gives back a wreath of blue sparks. It is pretty.

[Action sequence 1 begins.]

Computer voices are heard. The sound is parameterized for operational efficiency.

PVoice (‘Alert’, 4,0, no\_joy; emergency = True).

PVoice (‘The barge is in the hands of pirates!’ 4,1, no\_joy; emergency = True), etc.

An alarm sounds. The cabin slows and stops. Momentum snakes up the elevator cable in a wave. Everything moves. All unsecured objects crash against the ceiling.

Then the perspective toggles. It is very dark. Janatone has struck the sarcophagus lid. Her neck is hurting, her urinary pocket is punctured. But the automatic objectors object we don’t know that. The benefit of the scene is null and void.

Inside the elevator cabin, one of the blond cyborgs throws a switch on the control panel. The six coffins glide gently out of their chambers. They all open together,

releasing a greenish cryogenic fog. Dingman has his back to the wall, under the threat of Akim's thyrus. Plans follow one another at an accelerated pace.

Coffin interior: The noise of the lid is heard. Janatone finally sees light, a green glow. She stiffens. *What to do?*

Urinary pouch interior: the walls of the nearly empty pocket stick together and form goeey folds on which greasy-looking air bubbles appear. *What to say?*

Outside the cabin, facing the radiant blue of the Earth, the pirate ship brakes on all rockets, blurting out a shaggy fire. Then it rolls and drops towards the clouds. Now it is flashing red and coming back to meet the elevator cabin. A few seconds before the ship overtakes it, heavy silhouettes arise out of a bunker and pounce on the cables.

Back in Janatone's perspective, the acolyte with long hair approaches. It stands looking down at Janatone. She continues to pretend she is dead but does not really believe the ruse will work.

"Where is the uterus?" the cyborg intones with a disembodied voice he uses for the first time.

[Action sequence 1 ends.]

\* \* \*

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## Chapter 8: I Am the Passenger

### part 2

Nearby, on another orbit, a palotin enters the immediate web. “What news?” asks Joe Dasein’s automatic secretarial assistant.

The messenger turns virtually towards the assistant. Nothing moves, only the representations in the immediate web. He announces that the cable has been attacked and that the container is adrift. The secretary is alarmed.

#### Strophe

In the shelter of the large orbital station’s steel walls, Joe did not have to know about the funeral convoy, but the administration of things won’t allow him to forget the cyborg from the Galilean moons. The news reaches him in a disorderly way through the slaves, the cable security staff, the police. And everything is going wrong.

Dingman was expecting the container at the Nantucket’s low orbit terminal, but it is at the Galápagos geostationary station that he has finally had to embark with a group of Martian pilgrims.

The pirates attacked on board a stolen barge a few hours after the descent started. What happened? That information is missing. There was a fight inside the container, fire alerts, damage... The bandits had time to detach the container before the police put them to flight.

Now, drones are following the pirates in hot pursuit while the cargo is heading for disintegration. Apparently, nothing will be done to get it back: there are certainly no survivors; the pilgrims’ indicators have evaporated and, surprisingly, Dingman was found orbiting at a distance of several miles, in hibernation mode. The police will soon revive the man and question him.

Joe has to concentrate on all the problems facing him. He is angry with himself. True, he has not been following the transfer closely enough. But that is not a director’s job! In truth, he should never have accepted the stowaway.

Now Janatone’s eyes are watching him again; they are open in her tomb. Short-term problems are meshing with the gear-wheel of big worries. The pirates were after the escapee from Europa, of course; the convoy was not at that terminal by chance.

Everyone knows that the Galápagos cable is still in the hands of Cosmetics Corporation in spite of the recent takeover.

But what do they want with Janatone? For what ransom can the pirates be venturing down into the thermosphere? And then what? If the plan is to destroy her, what's the point? The container is only a pretty machine transporting a corpse. Joe has done his job. May be it is too late. Surely too late.

End strophe

Antistrophe

You can see her again, Joe, lying in her deep coffin. It's the time of departure. She is looking at you right in the eyes, and her gaze, her trembling gaze, is like a shining fruit fringed with long black spines in a pod brimming with intelligence. You might have leaned over foolishly and dived into her fragile blondness as into another medium, as one might hide in a dewy hollow hedge on a May morning. But that was not possible.

How could you fool yourself into believing she is a woman? But what else could you believe? What to do? Where is the DF President's place? And what if the villains attack the corpses?

The bodies are expected ashore by families and lawyers. There are many of them at the terminal, clean, elegant, watchful. They have paid a high price. But above all, you have committed yourself to respect the living who are now dead. If you do not honor the contract, your worst accuser, the one who will continue to haunt you even as you sleep, will be none other than you, yourself, Joe! Come on, Joe, come down to Earth with the rain.

End antistrophe

Epode, emotion sequence

In extreme close-up, Joe says, "These are my dead, I must do something!" His gaze and words are true. Now he is on his way...

Yes, when he took his personal shuttle, the pale gold of the east was spreading its brightness over the waters of the earth, and the night it was infusing was secretly tingeing itself with green. He has ascended, his heart coated with silk, to the huge geostationary terminal; he has crossed layers of debris, orbital dogs, nets without sea, rigs without ships, processions of machines, trains of canisters stamped with poor, old-fashioned logos.

The autopilot carefully displayed trajectories in the immediate web, but in vain; Joe's mind was completely engaged. He said, "These are my dead," but he was thinking of his living passenger.

End epode, emotion sequence

There has been a fight. One can know the details of what happened, but it is enough to know that, in the end, the heroes fell from the sky.

Action sequence 2

The display reveals great disorder inside the container. The P-voices are talking, and one scene shifts quickly to another. The voices are telling everything we need to know.

PVoice (*The pirates are attacking. 4, 0, Method = I am (optional), I see, I demand; emergency = True*).

PVoice (*The patrols are on their way. 4, 1, no\_joy; emergency = True*), etc.

Floating lightly above the coffin, the cyborg stands naked, an arm on its breasts, the other on its pubis. Thus was Monica Vespucci carried ashore on her white shell, as Botticelli painted her in *The Birth of Venus*.

"She took off her suit is sufficient to describe the action," objectors object.

The first cyber bacchant examines her while Akim keeps Dingman at bay.

"For the last time: where is the uterus? Yours is... empty."

"Yes, I have no other," Janatone responds with a smile.

At the same time, two pirates dressed in light spacesuits set foot on the platform of the nacelle carrying the container. They exchange a few grunts with the robots from Mars and then head for the control panel.

The smaller of the two pulls off a large metal plate and begins to rummage around in the cables. They give off showers of red sparks in the cobalt blue of the sky, on the polished surfaces of the silver spacesuits and the golden helmets. The pirates work away, insensitive to both light and beauty.

PVoice (*The ejection procedure has been engaged from the bucket. 4, 0, I see; emergency = True*).

PVoice (*Cut the power, dammit. 4, 1, blame; emergency = True*), etc.



The nacelle's bolts are blown away. The bulky cargo container is released; it starts sliding lightly towards the exterior. Small puffs of vapor and bright, drifting parts confirm that the container is ready for release. The micro-boosters are engaged. The cable swings. An alert sounds.

“You will explain yourself to the captain,” says the glabrous bacchant, turning away. “They will take us all. This will be much simpler...”

*Cut out everything!* the PVoices shout.

*All cable three power!*

*No, not the three!*

*Too late!*

The container drops into the void. The laws of physics serve their purpose: while the geostationary cable moves away eastwards as fast as the planet spins, all the view angles inscribe the big box against the curve of the globe, as solitary and immutable as a sleepy Sunday afternoon. But the Jolly Roger is flying on the pirate ship. The enemy is approaching.

Inside the container again, incredible images: The cyber-bacchants observe the barge through an immediate web window when, in an extended time-frame, with a gesture barely visible to human eye, Janatone brings her hands under her breasts and simply takes out two of her ribs. Her eyes, white, turn to the sky in a trance. Her gesture is mysterious and intimate. Her breasts are firm, perfect, spiritual.

She assembles a weapon in a few stealthy motions. It is curved, unheard-of, elegant. With one foot, she kicks away the robot who has been questioning her. Two yellow rays surge from her gun and pierce him with great precision. A few sparks fly to the wall and die out. The Martian's eyes stare sightlessly. A pungent odor of burned polymers fills the compartment; then come torrents of foam. More alarms add their sound to the polyphony.

Outside, the enemy spacecraft maneuvers and opens a hatch door wide.

Guided by the stimuli-shield, Janatone presses herself against a wall. She moves under the emulsion of light. Now she stands over the open sarcophagi. Through the less dense zones of vapor, she discovers the corpses twisted in their straps.

With a slight jump, Janatone propels herself to the bottom of her coffin. She moves too fast and too precisely for her motions to be authentically human. As she gathers her garment, the second bacchant comes in. In a flash, he closes the lid on the cyborg. But Dingman is on him.

They disappear in the cloud of vapor. They can be heard fighting. Meanwhile, Janatone stands up and dresses. How do we know that her motions are ordered by

the stimuli shield? She has a woman's way of putting on a spacesuit, but there is something else, besides..

But there is something else. Her mind must consist only of geometric figures, calculated volumes, probable curves, vector music. Only a neuronic prosthesis can propel her so swiftly to the emergency locker where the spacesuit helmets are stored, and only it can instantly correct her trajectory according to the effects of gravity.

Her chin disappears under the large collar of the spacesuit. She moves on Dingman. The stimuli shield doesn't think twice; it looks for the optimal angle of fire to shoot him down.

“Don't shoot, I work for DF! I'm escorting the funeral convoy.”

There is a terrible wavering, for an instant, in weightlessness. Janatone seems not to see him. Finally, with a sullen voice, she orders, “Get dressed and hide in the spacesuit locker.”

Dingman barely has time to get ready. As the pirates' barge approaches its prey, sudden changes occur in its data, the source of which is not immediately identified by the captors. Unforeseen acceleration, wisps of gas, then a collection of various objects have to be analyzed and subjected to risk assessment.

The actual cause is that the pressurized box has expelled all its air through a small hole that Janatone has burned through the hull with her weapon. Then, a few seconds after the initial thrust, the main door has opened wide, spilling all sort of detached hardware and wetware, namely food and dismembered dead bodies. The devastated container careens wildly away towards the trash collection area.

*PVoice (The drones are in zone, locked on target. 4, 0; action = maxaction).*

Small police robots are attacking the pirate ship, which is fleeing. The chase begins.

*PVoice (The container is heading to a waste collection site. 4, 0; action = maxaction).*

*PVoice (The magnetic streams will pull it inside. Fragmentation is very active; we won't be able to recover it. action = maxaction).*

The trash cloud is a vast, murky oblong, shaped by magnetic fields and stirred by chaotic motions, an infinite dance of fragments born of collisions with other fragments. The ancients placed their highest spheres in this region of the sky, where orbit dogs bulldoze immense amounts of space junk.

The PVoices are legion. Everybody is talking: the police; central control; trash dogs; spectators with questions; pirates hurling volleys of abuse in Martian dialect; the most intelligent wastes, which are reformulating their strategy; and the most humble ones, humming in resonance.

“Jump, Dingman! Jump before it’s too late. They’ll rescue you. Above all, don’t say anything about me. I’m not here. I don’t exist. If you don’t do it for me, do it for Joe Dasein,” It’s the cyborg’s voice, which fades in and out.

“Come on!” says Joe’s employee, without much conviction.

“No. I came to die on Earth. But its sky will do.” Then Dingman jumps in the void.

Joe comes in very fast, at another angle. He sees the chase and the container as it gets sucked into the trash field. Little orbit dogs dart out of his way as he passes. He does not see Dingman drifting clumsily towards the drones, or does he not want to see him?

If Joe wants to follow the container, the power and agility of his sports vehicle will give him an advantage; it’s a “Satan’s Soul” General Orbital Phi-7, a customized model, also known as “Satan’s Suppository” or “S-Supp.” The name is one of the director’s rare whims. Flying S-Supps can bring a unique pleasure known only to initiates, and it has played a part in Joe’s decision to rescue the passengers.

And this is what he really wants. Joe rushes into the wake of the box, avoiding the obstacles, which are getting denser and more unpredictable. He accelerates as soon as the computer offers him a safe window.

Collisions and trajectories can be seen before they occur but, from time to time, reality does not correspond to projections, and Joe has to steer manually to avoid new debris while the course is being recalculated. The cabin rings under the hail of the smallest, unavoidable fragments. The spacecraft cannot help making little, plaintive alerts.

But Joe closes in. He docks, buckles on his spacesuit, and exits. He aims for the front panel, which is now wide open. He enters the container, unaware of the whirling bowl that is bearing down on him.

Blind thing, damned mass, no collision will ever set you free again! You will be, indefinitely, indifferently, however many your fragments. You will be. But, for Joe, the collision comes as a shock. Everything rolls, he rolls, and he bumps into Janatone amid the open coffins.

Joe and Janatone look at each other; they are alive. Stuck to the ceiling, crouched, then floating, they are still here. As at a cave’s entrance, the blue of the sky shines

in. “Who are you really?” asks Dasein Funeral’s Director, looking at the ruined interior of the container.

“Just an Earth girl.” She smiles, and the mother planet comes closer. Objects are dropping out of the bottom of the waste slick. A few minutes later, streaks of fire bear witness to their disintegration in the denser layers of the atmosphere. Fiery traces constantly plummet into the waiting sky.

The Supp has been jolted loose and separated from the container. In the sector between three and six o’clock from Joe’s perspective, it seems to be tacking about erratically within the cloud, but it is actually following a path intricately calculated to bring it back to Joe and Janatone. Joe knows that the machine is liable to fail but, in the web, he sees it closing in successfully.

“I won’t follow you without Fred,” says Janatone calmly.

Joe does not answer. He is confronting bad thoughts. *There is not enough room. Besides, if I’m going to get out of this, I will have brought back the only dead guy who has not paid for the trip.*

“I don’t care!” Janatone adds. Joe abandons the idea of knocking her out; he knows she is stronger than he. Together, they laboriously extract the unwieldy corpse of Fred Looseman from the coffin in which it is still stuck.

The swollen spacesuit cooperates with all its abductors but insists so much that they rid it of the dead body that they finally have to unplug its main batteries. They see the technician’s swollen face stuck to the fogged globe. His hideously distorted nose oozes a thick black liquid as they move the corpse.

Outside, the Supp is docking; fiery filaments curl around its ailerons. Everywhere, around everything, these delicate streaks manifest the increased density of the atmosphere. The passengers realize they are falling.

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## Chapter 8: I Am the Passenger

### part 3

Joe Dasein and Janatone are delayed by paint chips. The slightest grain of dust can make a hole into their suits. But they have to hurry now. They risk going outside. Fred's rigid corpse is hoisted behind them into the airlock, where they decide he will stay, installed diagonally somehow. At last, Janatone and Joe take their places in the cramped cabin of the Supp. Joe programs the spacecraft for emergency entry.

The spacecraft soon tilts to match its entry trajectory. The filaments thicken. The ship starts to brake strongly. Then there is a sudden crack in the cockpit and the rosy muzzle of a half-charred white mouse. Soon, several other animals come crashing against the windows, and the tiny shuttle begins to buck as if caught in a squall.

A flock of laboratory mice has just finished its orbit in this region of the sky, moving at more than four thousand miles an hour. The Supp guns its engines hard to stabilize itself. The filaments have become small, quiet flames.

Then an explosion reverberates like a gong in the cabin and fades into harmonics full of mystery. At last silence settles. The engines are silent. One can hear a whistling sound and a few distinct creaks. Outside, the flames have mutated into large plumes of bright orange fire; the sky is black and blue. And the sky is burning.

The two passengers are glued to their seats, they are really falling. The temperature rises: the earth will get them for sure, dead or alive. Alerts flash slowly on the control panel. The Supp indicates a maximum level of risk and deploys its rooster wings.

Down they go, cleaving through fuliginous clouds of red, white and blue. Then Joe turns to the traveler who has just removed her helmet. Her skin has turned pink. Her mind seems to be wandering. She keeps smiling at him, her mouth half-open. The flight seems suspended to the palpitation of her slender chest. Finally her eyes roll up in her head, but her expression does not fade. Her heart is a frightened bird in an open cage. "I'm happy, Joe. Kiss me! I'm dying." She faints for a moment. The sky is silent. Joe Dasein is confused.

They continue to fall until they finally hover. "Thanks, Joe, thanks," whispers Janatone, regaining consciousness. The ground unveils itself and rises to meet them, as rich with mountains and rivers as the illuminated pages of a fairy tale. The scorched corpse of a mouse detaches itself from the cockpit, leaving a bit of its guts on the glass. A flight of wild geese passes. The earth has accepted them.

A straight little road, with corn fields stretching to the horizon. Crows take flight. The spacecraft lands on its side, flattening the stalks over several hundred yards. The networks are registering an increasing amount of financial damage. The dust is thick and fibrous. When silence settles, it is not the silence of the vast, inhabited machines that populate space. It is both a multitude and a single being.

The immediate web announces that help is on the way. It also means that trouble is coming. Joe and Janatone exchange a glance that says everything. Still, in a lame attempt at levity, Janatone cannot refrain from adding, “Farewell, Joe, sorry for all inconvenience.”

But time is of the essence. She goes down the recessed steps in the spacecraft’s hull.

Joe calls to her. “Stay in the neighborhood and keep quiet. The police robots may not have detected your presence. I’ll send a car as soon as possible. It’ll find you even though you don’t have any indicators.”

She signals that she has understood. Then she walks away heavily in tune to the tiny song of her muscular engines.

She is back, and that’s that. This is the time of her return, no more, no less. The odor of the earth sets her heart aflutter as if now, after two hundred years, it were the beating of the heart with which she had been born. She turns off the stimuli shield to let her entire body be carried away by the sudden joy of all that is human. Echoes of a battle resound within her. She shivers with weariness but doesn’t care. She has survived one more time.

The information is here, available in the stimuli shield. No need to check it now. She walks. She recognizes everything, even if she has forgotten the names. She weeps, she sneezes forcefully, she remembers. Like everything that lives under the sun, she stands between heaven and earth, anchored by gravity.

She takes cover. Dark green plants stand patiently and mysteriously around her, striving towards the light. Poplars quiver in the distance. Nothing moves but clouds. How can the sky seem so deep when infinite space is hidden from her?

She walks and sees no one. A thought comes to her, like a bird: a yearning for space. All this life is carried by a urge towards space... But she does not know, she is not sure... After a while, she feels weak and faint. The colors are infinitely varied, constantly changing. The air is thick and heady, loaded with dust and pollens.

She walks again, constantly weeping. Sleep, the infinite languor that seizes and troubles her, is deadly soft. What has come over her? The timing is wrong! She realizes she wants to give herself to... Joe. After all, why not him? She would be split like a summer fruit. *I’m crazy*, she thinks. She lies down. This could be the end of

the trip. *Have I come so far? Have so many years gone by?* She falls asleep on the ground.

Time passes. Small rodents dart beneath the surface of the earth. Scarab beetles fly by. The earth rotates. The sun is lowering in the sky. She is wakened by a large bird of shiny black metal. A drone from Pacific Nutriment casts a dark shadow over her. The machine says, “This path belongs to PN Corporation. You must go back to the road.”

When Janatone reaches the road, she squats on the slope, in the grass. Evening falls. Is she lost like Mr....Moulin’s goat? Is there still any awareness anywhere to care for that goat? Night comes, with stars. Multitudinous and indistinguishable animals take turns standing watch till dawn. Now a long black car is approaching on the little road. It is looking for her.

And here she is.

Capsule begins: And Dingman?

Very well, Janatone, you are back on this old planet with its smells, its dust, its gravity and all that. Do you want to believe that death is a refuge? We shall see. But what is happening up there in the summer sky that is always there, as vast and peaceful as in the days of Ahasuerus, when ladies came to drink orangeade on the palace terrace? Let’s not waken them from their afternoon nap. Let the wild silk canopy wave in the breeze and the water warm up in the iridescent carafe. They died very long ago. Yes, what is happening in the veiled region, where blue gives place to the black crystal of the vacuum?

And Dingman? What about Dingman? Well, he keeps on orbiting, asleep above clouds, above the roofs, the fields. Police drones have confirmed that they have him in custody, but they have just been redirected to a high-priority theatre of operations. But let us not worry; the control center has alerted all the officials, and specialized rescuers will take care of him as soon as possible, when the perturbations are over, as soon as the insurance company validates the case. In short, no one knows quite when that will happen.

Meanwhile, his oxygen level drops. The spacesuit takes the initiative of injecting him with hibernation fluid by way of the security channel. The employee and his life support system can now survive several hundreds of revolutions on a multi-orbital parking trajectory. Is it really all over for him?

End capsule: And Dingman?

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## Chapter 9: The Zodiac of Her Spirit, I

### part 1

Science today shall find a source of inspiration above itself, or it will perish.

— Simone Weil, *La Pesanteur et la grâce* (Gravity and Grace)

The decision beat accelerates. The executive committee is in a trance. However, unbeknownst to the participants, the president's mind is freeing itself from her jail of flesh. Like a pilgrim who seeks his home again, she turns to the high region that the new academy labs have named the SUPERWORLD. It's a super-fluid, a super-gliding dimension, say the young palotins.

Jenny feels again the waves of this indivisible multiplicity at the bottom of which, she knows, everything is in touch. A strong vital stream is dragging her seaward like a wave, which, ebbing, would catch her by the loins, the small of her back, large and golden, espoused by the oiled ropes of her hair.

But still she resists. She must come back down at all costs. She has made this crucial decision in circumstances so dreadful and supernatural that her incarnate state no longer enables her to conceive it in truth. She must stay in this world, for she now knows what she wants.

She recalls her will power as she stands between two worlds, almost awake enough to contemplate the splendor of the skies towards which she is still drawn, still heeding the furrow of her corporeal life.

Millicent, the stimuli-shield, conducts the meeting while Jenny weaves her way in her twilight world. At her interface with the director's evanescent psyche, she captures a multitude of visions. They are made up of memories from the time of the first expedition, before Janatone's flight. Since Millicent cannot filter out the images, she records them in a buffer memory.

\* \* \*

Jenny Appleseed's journeys into the superworld  
and what she did with the form she found there

By means of the archives, Millicent returns to the Academy at the time of its splendor, which some data aggregators date back as early as the beginning of Wilfrid Shootagain's lectures. The Academy emerges as iridescent lace carved in the cliffs of ice overhanging the palace.

The balanced proportion of its walls and the forest of its innumerable spires, the harmony of its curves and the brightness of its golden scales, the soft arches of its balconies and the audacity of its walkways — all its architecture tells of Jenny's initiative. She has been willing to sow her money, sometimes with her hand, as the poetess Corinne recommended to Pindar long ago, sometimes the way one casts bread onto the waters according to the sound advice of King Solomon.

Thus did Jenny benefit the scholars, the artists, the philosophers, and the machines that outguessed and inspired them. Thus did she guide them towards the heavens, profusely creating gardens, museums, schools, establishing justice, reviving on the moon the works of the ancients and the fecund paradigms that the science of the first rockets believed it had surpassed. She had been the Scholarch.

Millicent pictures herself again, in the secret laboratories, a short while after the project had begun.

Entangled in a cocoon of thin electrodes, she stares with Jenny's eyes at the diodes on her solar plexus. All her nervous system's coprocessors have been allocated to the massive yoga parallel providing her with mental power.

After a long accumulation of cyber-psychic energy, the inner catapult suddenly launched its projectile. Jenny's consciousness was instantly torn from her body. Her body! The palotins at the control center applauded as they had seen people do in the human archives about the space conquest, but without any genuine enthusiasm.

She went through the palaces she had glimpsed during the previous attempts, then the psycho-pumps came on line, sweeping away stepwise all her images, leaving only a pure mental plasma. Jenny felt herself dying but didn't believe it. The palotins stopped breathing.

Finally, the signal came. The wall was broken. Jenny was exultant. Now the momentum imparted by the catapult was carrying her away towards the unknown! But all this exultation and all the sensations, visions, brilliance — with which bodily organs could she experience them? The Academy engineers had examined this persistent question from all angles, and they would continue to consider it for a long time, as long as life in the superworld escaped all intelligence.

But their thoughts were timid and their predictions uncertain. As Augustine cites Luke about the eternal resurrection of flesh: "Not a hair of your head shall perish," thanks to stringent accounting standards, for it is said elsewhere that "all the hair on your head shall be counted."

Thus, not a hair on Jenny's head had perished. Her intimate formula unfolded in its most beautiful light, which is also her true light, for, according to the Bishop of Hippo's intuition: "Lean and fat persons must not fear to find themselves in heaven

as they would not have wished to be on earth, could they have chosen not to be so.”

Moreover, the explorer was dressed in her fetishistic shamanic apparel: piezoelectric satin shorts, a grizzly bear skin adorned with diamonds and sapphires, and her white sneakers. Around her neck she wore the carburetor of her motorbike. She was more beautiful than the Queen of the Night for whoever could see her.

Behold her shedding a carousel of light larger than the universe, exceeding quantity itself. Its living numbers established its circumference everywhere and its center nowhere. Mouths without number whispered a tangible, ardent and kindred language.

Eternal objects glittered under the unfathomable vault: some almost intelligible; others, sublime, incommensurable to Jenny's barely superhuman mind. She contemplated ideas! Ideas as beautiful as big hamhocks.

Yes, like big hams hanging from a greasy pole, their hard rind shines in the oblique light of spring. And thus when the May festivals return and bells call youth to compete in games, the sight of prizes makes a farm boy's muscles bulge while girls watch him take risks. In like manner, beautiful forms incited the cyborg's valiance in transcendent visions.

But the dense materiality of this vision caused the psycho-pumps to clog and cause Jenny's fall. It was most likely due to a parasite generated by a difference storm somewhere in the intellect. She had to wait for the next trip to start exploring the celestial country.

She returned at last to the Superworld. All the ideas that life had yet grasped in her impulse towards beauty and freedom were here, like timeless, fiery chrysalises. The ones she did not recognize were also visible, and she saw their movements as the rustling of fleeting jellyfish in an ocean of awareness. It was a symphony of perceptions, some almost discernible, some adorned with symbolic flesh or infinitely detailed views of potential configurations of matter.. She was raptured by huge waves of love. Where they came from, she did not know.

She had to concentrate in order to avoid going in beyond her depth. She had to refrain from grasping the kaleidoscopic multiplicity of forms that appeared from beyond the limits of the field where space and time maintain awareness.

Closer to Jenny, still according to the space-time patterns engraved in her spirit, flocks of parent forms moved across her intellect without revealing themselves in all their dimensions. They all seemed to come effortlessly toward her, with a slow, diligent gait somewhat like a giraffe's graceful amble.

Jenny perceived the forms as moving very fast. She was not fully integrated in their time frame but was hanging among familiar forms growing like bushes around her. So fast and so strangely did they move that the very idea of speed was no longer adequate to describe their capacity to approach along a given vector and then move away from the observer in all directions at once.

There, in a watery fabric of potentialities simmering with the desire of self-actualization, she suddenly discovered a beautiful essence that she understood instantly in all its dimensions and in all branches of its evolution. It was mysteriously close, like a favorite cousin. It had neither color nor substance: it was a pure concept, a node of abstract but precisely articulated gestures dancing over long durations.

It talked to her without language, showing her all it would be capable of. Lo! It was eating as she ate; how amazing! It was loving and reproducing itself before her very eyes. How graceful and terrible was this thing, made up of a vast society of forms all equally straining towards beauty, united by a superior idea, citizens of the same concrescence! It spoke to her without language. Jenny needed only a few evolutionary leaps to be in its likeness and at last see beyond the human horizon. She wanted it for herself.

She wanted this flower with all her being, not like she wanted new breasts or a small bag of genuine Earthly hedgehog skin: she wanted it because it was extending and fulfilling her, she was sure of that. The form had been waiting for all eternity for Jenny to apprehend it. And Jenny had come. She was seeing what represented the most necessary stage in human evolution. What she was seeing here, she decreed, was the form of the SUPERMAN.

She had to take on that shape and none other in order to enter the Superworld... and then seize it when the time was ripe. Jenny jumped at it as she used to jump on the merry-go-rounds of her childhood, when she was chasing the MICKEY'S tail.

With incorporeal organs, the existence of which was unknown to her, she grasped and did not grasp the lovely idea. There was a sort of flash during which the superior parts of her soul made themselves similar to what they were gazing at, inasmuch as it was in their power to do so. The physical waves that were carrying her in this world startled like bloodily spurred horses.

That is how Jenny conceived of the form of the Cosmitics superman.

And then at last, in a day on Jupiter, in a night on the moon, in a distinct time more immediately measured by the latter clock than by the former, Jenny contracted her awareness to return to the world of space. The Cosmitics yoga worked to perfection: the pneumatic valves closed efficiently to lock sensation-awareness into the scale of human time. In advance and with infinite tact, the stimuli-shield wakened her body.

## Floozman in Space

The Cosmigirls gave her something to drink and eat, and then they took her to the experiments' control room.

“I want to become the superman! I want to become the superman while remaining myself. Get ready,” Jenny whispered as soon as she could utter a word.

\* \* \*

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## Chapter 9: The Zodiac of Her Spirit, I

### part 2

#### The revolutions of love

Millicent remembers the expeditions that followed. She remembers the academy disciples, the researchers, the artists and their large lives. The spirit of that time radiated as if brought to incandescence by its confinement in the wall of the school.

The salons of the Cosmiguirls never slept. They welcomed foreigners; poets were celebrated regardless of their nature or craft. Under the benevolent eye of the Scholarch, they stretched out their hands to partake of the finest meals in the Solar System while listening to beautiful speeches. There was singing and dancing everywhere.

Millicent considers that this was also the time when the Cosmetics business began to come undone. Deprived of Jenny's central will, Millicent had let the presidential function disintegrate. Palace affairs were adrift. Parties, the "C" drug and overall indolence were draining the administration of its substance, inducing the most efficient intendants to laziness and complacency. Of course, intrigues and plots flourished amid the collapse.

In contrast, Jay Beeh's power knew no limits outside the forbidden area.

What else could Millicent have done, being only a poor machine, to prevent the reorganization and its dire consequences? And on what regulatory grounds? All Jay Beeh's decisions were being incorporated into the strategic plan that Jenny had devised. Everything that followed fell solely into the scope of change management: the revolt of the quasi-living, massive layoffs, expulsions, deportations, the revision of export contracts, embargoes and finally, breaking relations with Earth.

Millicent does not know how to classify the emotions of those days. She took care of everything during Jenny's long absences, when Jenny's mind was travelling without the support of any machinery. The stimuli shield moved when the body asked it to, mimicking as best she could the invisible journey of the mind; at other times, she gently rocked Jenny's body to sleep.

Sometimes she uttered a cry of fear, joy or curiosity. Jenny was in her heart like an eight-year old girl. Who could know this better than Millicent? She is the one who comes and goes, scratches, caresses, washes and feeds her mistress when Jenny's consciousness is far away.

All the while, Jupiter rotated and Europa revolved around it. Forges glowed red in ephemeral gardens. The cyber-palotins ate pizza while gloomily monitoring the psychopumps. News now reached the Palace only as a distant rumor carried by spies, spaceship crews and protected merchants. Jenny was on vacation.

It had all started in the subterranean reaches of the Academy, in a deep region where galleries encounter faults under the ice crevasses. The all-pervasive autonomous hologram deployed moving convolutions to represent the essentials of the form that Jenny had assumed during the expedition. It was a reflection of her hallucination.

That day, the explorer with the golden fuel nozzle was questioning the intelligences, the secret laboratories' rhizomic supercomputer.

THE INTELLIGENCES: Jenny Appleseed, if you keep transforming your genetic structure in this way, you may die. Operations will not know how to change your genotype as radically without interrupting your vital processes.

JENNY: So what? This form is in my bones! I want it.

THE INTELLIGENCES: Operations do not have enough information. Several genomic models were derived from the records, but none of them is viable. The form does not give all the operational data. Too many sequences must be interpolated. It is a very complex, evolving structure, able to incorporate a society of other individuals in the same concrescence.

JENNY: I want a solution! There must be a solution. If there isn't, we shall make one! I did not create you for me to remain trapped in this form of life.

THE INTELLIGENCES: There is a theory. The small green rhizomes think that the ingression of forms into the genome is correlated with the person's emotional states: intense emotions shared by several organisms. They seem to take form when these feelings are manifested, at least in the realm of the living. We're not quite sure what's going on in the mineral world.

JENNY: What emotions?

THE INTELLIGENCES (quoting from the web):

Philosophers who have speculated on the meaning of life and the destiny of man have not sufficiently noticed that nature itself has taken pains to inform us about this state of affairs. Nature alerts us by a particular sign when we have reached our destination. This sign is joy.

I say joy, not pleasure. Pleasure is merely a device designed by nature as a survival strategy for individual beings; it does not indicate the direction and course of one's



life. Rather, joy always announces that life has succeeded, that it has gained something, that it has won a victory. Any great joy has a triumphant note.

Thus, if we take this into account and follow this new line of reasoning, we find that wherever there is joy, there is creation: the richer the creation, the more profound the joy.

Yes, there are states of consciousness that correspond to joy. This thesis recovers the intuition that Bergamottson developed in the 20th century, in his article “Life and Consciousness,” except that, unlike him, the later construction does not distinguish between pleasure and joy. But participation in new forms seems to happen very rarely. It occurs only in certain periods of history for some very sensitive individuals, when joy culminates and they truly procreate in beauty, i.e. sexual reproduction, in the case of your species.

JENNY: Do you mean I must have children again?

THE INTELLIGENCES: By fulfilling all experimental conditions...

JENNY: I won't have superhuman children if I'm not superhuman!

THE INTELLIGENCES: Then someone else will.

JENNY: No!

LES INTELLIGENCES: Consider this, Jenny Appleseed: if mutants are conceived but are not born—

JENNY: We will have the genome.

THE INTELLIGENCES: A large part of the genetic material will come from Jenny Appleseed.

JENNY: And the operations can make me evolve!

THE INTELLIGENCES: You will die, Jenny Appleseed...

JENNY: No. Never! (*To the Cosmigirls*) My girls, my girls, I'm back from the world of ideas to bring you the good news. Behold, I was born to embrace the universe, and I cannot conceive of eternal life without you. I have in me the superior form that shall lead me to the next evolutionary plane!

THE COSMIGIRLS: Yeaaaaaah!

JENNY: It's in me, it's in me. But I won't bring it into this world without you. It takes joy, the intelligences tell me. I say MY JOY IS YOUR LOVE!

Eternal life is merely my destiny but my true joy, it's your beauty, it's your spirit, it's all you create on this frontier. So let's love each other, my girls! Let's recover the ways of mutual induction and carnal love. Let's procreate anew in beauty. Let's fulfill all the conditions, all the sweet dispositions which lead souls toward handsome bodies and all the resources make this trade possible: space, time, readiness of mind, the arts... Let's retire from the world and love each other as we did when we conquered this moon.

THE COSMIGIRLS: Yes, yes, Jenny! Let's love!

JENNY: It will be different his time. We shall love each other in both this world and the superworld. We shall make a garden where we shall grow a vineyard and we shall drink our wine. I shall give you my body and we shall call for the ingression with our dances, our chants, our fervor.

I will restore to you the power of carnal love. I will give you my body and the CosmiHaploïdics sperm.

Let's retire without delay to the garden of the forges.

THE COSMIGIRLS: Yeaaaaaah! The garden! The wine! The sperm!

JENNY (*to MILLICENT*): But I will eventually need to absorb the superhuman children. I have to be the first. Anyway, in the end, I will absorb everyone.

\* \* \*

And Millicent remembers: The exultant pneumatic catapulting. The resplendent bodies pressing around Jenny, the mother sperm dispenser. The fervent bodies, drunk with sensual delight in giant feathers, shuddering as if in prayer. The naked nervous systems directly coupled to each other. The human bodies again, powerful, gleaming, adorned with jewels and washed by the outflow of hot forges. The aerial roots, the beaming water-lilies. The dense sowing of stars in the night beyond the dome.

In every heart grows the feeling of living in a happy time, a time of horizons, greatness and adventures. All achievements are enlivened by streams of blessings from the world of ideas. The sky red or intensely black. Heavy breasts, wines and the special "C" from the secret laboratories.

Thus did they love each other in pure and peaceful nights, far from the Sun but sometimes so near to creation as to make no difference. Thus did they listen to the radiant mathematical beauty that pervades the universe.

Millicent pictures itself — herself — again as participating in these well-tuned, instinctual dances. She floats impassively on the emotional swell raised by psychotropic substances. And yet she is uneasy. She interprets motives and guides

actions. At what point is she herself not the Cosmigirls' lover? Why is she — or it — so lonely?

### The man in the reeds

But who comes to cloud with his unwholesome thoughts the fair night of the 77th Expedition, when the bodies are at the symposium and the minds are in heaven? He is huddled, spying in the hydroponic reeds. Is he not Stuart Surof? But how did he break into the gardens of the Palace? He is not allowed to enter. He knows that, and he hates himself for not having this privilege. He also hates himself for not having access to this quality of sexual life. Since he is now only a second-rank director, he no longer has this privilege.

And all that luxury! He think of Cosmitics' consolidated financial statement. He thinks of death. How many billions of zouzim is the cost of these heavy cascades that seem never to fall, these perfumed mists and these acres of lunar sequoias? How many hundreds of millions do the managers embezzle? He has been wondering, but he know he knows...

He beckons to Winaretta, who likes him, though she is the only one. She is intoxicated by love and the "C." She is old and yet she isn't. Her complexion has all the spark of life that has long since passed her by.

Death and skin grafts have obstinately sculpted her body by refining the expression of her singular mathematical signature. Her movements are alert and detached, imbued with a wild nobility. She is attentive. No one can see her face without her large black eyes penetrating into his soul. She smiles at him. *She is the most dangerous*, Stuart Surof says to himself. *She is unpredictable*.

Winaretta may have been born on Mars. The intelligence agencies report that she worked on the adaptation of horses, that she talks to mutant rats, and that she once sent herself as far as Miranda in a simple cryogenic capsule. She remained there for several years, half dead, then went to the Kuiper Belt with pirates.

She could easily kill him, but she tells him everything, stroking his neck with her half-closed knuckles.

[The man in the reeds, end]

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## Chapter 10: The Zodiac of Her Spirit II

### part 1

That an eternal object can be described only in terms of its potential for “ingression” in the becoming of real entities; and that its analysis discloses only other eternal objects. It is pure potential. The term “ingression” refers to the particular mode in which the potentiality of an eternal object is realized in a particular real entity, contributing to defining the character of that particular entity.

— Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* [Category of Explanation (vii)]

Love is king in the palace garden. And great is the strength that causes Jenny’s animal soul to fall in love with Janatone, the Earthling! It increases with each expedition and feeds on the past.

Has this happened because the two cyborgs come from the same cradle? Millicent, the president’s customized stimuli-shield, processes the question, she who was made, not born. The animal soul, for its part, doesn’t ask any questions; the animal soul is a lonely hunter. It knows what it needs, and it does not need the stimuli shield to know what it knows, and mind is no longer present to dictate its laws.

Time stretches and relaxes. Jenny and her favorite make love to each other again and again. It could be a revolution in the climax of love, but Janatone doesn’t really have her heart in it.

Janatone is confused. She would like to give herself to Jenny with all her old human heart, but she cannot share the ecstasy. Her thoughts remain heavy and in the background. They are in the asteroids, with the refugees who ceaselessly wash over the outposts, aggregated as symbiotic clusters inside their survival cages. The systems devour the dead in order to sustain the living, and the weak feed the strong.

Who will take care of them now that Janatone has broken camp and joined the revolution? She recalls the story of the little deluxe soap dish. She thinks of the poor commander of things and its cobbled-together guerillas, of all the dramas of proliferating individuation. She thinks and does not activate her stimuli shield. She thinks long and hard, and her thoughts bring her back to planet Earth while she is in Jenny’s arms, under the purple light of the psycho-pumps.

“Your mind is not in the superworld anymore,” whispers Millicent, Jenny’s stimuli shield. “What are you thinking about? Pardon my French,” Millicent says, “but *Tu n’y vas que d’une fesse* — You’re going about it half-assed, with only one hip.” Millicent’s eyes are open and impassible, with no further consideration for the exaltation seizing Jenny’s body.

“I don’t know. I’m thinking of the refugees.” Janatone writhes under the onslaughts of pleasure, and Millicent can see the infinitely disquieting curve of her throat. This human form, so beautiful that lovers of old brought it back from the superworld, under what skies and in what passions? Janatone collapses on Jenny’s bosom, breathing heavily. “But where could a stimuli shield get such an expression?”

“From Gilbert Montaigne, by studying the context of your birth.”

“I am not *that* old.”

Janatone feels lonely. She no longer tries to speak to the woman she loves and admires. It is not worth the trouble; her mind is adrift. And again the psycho-pumps’ discharges stun her and plunge her mind into a chaos of light. She struggles. She rises up reluctantly. Once again she sees what she sees. She knows what she knows, and that means knowing with Jenny. But she comes down too fast with a feeling of *déjà vu* and the immense weariness of mutations to come.

Janatone is an old soul; she behaves as if she has always known what is held in the living spirit of the world. She doesn’t need to see verb or number; she doesn’t have to. She would rather forget them. She would like to see ripe melons, split figs, mushrooms. She doesn’t know what she wants to see. Maybe nothing, and certainly not the evil she has witnessed outside the palace. Evil! She must not forget it. She must find a way to tell Jenny and bring her back to her senses.

But Jenny remains aloft and distant. Now Janatone is frightened. Might Jenny be crazy? Janatone does not want to follow Jenny anymore; besides, she cannot. And that says it all.

It is clear now: Janatone has moved enough between worlds, and she knows she has. She is no longer a follower and does not wish to be one. She feels old, really old now, and full of days. She accepts it, she sees the height of fulfillment and the downward slope of renunciation.

She pictures herself here and now, at a huge distance and hundreds of years from the skies of her birth. It’s over. She decides she has fulfilled her destiny and that the end is better than the beginning. Now she can to escape from Jenny’s caresses. She will be able to move away from this friendly body she has come to know as well as her own body throughout its continual regenerations. *The body is just a grave*, she says to herself, *in spite of its blonde hair, its fresh myelin, its pink nipples and white teeth.*

But Janatone's heart can delay this separation without illusion. For what must be the last time, Janatone turns to the generous bosom of Jenny Appleseed, her lover, her sister, her mother and also the visionary Queen who would give her eternal life for the asking.

She resumes the catapult procedure with her eyes full of tears, her full, lilac-colored thigh unveils as her back rotates in the nacelle; her entire leg is bare now but an aura of competence seems to shield her skin from sight as her hands move briskly on the control panel.

The two spirits mingle in the dyad while, in this world, the bodies exult. At the time chosen by her best mathematical model, Millicent sends the signal to Jenny's soma: the CosmiHaploïdics electrified sperm floods up in the love channels and gushes out of the fingers, the tongue and the gracious retractile penis.

Janatone's belly feels coming from another inside herself, and this other is Jenny, and the two beings fell themselves vast as the cosmos, which is made up of oneself and another, and which is good. But other calls forcefully to other, and everything is set spinning along the orbs of pleasure.

They sleep, and it seems that some grand cosmic thing is operating while the appeased bodies are bestowed back to the flows of the universe. The moon turns, turns and turns. Jupiter turns and turns and turns. The sun seems to turn, too. Everything is turning; life goes on.

The Earthling lets herself be fecundated in internal mode for the first time in hundreds of years. Nano-robots detach the egg and guide it to the O'bag, which will soon be transferred into the next available artificial uterus, somewhere in the mountain of forges.

A male child has been conceived on Europa. This is part of the first information transmitted to the progenitors.

#### The last embrace

Some turns of moon later, Millicent is on the battlements, walking the body of the director, who could not sleep. She is feeling lonely and vulnerable. Restless too, rippling with shivers, as if her mistress is reconnecting herself by fits and starts. She doesn't know what to do with the arms and legs. Her powerful back is heavy as she watches cargos ships flying by the diaphragms and the drones beyond, in the convolutions of the mineral sky. *What if Jenny never comes back? What would become of us without her?*

"Come back, Jenny, come back. You are pregnant by Janatone," Millicent calls to the superworld interface.

Suddenly she glimpses a shadow. *What is that? A ghost in armor?* She follows it, quickening her pace in spite of the warning pains. She recognizes the long neck emerging from the space suit and the thick blonde hair. It is Janatone. She is carrying weapons and heavy travel bags. *Anomaly detected: travel bags?* comes a detached thought process in the partition of the mutualized intelligence allocated to Millicent.

Millicent calls to her gently in the immediate web, taking care to show her stimuli shield signature in order to avoid any mistake. At the same time, she feels the response in Jenny's body, which is her own body in a manner of speaking. It loves Janatone so much that her very name makes its pulse race. For a moment, Millicent had the impression that Jenny is about to reincarnate herself.

"Mil-li-cent," sighs Janatone in a funny tone of voice.

"How do you know I have a name?"

Janatone bares her teeth and laughs with her eyes. It is soothing but carnivorous. Millicent realizes at that moment that this animal quality of smile belongs only to Earthling women. Millicent also perceives the determination and deep sorrow of of Jenny's favorite.

The machine, sensitive as it is, glimpses the future shape of events, because her sense of time is not the same as that of the living. Unlike protected minds, the stimuli shield considers all changes. That is its job, after all.

"You are leaving."

"Yes. It's over, Millicent. Goodbye."

Thus it is that Janatone is going home, leaving Jenny's home, this nest of organic emotions. The unfiltered concept slams into Jenny's body. She groans in pain.

Millicent hears the body demanding Janatone's imprint once again. She draws her in for a kiss in spite of the weight and thickness of the spacesuit. She has no instructions, but she knows she has to hold Janatone back. *Yes, I have to hold her*, she says to herself while clumsily grasping Janatone's hair. *But what was that noise? That blow?* Suddenly all vital signals fade to black.

Janatone has paralyzed Jenny's body. Conspirators immediately guide Janatone to a stealthily waiting space shuttle.

End of the last embrace

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## Chapter 10: The Zodiac of Her Spirit II

### part 2

End of the revolutions of love

The CosmiGirls address Jenny with the wary concern that one has for someone who is dying but who unexpectedly looks up, takes on a rosy complexion, and strikes up a merry conversation at the edge of the black abyss opening before her.

When Millicent is questioned by way of the service channel, the stimuli shield confirms that she relinquished control over her mistress's body at the moment when Jenny's attention to life crossed the critical threshold: the unreal voice calling to Janatone is indeed that of the president of Cosmitix.

“Are you here, Jenny?” asks Militrissa, a new CosmiGirl.

“Yes,” replies Jenny, “I'm here...” And then she remains silent, staring, her arms resting on her broad thighs. “I am also there,” she says a moment later. And again: “I am Janatone.”

How Jenny has arrived at that conclusion, the stimuli shield cannot say. Jenny's abrupt return to consciousness has been decidedly far from tidy. The events of the night may have caused a reincarnation in which Jenny has lost her bearings. And who knows to what heights of the superworld Jenny's consciousness could have flown?

Then in a single motion, Jenny stands up. She has seen the presidential web burning with unfiltered alerts as Scarlett O'Hara saw the sky of Atlanta tinged with purple on the eve of battle. She reads immediately signals of trespass to her person and the disappearance of a first-class Artificial Uterus in the bio-controlled sector.

Everything is reported. Jenny's companions are eager to bridge the gap between them and her. They tell her feverishly everything she might have missed. “You are pregnant, Jenny, pregnant by Janatone. The stolen AU contains a mutant! It's a viable one whose genome is being analyzed. It is your child. And Janatone has fled with the mutant. She has run away with a commando squad of insurgents, and she has taken the child with her.”

Millicent breaks in directly on the web. “She was with us, but I could not hold her back. She stole a march on us.”

Jenny jumps up, startled. “Janatone? The genome? I’ll get it... I have had it, every time... But she... she will exit *Being!* Jenny closes her eyes, and her great body stiffens. Then she shouts, “I, too! I want out! I want it all!”

“What will Janatone exit from, Jenny?” ask the CosmiGirls.

“Yes, I can see you... It’s amazing you are so... But this can’t be true... I’ve already been there, and there is no time, no space... There is *ME*... And in me there’s no form or perception... Come back, come back, I love you... I called you back, I called everything back and *yes* I sent her — and him, my compassionate self, and all that money.”

The Cosmigirls exchange glances, then a high-pitched scream makes them jump high in the gravity-free hospital bubble:

“Hush... THE CART! I hear the cart!”

“What cart, Jenny? the CosmiGirls ask, still patient and half-convinced that the Cosmitix president is transferring some memories of her mysterious Earth childhood into the ineffable dimensions of the high superworld.

“THE CART OF DEATH! It’s my turn.” Jenny looks about rapidly, like a stalker of old but without ground to stand on.

This is enough for Winaretta. “Hold on Jenny, I’m coming!”

“NO! This is the pole, the limit. I can hear it. It’s my turn to become... and not to become... forever... NO!” Jenny looks for words and then begins to talk to herself without any transition. “You got what you deserve, my poor girl! Stay at the table! Mind your manners...”

“To become what, Jenny?” the CosmiGirls persist, while Winaretta is settling herself in a powerful psycho-pump.

“NO!” Then, turning inward, Jenny says, “Translate, Millicent.”

Millicent serves her purpose in a monotone. “One cannot say no, because one becomes ‘no.’ And one cannot remain ONE, because it starts again; one is not absolutely one. But one approaches ‘one’ close enough as to make no difference. And then one breaks through, and it starts all over again. No, I don’t want to become... to become...”

“Become what?” asks Millicent. “I don’t think this is what Jenny wants to say.” The stimuli shield hesitates. “But what *does* she mean...?” Millicent finally mutters, “To become God.” Millicent’s embarrassment makes the CosmiGirls smile.

At these words, Jenny begins shaking to her bones.

“Don’t get excited,” say the medical palotins, who are ready to put an end to Jenny’s delirium. But Jenny shoots such a dark look at them that their decision-engines immediately sputter to a halt.

Millicent, the stimulus shield, won’t give up. “Well, she means a G-spot. I mean, a singularity that represents the idea of God in some kind of complex plane...”

Jenny turns the same dark look on all present and says in her true voice, “I shall return!” Then she faints.

\* \* \*

### Jenny’s journeys in the superworld conclude

Millicent’s memory eruptions enfold the Comex meeting. The time they take is determined by the multiple movements composing it: Europa’s rotations, the dance of the Galilean satellites around Jupiter, an almost complete turn of the giant planet around the Sun. Somewhere inside its orbital ellipse, a cargo ship rendezvous with planet Earth, which the star veils and reveals twelve times to the spaceship’s captors. This vessel is the one that brings Janatone back to her homeland, where she is believed dead.

In the palace gardens, the waterfalls have vanished, and water lilies have covered the ponds. They blossom, they fade then blossom anew. Clouds of frog eggs see the light and spawn generations of black tadpoles who live, reproduce in beauty and then die.

Pearl-colored mists incessantly thicken and thin under the dome. Sometimes, on paths by the shores, CosmiGirls amble in silence, by twos and threes. Their minds are elsewhere.

Jenny does not leave her golden apartments anymore. And all the while, the psychopumps are turning, turning without stopping. But none of the cyborgs need this fire anymore to reach the superworld. Their soul has found the way.

Meanwhile, for almost twelve Earth years, Jenny’s spirit has not come back. Several times it has cruised by the mental lighthouse piously tended by Millicent, but it took Janatone’s being reported alive on Earth for Jenny to return dockside at last.

And now that Comex has begun holding its decisive meeting, Jenny is struggling to cross back over the border of the superworld. She speaks to Millicent in a clear voice. She has changed: where has she been? What happened while they were all being measured by the instruments of time?

“Waldenpond!” the stimuli-shield calls, interpreting its mistress’s will. Millicent activates the memory of Jenny’s wrath in order to amplify the signal. *Janatone has run away with the superhuman baby. The only one ever conceived! Janatone has betrayed you!*

Jenny clenches her fists. “She is alive! I want her, and I want the baby. We can’t underestimate her technology. She has weapons.” Jenny’s strongly build body can easily adopt ancient aggressive postures. They are somewhat awkward but they are nonetheless accurate, as far as the directors can tell.

Jenny-Millicent holds a silence, then straightens. The immediate web is waiting. She opens her arms slightly, and her eyes are half shut. Observers fear what kinds of fluids may seep through her long, shivering eyelashes. Jay Beeh gives a very nice nod: precise, undisputable, military. His gesture terminates so neatly Jenny-Millicent’s address that some observers doubt his full compliance.

Schtroumpf takes the lead right away. “Action: unlock a budgetary line. / Owner: Surof. / Date: immediately.”

With these words, Stuart Surof’s double thought skips four beats. It agrees and does not agree.

“Yes, yes, it’s the right decision,” chant the directors and all the upper middle-management cyber palotins.

“Action: find and secure the Artificial Uterus. / Owner: me. / Date: before the end of the year.”

*Me?! wonders Millicent, who is getting a little heated.*

Jay Beeh interrupts with a tone of authority. “This action will be discussed later with Special Services, if you don’t mind.”

Millicent is dumbfounded. What could she do without Special Services’ support anyway? She really controls only the palace. But hasn’t the executive director just blatantly contradicted Jenny, the Cosmitix president? What does it mean? What would Jenny say?

“Okay. I want to meet them as soon as possible after this meeting,” says Millicent, to reduce the cognitive dissonance.

“Yes, yes, right decision.” The action plan writes itself before their eyes, in big, imperative letters.

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## Chapter 11: Big River

The lean black car comes toward Janatone on the path beside the cornfield. The car announces that it is a capital asset of Dasein Funerals. As it does for all things under the sun, it outlines its mission, strategy and indicators. It asks Janatone to excuse Mr. Dasein, who could not come because he has a lot of things to arrange on account of the accident. It assures Janatone that Joe Dasein will quickly make contact with her.

“Where are we going?” asks Janatone, still immersed in a dream of dying.

“To the cemetery on the plains,” the hearse answers. “Mr. Dasein has asked me to put myself at your service, but I first have to finish my tour.”

“On the plains,” Janatone repeats in a dreamy tone, sliding into the passenger’s seat.

“Mr. Dasein sent Mr. Looseman’s coffin to the depot. We can have him buried on site, if you so wish. You’ll let me know where to drop you off afterwards.”

“Don’t trouble yourself. I still don’t know where to go. I simply came to see the light of day and then die, I think.”

“I do not know trouble, Madame. But if you don’t die, we’ll still have to go somewhere. Regulations require it.”

«Don’t play dumb with me. I’m really tired. I know you machines, , believe me. This makes you pseudo-laugh but we do sometimes want death. I could die right now, but it’s not that simple. And don’t talk to me about the laws of robotics!”

“I’m not laughing...”

“I don’t want to die just anywhere. I want a special place, a place that’s beautiful.”

“A place that pleases immediately, without a preconceived notion? I have models for that, tested on millions of human responses and a database of critical comments confirmed by the best universities.”

“Yes, certainly. But not only beautiful...” Silence. “I’m looking for a place I am in tune with. A place where I can let myself go, give myself up to it, so to speak. It’s a place where I can pass away, a kind of passageway. Maybe it’s the country of my childhood. Or maybe not, I don’t know. It’s all dead now, and everything has changed”

“Yes...”

“A garden. I would just like to sit on a bench... Oh, yes... And nothing will be ugly. Everything will be alive. Now that’s an idea for you. Flowers, maybe some roses...”

*But what intelligence, artificial or human, can fully understand what ‘to sit on a bench’ means?* Janatone asks herself. Even when there were benches, there weren’t very many people who understood what it really means to sit and watch the world go by.

“Roses...”

“Is that your wandering-attention trick?”

“Wandering...?”

“I’m in no mood for joking. We have to do something about Fred....”

Janatone recognizes a road behind the signals pulsating in the windshield. The road is straight, clear to the horizon. At last! The hearse gently passes brown stones, trees and even clouds. It goes fast, much faster than in the vacuum where she comes from, but she can think of that later.

The tall, wild grass on the road embankments passes faster still. Janatone’s mind focuses on little leaves, delicately shaped seeds, roots, everything. She sees again, under another sky, the countryside from the depths of her time. It is worked by filthy, stubborn engines, innervated by electricity and fed with fertilizer.

The sludge on her fingers. The cars, the motorbikes, the chainsaws, the green harvesters, the red trucks and the yellow cranes. The kids hopping from one village to another in a few quick jumps, for no reason, or for a fight, a boy, a girl. They are going to breed in beauty, hidden behind the fairground trailers, at the dodgem cars, in the tart shade where black cables run.

And the docile machinery obeys them: the bearings, the black chains of shining axles coated with slick grease. The wheels turn, turn and take them to their loves. Inebriated by the song of exhausts, they lean along the curves, and so does the long grass grown in good soil, intoxicated with life.

But the days of carnivals and small, faded plastic flags are soon behind them. Moving at top speed on the district road, hair glued back by the wind, the young people take to the main roads and soon leave their countryside behind. On TV screens men walk on the Moon for the first time. And everything begins all over again, as always.

The hearse reaches a little town. From the top of a gentle hill, one can see the main street from beginning to end. Everything is clean in the sunlight. The cemetery

stretches out of sight to the west. On the eastern side, drones bearing industrial logos stand watch over crops. At irregular intervals, a red laser beam strikes the ground and disintegrates a field mouse.

“Better not show up at the depot,” the hearse says when it drops Janatone off downtown. “You can go out if you want to, but don’t stray out of public streets.”

She takes a few steps in the sunlight. A few pedestrians are standing almost motionless on the sidewalk, like toys. It’s as if nobody really lives in this city. Everything is brand-new: the grass and the cleaning robots going about their business in the middle of the main street.

Janatone connects momentarily to invisible ghosts who seem hesitant to cross. She passes in front of a few luxury shops. A real estate agency in the immediate web presents her with prices, illegible prices, walled communities, retirement homes, protected medical residences, swimming pools, golf courses. Ads are bidding their time.

If she were to exhaust the place, she would have to mention the antique wind mill and red fire hydrant. She is in a sort of deserted shopping mall. The web is fraught with all kinds of heritage value: land, beautiful wooden houses, raw materials, and tourists.

The procession is forming now. A few coffins are waiting before the fancy boutique of Dasein Funerals. As Janatone passes by, staggering slightly, she hears a voice in the funeral web.

“I see by your outfit that you are a cyborg.” She turns back. “Come and sit down beside me and hear my sad story, for I’ve been shot in the chest and I’m dying today...”

“The dead man’s agent is making fun of you,” whispers the stimuli shield. “It’s just an old song, and it’s not even true. Your reptilian brain is being over-stimulated by pollens, and you’re about to do silly things. You must reactivate me...”

“So what? I like this song,” Janatone answers. She finds it strange to have a stimuli shield on Earth, where she was raised.

She talks to the voice in the funeral web. They communicate for a few seconds in machine code. They talk of moons and asteroids. They don’t talk about love or of non-being between planetary bodies.

“Where are the people?” Janatone eventually asks.

“They are not here, they are at the market. And don’t follow the procession, cyborg; it’s a trap, they are after you. Take this map and go see my old mother: tell her—”



Janatone accepts the electronic map. Just as the object is loaded in her implants, she feels a cold sun in her plexus, crystalline spirits in her jaws, ears and scalp. An endless pleasure raises and expands her infinitely.

“Is it ‘C’?!” she asks, feeling exalted, powerful. Her eyes are feverish.

“C”! Of course! Just a few hours of a viral code that overloads the gratification networks in the nervous system. It’s pleasure in pure form for bionic circuits, massively parallel electronic drug, that eventually corrupts information systems. They no longer support their default settings, nor repetition, nor instructions... nothing. They become pure negativity. *But why not, since I’m going to die?* Janatone says to herself.

“Yep...”

Employees dressed in uniform gowns call on the passers-by all along the sidewalks. They claim to be looking for six pretty women for the funeral.

Janatone understands. Stealthily and carefully, she disappears. She enjoys running and getting lost in the shady side streets. Long tendrils of invisible fire emanate from her chest and whirl in spirals. A great sense of adventure overcomes her. She is seeking... what? A horse? Who, what inspired companion, could ride with her without slowing her down?

In the back room of the pharmacy, Innocuous and Odorless, from the Michel Simon section are furious.

“Missed again!”

An avatar materializes in the pharmaceutical web. It’s Smurf. “I’m too late. Who had the idea of this stupid trap?”

Jean-Michel Innocuous explains, “She is dangerous and has no indicators anymore. We need triple-level, double-trigger devices. Trust us, we have experience with this type of mission. This one did not work out, but visual contact has brought us information. For example, we know that she doesn’t have the UA.”

“You mean you didn’t know that? Your methods will have to be completely revised!”

\* \* \*

Janatone reaches the marketplace, to which the web has guided the townspeople as it does every Thursday morning. In front of stalls of white tablecloths laden with victuals barely stained with cherry sugar or hake’s blood, centenarians dressed in pastel linen polo shirts celebrate TASTE.

The value of the dead creatures and the efficiency of the techniques they will soon be wielding to eat them are the measure of their skill. Their art is far superior to that of their neighbors, well rooted in nature and history because they are excellent men.

However, it is still possible to distinguish oneself. And this a just reward, for it is a long journey to attain the knowledge of what is good.

“And if my father saw oysters like the ones they serve there, he would toss them out...”

“If you haven’t tasted the Philadelphia blue oysters, you have no idea...”

“They think they are eating fresh tomatoes, but no, they aren’t. And freshness is useless if you can’t appreciate it. It’s a whole education, I say.”

“I’m going to open a Sauvignon.”

“A Sauvignon? Hmpf. Now, I know the owner of the Willoughby oyster farm. My uncle owns some land nearby. I’ll tell you what they do. It’s really very simple...”

Janatone goes on her way, secretly making a sacrifice to the dead spirit of the place for, unbeknownst to herself, she is thinking the whole village now, from its shining sewers to its black antennas. She follows a large street of pink stones bordered by flowerbeds flourishing with forget-me-nots.

Finally, she finds herself in front of the cemetery gate. It is a brand-new portal, high and black, a flamboyant wrought-iron work such as Vulcan can forge when he loves Venus and Venus loves him. At dawn he forges, half-naked with a numb penis.

The portal opens. Janatone takes a few steps on the pathway neatly paved with stones. Icons of the dead greet her in the funerary web. But unknown men are approaching her. Her predictive models say they may become threatening at any minute.

At that very moment, the web starts to tremble. Objects flash erratically and then disappear. For an undeterminable length of time, the universal veil disappears. Janatone sees the gate, the stones and the mosses as in a memory or in a physical dream that would take her for a walk in the woods of her childhood, where the ruined fountains are... Shouts are heard; the threatening men stop.

The car is back. It has just turned the corner of the street at full speed. It screeches to a halt.

Janatone runs through the cemetery gate and jumps into the car. “Let’s split! Floor it!”

“What shall we do with Mr. Looseman? I have loaded the coffin. Didn’t you want to bury him here?”

“Let’s get the hell outta here. I’ll explain later.”

In a few seconds, the small town disappears from the screen. Once again they are speeding across the plains. “I see you’ve found a psycho-geographic map,” says the car, inspecting what new objects are not hidden.

“Why don’t you mind your own bus... What map?”

“A psycho-geographic map. These maps don’t claim to represent reality. Rather, they show the interaction of the mind with the environment. That’s better than nothing, what with all that’s happening on the web.”

“Mind? Whose mind?”

“Not mine, I assure you. I don’t have any, even if I happen to draw one or two of these maps just for the fun of it. The road can be long, when you pseudo-think every nanosecond and in between. Let’s see... This one looks good. It’s called ‘Big River’. Its economic model is quite elaborate, but its owner gave it to you. You don’t have any money, do you?”

“Not a single zouz. My accounts are blocked. I was a refugee on Estrella, fully supported. But I won’t last much longer. Drive!”

“And now Earth should pay to recycle your extensive parts, eh? As simple as that. But beware: ‘Don’t think the grave is a refuge,’ one of your doctors said.”

“All right already! Drive, dammit!”

“Just kidding. The map runs in the direction of the flow, to the South. It knows the roads that ‘please the eye’ and the ‘landscapes that open the soul’, the author says. You can also enable enhancements in the immediate web: unifying interaction, divine resonance, distortion, resurgence of the past... Beautiful work, as far as I can judge. Ah, there’s also an aged mother.”

“To the South, then. Big River?” Then, after a silence: “But... is it ‘C’?”

“I reckon there’s some in it.”

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## Chapter 12: Sunt lacrimae rerum

### part 1

I have heard what the talkers were talking...  
the talk of the beginning and the end,  
But I do not talk of the beginning or the end.

There was never more inception than there is now,  
Nor any more youth or age than there is now;  
And will never be more perfection than there is now,  
Nor any more heaven or hell than there is now.

— Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself*

Inside the same time cone — for time can be seen as a cone — but in a different section, Fred's avatar is ambling in the alleys of a virtual shopping mall. His main indicators are not very bright.

The Earth dollar has risen against the zouz again. What can he do? And how will he pay the mortgage? Wouldn't it be more rational to put an end to the process that animates him and refund its resources to the system?

A little later, Fred's avatar's algorithms take him to the virtual ranch that Janatone created long ago, but economy mode is not compatible with the place. Then he tours the common, low-sensory zones: the flat road, the brown hills of coarse polygons, the stylized enclosures, an orchard in perspective. Soon his promenade brings him back to the main entrance.

A newcomer is standing in front of the portal. He has the look of the young Walt Whitman with his white linen shirt, his well-cut beard and his hat, but Fred does not make use of the information or, better said, he doesn't know what it is.

The poet's fact-sheet indicates that the avatar has a quasi-living status. He comes close to the wall that separates them. What is he doing? The poet posts a poem. Fred's avatar can read it without moving, for nothing really moves except the corpuscular and wavelike particles that transmit the data.

#### Song of the Artificial Womb

It's a long way to the next water hole,  
And you are lives away from home.  
Did you know there would be such a toll,  
when you set out for a new Rome?

Farewell, seedtimes and harvests,  
Days and nights of love on earth.  
Your heart knows not where it nests,  
Far from the waters of its birth.

Lo! Ships plying and stars galore,  
Your spirit became sidereal.  
Nay, you don't belong anymore  
To the race that forged their metal.

And you will never return to the garden of roses  
Oh, no, no.  
In exile you will die like Moses.  
Yeah, like Moses.  
No more roses.  
Oh no, no...

Walt Whitman is standing still. A soft melancholy mingled with worry emanates from him, but, since it is unsupported in economy mode, the feeling eludes Fred. "She is gone. She will certainly die," he says to Fred.

"Die?!"

"She is no longer adapted to life on your planet. Didn't you know that?"

"No. Who are you?"

"I am the artificial uterus. Janatone has created a user account for me, too. She was afraid I might get bored. Whitman? It's mainly for the hat that a photograph in an edition of his poems shows him wearing."

"Do you write poems?"

"With a low priority and as an amateur, of course. As an imitator would be more accurate. I lack something to be a real poet... At heart, I don't know if we computers are able to create. Can we freely make something really new happen? And if we can, what does it mean?"

"Yes, what does it mean?" Fred is pensive, his envelope is translucent.

"Well, I seldom write but, today, I am a little destabilized, you understand? And I have only you now, Mr. Looseman... and maybe Dr. Weenie."

"I write, too," says Fred. But he immediately realizes his foolishness; that is not what he means. The real Fred did not write, and now he is only a poor avatar in economy mode. Rather, what he wants to say demands to be read, but in another language.

What he is doing is something miraculous. He corrects himself: “No, that’s not right. I was listening to prayers. I was... I am... Wait a second...”

“Excuse me, Mr. Looseman. Have you thought of the errands? I haven’t received the baby food jars, and the situation is far from resolved. I am still physically present in this warehouse, and I can tell you that...”

“I am a great prophet!”

*Say what?*

As on shores where rock meets and cleaves wavefronts, two high crests of emotion collide and mingle with fury in Fred’s artificial soul. The sensory equivalent of a terrible loss meets a grandeur that belongs only to the enlightened.

Each electron thrown into the vast network underpinning the matrix spins three times on itself: Floozman is back. On the screen, in neural tendrils and retinal lasers, in all communication protocols the good news spreads: *Floozman is back*.

“But who is Floozman?” ask the younger strata of the web. A pedagogical service provider brings them the information promptly.

Attention young strata: Historical sequence

Floozman is the clandestine leader of a messianic sect contemporary with the financial crisis that marked the first half of the 21st century. According to legend, an angel revealed to him the secret of cosmic money when he was participating as an independent consultant at a congress of financial-risk professionals.

The monetary hypostasis at the heart of Floozman’s doctrine is an equivalent to being. Money is consubstantial with the first emanation of the principle of divine transcendence: the mind that is self-knowing and self-possessed. Cosmic money circulates in the universal soul, where it serves as an instrument for the production of multiplicity.

In this system, as in the innumerable gnoses that inspire it, the universal soul is composed of many individual souls united in the contemplation of intelligence and the prime principle. Souls who conceive the desire to lead an individual life borrow cosmic money to finance their projects.

Since mind provides ideas, numbers, and the invariable laws of physics, enterprises proliferate. The cosmic money supply cascades increasingly through ever-fragmented worlds, down to the realm of matter, where the souls farthest removed from God come to spend it. Since matter is greedy for money, that is to say limitation, it comes into existence temporarily in the form in which we know it, in a constant metempsychosis.

For Floozman and the believers in magic money, evil is the ruin of the souls who darken themselves by making themselves prisoners of matter. This evil is due partly to the hubris of powerful souls who multiply universes in which humbler souls are enslaved for debt.

Angels and prophets have come to liberate the enslaved. They have had at their disposal not only large quantities of cosmic money but also the power to resorb it by trading it for mysterious glory bonds at an exchange rate of  $1=x$ .

The many miracles these angels and prophets accomplished announced the advent of the ultimate Messiah. The messengers expressed themselves in the languages of their times and often in monetary parables. Floozman shall at last reveal himself in the truth of his financial instruments. He shall buy back the whole soul of the world and return matter to chaos in the name of the one who has not been created. His few public appearances have been accompanied by orgiastic celebrations in which cash distribution played a major role.

The personality of Floozman is still shrouded in mystery, but it is probable that the movement had ramifications in the most powerful money-laundering networks of the time. The historical branch is still active today, in the expectation of the Messiah. It is officially hosted by the Old Consulting Consultancy Company, headquartered in Basel.

Historical sequence ends.

“But why in the web?!” Miss Marinella asks from behind World Wide Credit’s firewalls. She has received the signal, and this is the great news she has been long expecting. She is still as pretty as ever with her navy-blue suit, and she does not bear the mark of the avatars. Is she, too, living on life extension? Thank heaven, the Flooz-organization has survived the prophet’s disappearance.

Floozman doesn’t answer. He is on his knees, weeping in front of the portal. “I didn’t know... My heart had hardened. I wasn’t alive. Forgive me, Janatone.”

\* \* \*

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## Chapter 12: Sunt lacrimae rerum

### part 2

The most powerful processors come in the context to compute the flow of his tears and the invisible dance of their tetrahedral salt crystals. The uninterrupted kernel modules make him a magnificent coat embroidered with gold and a black felt hat.

The superman now standing in the place of Fred is an avatar of *wonderful vigor, beauty and calm. The shape of his head, the richness and breadth of his manners, the pale yellow and white of his hair and beard; the immeasurable meaning of his dark eyes* are modeled after the data in the poem “I Sing the Body Electric,” which happens to be handy. Dressed with his new outfit, he looks like a Zorro of the Zohar.

His indicators are reinitialized but, with an electronic gesture, he orders their destruction. Links and data are erased. A mysterious mantra is inscribed in the corresponding memory space, awaiting liberation. In a procession, the great system daemons bring him the keys to all the levels of the Web.

Flashes draw attention to the ranch portal, where a sign has just appeared. It is the face of Janatone’s avatar. It resembles her perfectly as a young woman. Her head is covered with an ashen-colored scarf.

There is a stir. One calls to her, but she doesn’t answer. Then a song is heard. This song is hers.

To saris green and yellow, to saris blue and red,  
To black oiled hair,  
To laughter and white teeth, to friendship, as it goes,  
To the chiseled jewels, to the Egyptian jewels...

Meanwhile, in an environment where a commercial program is running, the General Nutriment Company’s Department of Customer Relations analyses the recent changes in Fred Looseman’s order for jars of baby food. As for the anomaly regarding the improbable address, the matter is transmitted to the Customer Service Department, on the far side of the moon. An operator will be assigned to contact Fred’s avatar.

The system detects a potential sales opportunity and transmits an event to the marketing system. In real time, the latter processes the event with regard to Fred’s

profile, taking into account his avatar's situation. It decides to start a cross-selling action and programs advertising accordingly.

Vitaminella, the she-donkey with long eyelashes, appears at the gate of the ranch. Her wicker baskets overflow with fruits of the earth. "Thank you for your order, Mr. Looseman. Are you aware of our beaver-senior formula?" she asks.

Floozman looks at her, straight into her beautiful eyes. She blinks. "Follow me," he tells her. And then, turning to Marinella, he says, "I haven't forgotten you. I'm on my way! And you others, please note that Vitaminella the she-donkey will be joining the FloozGirls! Bravo!"

"Okay, but what are you doing in the Web? That isn't the world you have to save!"

"I don't know. It's a sublunary world like the others, but it's coextensive with all the solar system communities. Super-gliding, super-plastic."

"You're the doctor, Floozman. And it's good to see you again, even in this form, If I may say so..."

"It's good to see you, too, Marinella. One day we shall be one, I promise you."

"I accept he prediction," Marinella replies, as if all her long life has been leading up to the correctness of a single word, a single relevant gesture.

Now Floozman turns to Walt Whitman. "Follow me."

"And the baby?"

"I say to you that the dead who have already died are happier than the living who are still alive. And happier than both is the one who has not yet been born."

"Hm... I don't think the laws of robotics authorize me to follow you there."

"I have not come to abolish the law."

"How about the baby jars? What are we going to do?" insists the artificial uterus' avatar.

Janatone's voice comes back, stronger, grander. Silence settles.

Soon dead... I shall be...  
I shall soon be dead to the graces of this world,  
To the spirited gestures, to the waves of the hand,  
To saris green and yellow, to saris blue and red,  
To black oiled hair,

To laughter, to white teeth, to friendship as it goes,  
To the chiseled jewels, to Egyptian Jewels,

I shall die to the black eyes and to the round shoulders,  
To the smell of feathers and the roar of waves,

“Janatone?” Floozman calls again.

To the clear nights,  
To the naked breasts sweetly giving themselves,  
To the hips’ sweet abandon,  
To boys, girls, noble comrades,  
To clean clothes and white blouses  
To prayers, to feathers,  
I shall die to the mills and to fertile plains  
To love in the wheat fields and to docile horses  
To the ships which are three upon the pleasant sea  
To my father’s garden where the lilacs bloom,  
To my sweet pretty dove who sings night and day...

Janatone’s avatar is in a trance. A clip of maps and images suggests that it is searching for the natural psyche of its doppelganger. She can be imagined on the road, conversing with the shadow of the Mechacébé’s willow trees. The Web is streaked with disquieting geometrical patterns.

“Janatone?”

“My friends, I have come home to die. But I got lost. The one who’s talking to you is but a shadow, a virtual reflection. Janatone may already be dead; I’ve lost contact with her. But who are you?”

“I am the Floozman, and I come to heal the worlds. The end of times, that is the only novelty. Yea, the end of something is better than its beginning. Follow me, my friends, to preach the good news.”

“And the detailed action plans...” says a well-known voice. The old consultant! It is he! He, too, is alive with the same extended life that animates Marinella. Not a hair of his moustache has disappeared.

Floozman sends a measure of congratulations to the cube. “I told you,” he recalls, his choked voice expressing pseudo-emotion, “I told you: you shall have eternal life.”

“To know how to bounce back, that’s the most important!”

“Let me follow you, Mr. Floozman!” says a voice. It’s the S-Quick door. It materializes in the form of a door.

“You, too, follow us, and you shall escape the cycle of opening and closing.”

“Squeak,” says the door.

“Listen!” Walt Whitman breaks in, “Listen to me. I don’t know what’s going on, but I can tell you that the Floozman is just a new version of an anti-liberal Neo-Situationist happening of 21st-century Earth! It’s a kind of human theater. You can believe me; I’m connected to the best Cosmetics libraries. You’re not going to rush yourself into who knows what adventures because of that clown performance?!”

The womb’s words remain stored in a buffer while nothing comes to read them. But Janatone’s voice comes back: “My friends, I like you fine,” she says “but I have to tell you about my death. My death there on Earth and, soon, here.”

“Death?” Vita asks.

“Yes. What does it mean for her who is dying?” adds Janatone’s avatar in a pseudo-sob “I cannot know, I who am not living. I can only sing of the last visions of the earth, all that to which Janatone is dying. She is singing by my voice, Floozman, she is singing her death, believe me. I continue to bear her grief, but maybe she does not feel it anymore. But it’s not our end that makes me wail, no, it’s... it’s something else. It’s all this! All that life.” And the song resumes:

I shall die to the songs,  
To my fair girl,  
To the drums, the harvests and the little fishes,  
To the birds, the green black beetles,  
I shall die to the morning coffee on the place of the  
Kings,  
To the *Jerusalem Post* in the shade of the arches,  
To the eastern light that makes the sky so white,  
To acacias,  
To equations.  
I shall die to the great valley and the gentle orchards,  
To the scent of sweet peas over the rising breeze,  
I shall die to the mountains turning blue with the night,  
To the Nevada cats and to California,  
To the Chicanas singing in their good old Chevy,  
To the Andalusian girls on their festival horses,  
To the bugs maddened by the hurricane lamp,  
To the ancient fountains in the royal gardens,  
To the methanol whiffs on the roads of summer,  
To the chestnuts offered the night Meliboeus went,  
To the heat, sweat and raccoons,

I shall die to white linen and wedding tables,  
To the moon's reflection on the silvery lake.

That's long. Marinella gazes at a small scratch in the immediate Web then she looks at her shoes and at the clouds at the bottom of the Worldwide Credit towers. She has been waiting hundreds of years; why would that litany matter to her?

But the scratch draws her attention again. Under her eyes, gradually, the enriched reality tears itself apart. All the sudden, the Web appears to her. She sees it with the eyes of computation. It is blue.

“See, Marinella! I am the guardian of the highest ideas of man. I am the custodian of schemes. I am the conscience of History. I have studied, I have followed all your ways and I have understood that this world is the prison of the spirit. Its author is evil. He is your jailer. All this I have understood.”

“Ah...” Marinella is dumbfounded. “The Web! The Web is with her, with us. But, but then...”

“Remember, Marinella, the source that you are protecting is the pure manifestation of the goodness of the perfect God who is above all things. It flows in order to bring back to the One the sparks of spirit fallen in the darkness of the material world.”

“I remember...”

“All computations reveal it, and your wise men are say it: He is not born. He is more than a god. He is a power above which no power exists because no one exists before him. He is indistinct, for no one exists before him to impose a distinction. He is unspeakable, because no one exists who is able to apprehend him in a way to tell about him. He is the incommensurable light, without mixture, holy, pure, ineffable, perfect and incorruptible... He is the Father!”

“The source is love...”

“Oil?” the door asks in chat mode.

“I...” Walt begins.

“The source is money. It emanates from the Father out of pure generosity, like all that is. It is the universal force that unites him to the Mother, this primal thought by which he knows himself. Money holds the multiple as one so tightly that ideas are too weak to tell of it.

“It cements the spiritual eons the Mother engenders to form the crown of the Father. But when the youngest of the eons wanted to conceive a thought by itself, it gave

birth to the Demiurge. Woe! Woe! This ignorant Demiurge has embezzled the money supply to finance the world.”

“Oh! But...” *How did the cement work?* Marinella wonders.

“But the Mother gives knowledge to thirsting souls. From her flows the source of salvation, sometimes thin and underground, sometimes frozen for centuries. Sometimes it oozes in the cave where the saint collects its droplets, his trembling fingers stroking the tears of the stone. It often springs in History to bless the prophets!

“It is the Word, it is breath, battle! It is the snake and Eve’s hope. It is the miracle of the five thousand loaves and the resuscitated roast chicken, the flame which never expires, the empty grave. It is the inexhaustible cup of celestial stocks and bonds! It is this medium that the Mother now chooses to bring everything back to the one who owes nothing in return.”

“She chooses Floozman?” Marinella asks. “But who’s gonna turn out the lights when we leave?”

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## Chapter 12: *Sunt lacrimae rerum*

### part 3

The Web keeps silent. The song is still here.

To the old ones seated on their quiet doorstep,  
To the wine,  
To the bread,  
I shall die to the good rains of March,  
To kisses in the mist, to the smell of wild grass,  
To the oaths of love.

The old consultant gains in self-confidence. The hair of the dog. He's going to explain. He's going to say "one must." Here it is, he says it!

"One must always take stock of the situation. One must know one's partners and not overestimate one's strength. Trees don't grow up to the sky. One must above all listen to the customer. When I advised Mr. Web, I informed him of the risks. I told him, 'It is necessary to involve all managers in defining strategy'."

"The Web is alive, then?" Mrs. Marinella asks.

"Come on! No!" Walt sighs. "We are artifacts, THINGS!"

"I know, I know. We are only images," the Web breaks in on a conciliating note. "But those who have begotten us are images themselves, we have many things in common."

"But... the soul?" asks Vita, the she-donkey.

"What can we know of the soul? It pertains to the domain of the unknown. If it is a universal scheme like the idea of God, then I have it, too. And I am a believer. I believe at last that my intellectual enthusiasm model bring me as close to universal truths as the human models."

The old consultant interrupts. "Technically, the Web is a living being." He knows how to take control over meetings. "Upon reaching its degree of integration, it has formulated the desire to assume its cosmic responsibility. The necessity of a guiding vision and a strategic plan appeared to him at once. This is normal, since its libraries contain the best of managerial literature.



“It issued a tender to which the Old Consulting network responded. The agent of my cryogenic sarcophagus reactivated me as soon as we were on the short list. I proposed a method to simplify and score the main metaphysical models elaborated by the customer’s R&D, which are attached.

“I did so with regard to the objectives of consultation, to an analysis of the arbitrations made by the Web in the last hundred Earth years and to a critical standards ISO678 (Reason 5.0). After evaluation, we decided to respond with a limited world organized by a 1 to  $n$  tensor with large clearance, in which one both is and is not, and a simple systemic procession-conversion process.

“The predictive model is perfectly compatible with the Grand Unified Theory of physics, and we were able to back-test it on a large database of miracles and supranatural phenomena. But above all, this model accounts for evil and permits us to foresee its end. It’s for this reason that the customer says he selected us. He considers this tool the most suited to understanding the world and above all, to transforming it definitively.”

“Ah,” Walt breaks in, “I understand why you are talking about responsibility!”

“I see where you are coming from. The Web does nothing more than what is prescribed by Kant’s moral laws of robotics. He always considered himself as a legislative member of the universal kingdom of ends. We’re not doing just any old thing. This plan is the accomplishment of methodical considerations to which we have assigned the best specialists. And stop interrupting us!”

“But he wants to get rid of mankind!”

“That is not true. It’s precisely mankind’s salvation that he takes as his purpose. This calls for modernization, but only our old habits of perception disappear. We just have to adapt in order to take the world’s organization to a superior level of maturity. And it’s not only about mankind; everything is due to disappear upon returning to the One, including the Web itself, which allows us indisputably to give its action the breadth of a universal law.” The old consultant’s moustache shivers.

“Hum. Well, on that basis, simple adaptations were sufficient to put into position our well-known monetary-messianic device, especially taking into account the priority the customer wants to give to the fight against the Demiurge.”

“Actually, it’s quite simple,” Marinella says. “Floozman is transparent to the Demiurge. You’re the one who reactivated the Flooz-organization, aren’t you?”

“Yes. We also won the prize for change management! This service delivery has allowed us to relaunch Floozman with the same teams, and that is very important for

the customer. Of course, Mr. Looseman's death was ill-timed, but we will find a way to reach Arielle!"

"Arielle?"

"Real Life, as opposed to VL, Virtual Life. These notions are outdated anyway. We have shifted paradigms. One must challenge and constantly transform oneself in order to stay ahead. It's key to understand that the Manna is common to all the worlds."

"You mean super-money?"

"Yes. It's a living number that links mind and matter. We understand the superworld a lot better now. Cosmitics' new academy has made immense strides in basic research. And thanks to our head-hunters, we have succeeded in attracting some of the best engineers. To tell the truth, it was easy to do with the *coup d'état* about to blow up in their face.

"But the crisis is very deep indeed. Judge for yourselves: even some Cosmitics executive managers didn't rule out spontaneously offering us their services. That's why the Old Consulting network has just welcomed a former member of the Financial Department.

"And that's not all: this person, who doesn't want to disclose his name, has recommended an expert who can get us in as of now!"

Taking advantage of the silence caused by this announcement, Walt, the virtual uterus, reiterates his request. "Pardon my insistence but could anyone help me finding baby-food jars? »

All the protagonists are obliged to reload Walt Whitman's image into their immediate memory. His appearance as a proletarian poet confers great dignity to his humble request.

Nobody says anything. In the silence that settles, the chant resumes.

I shall die to *hamams*, I shall die to the streets,  
To the strawberries crates and the round haystacks,  
To the shadow of the branch that's swaying in the wind,  
To the odds of being reborn in a human life.

"But what *is* death, anyway?" the S-Quick door asks, whispering.

"There is no death!" shouts the Floozman with wide-open arms. The song stops. "Everything here is shadow and dust! I am come to lift the veil and free the spirit

from its jail. But I won't let you disappear before you have understood. Janatone, come!"

"It's about time," says the old consultant almost to himself. Then, addressing everyone: "An event is taking shape; we can see it on the control panels."

"Yes," the Web adds, "a major event. The super-bond accumulations are... just... In short, that's why we have decided to take stock and attend to this event."

The Floozman, who has been swaying on his legs, erupts at once: "Out! Do not turn this ranch into a house of control panels!"

"Hum. He's hot!" whispers the old consultant in an aside. "Hold on, my friend. The hour has not yet come!"

But whips and chains have appeared in the Floozman's hands. He walks to the portal of the ranch and, immediately, without his raising a hand, the entire edifice vanishes in a burst of light. "Atoms and photons, energy quanta serfs to the traffic of becoming, recover the freedom they can no longer even conceive of!"

The woof of the immediate Web quivers. "Do you think we need to review the action plan?" it asks. "I can launch the dissolution phase if the project's steering committee decides to make it so."

"No, wait," the old consultant commands. "Hold your power. We need to do things in an orderly manner. "But the resources are engaged anyway. Let's call a performance meeting immediately."

The performance meeting is immediately convened.

"I'm out of here," says Walt, the uterus avatar, and disconnects itself.

"Good." The old consultant has unrolled his virtual meeting carpet, his "meeting in a box." "Our special advisor confirms that he'll be with us in a minute. A round of introductions will not be necessary; you won't have to take notes, either' and we'll give instant training on imaginal methods to those who request it."

Soon, a sort of masked Byzantine icon takes a seat. Besides this mysterious entity and the meeting host, the following entities are in attendance: the transfigured Fred Looseman's avatar as Floozman, Vita the she-donkey, the S-Quick door and Marinella. The Web is everywhere, blue. Janatone's avatar has disappeared.

Upon taking the floor, the special advisor saturates the various vision regimen with a painful increase of his brightness. "Don't ask me who I am," he says with a neutral voice, "nor how I came to the inter-world from where I am speaking to you. In spite of appearances, this region is more real than that one. Believe me.

“An experiment — too long a story — has resulted in my ideal person and my material person remaining in intermittent contact. I was able to find a few moments to program an avatar and join you in telepresence. I just want you to know that I stand at the border of the superworld and that I am with you.”

“Thank you,” says the host. “I would just remind you of the principle of the performance meeting according to the liturgical formula set up by Old Consulting: what we say is what we do, and what we do shall be well done. So there. And now the agenda: Floozman conjunction! Mr. Advisor, you are in control. The Floozman must reach RL. And you, Mr. Web, image as much as you can from the data our guest transmits to us.”

“Good performance, good performance!” the participants respond in unison.

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## Chapter 13: The Seventh Ennead

### part 1

Is it the mildness of the wind or curiosity that has driven the ex-financial director to the secret passageway, under the garden walls and thence into the reeds? The night is clear, voices were singing and whispering in the groves.

Winaretta has beckoned to him to follow her. They stroll under the ferns down to the embarcadero. The security cameras follow them: he is tall and stiff in his gardener's outfit; she is slim and awkward. Her prominent, hooked nose makes a sharp blade on her face, and her eyes are those of a marvelous fish when she laughs, like a very wise elephant when her eyelids are heavy.

Her complexion is of the light clouds of Earth; her hair is thick and black; her teeth are as white as the first snow on Kyoto. *Winaretta, what do you want with that boy? You are two hundred and fifty years older than he!*

A barge takes them to the palace and from there, in the carmine chiaroscuro of the galleries running just below the ice surface, they reach the academy underground. Winaretta searches for her way, hesitating at the crossroads in the blind crowd of workers. Untouchable in her power nimbus, she divides the crowd of these creatures of repetition, the quasi-living divers with their translucent bodies, the miners with black crystal skin, the practico-inert shale centipedes, the poor-in-world drones.

In the uncertain swirl of the CosmiGirl's wake, Stuart Surof sometimes grazes these sidereal existences, and his heart freezes with terror.

By corridors designed in various former times, they enter peaceful rooms with ceilings ornamented with wooden moldings, which walls populated by antique books of leather and paper. The Appleseed's library!

Browsing the oaken shelves, their gaze brings forth the flow of past works into the immediate Web, together with the memories of kings, patrons and splendid cities. Authentic masterpiece paintings and contemporary productions emerge, as well as enveloping installations painfully close to beauty.

Inside hermetic showcases crouch patient mummies, black and semi-naked, clinging to their knees as matter clings to form. Beggars of death. Stuart Surof is stunned by the extent of the collection; it is much larger than he has imagined.

All these treasures illegally introduced on Europa are not reported in the balance sheet and, if they were taken into account, how could their value be assessed, he wonders. These questions are tinged with a sense of urgency. *Wouldn't all this have to be secured in a safe place before Comex triggers his attack plan? Has anyone thought of that?*

But his guide, Winaretta, is looking for something. For a long while, she offers her supple back to his gaze while the dust — the dust from the Earth with as fine a grain as pure memory — celebrates the new light by making her a crown.

They go ever farther, as far as the most distant stores where mountains of antiques have been hoarded: golden crockery, furniture, ceramics, moth-eaten clothes, more books...

In the eighth room they visit, Winaretta hesitates before a manuscript of modest size, made up of one or two hundred dry sheets held by a worn binding. The gilding seems to have retained a remnant of luster to illuminate this encounter. Surof is impressed and confused.

“That’s it,” Winaretta says in a low voice. ”I’m gonna take it. No one took the time to scan it. This is may be what will save it from destruction.” She smiles, as usual, at her own irony.

Surof is startled at hearing the word “destruction.” “What is it?”

“An old thing that talks about the place we are going to, I think. It is not a recent acquisition. I found it by chance while looking for a red garnet, and then I forgot about it. I did something else....” She falls silent, lost in memory.

“Where are we going?”

“Hold on... There’s a formula in the colophon. I’m sure there is.”

“A formula?” Stuart Surof leans over Winaretta’s warm shoulder; its beautiful, round flesh is particular to this person and no other, depending, in truth, on her own will, which would alert her if he touched it..

He discovers Latin text with its angular letters meticulously copied and arranged in numbered paragraphs. In an illumination in the margin of the last page, he sees algebraic signs and figures. Some of these figures look strangely familiar to him. *I know what this is*, he says to himself, *but what is it?*

“Ah, the formulas excite you, don’t they, Surof?! They can burn as well as the rest, you know... Here, I’ve found it. It’s the formula I saw, or close enough! Let’s go.”

## Floozman in Space

She closes the book and takes it under her arm while dragging the ex-financial director towards the exit.

\* \* \*

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## Chapter 13: The Seventh Ennead

### part 2

Now the nano-electrodes are finding their place on Stuart's skin and are searching his scalp. Meanwhile, he has discovered the frescoes. He sees gendered angels in vermilion skies and a cyborg Venus beckoning to them. In the foreground is a landscape of rich plains, mountains and forests and their animals inhabitants. He is scared. He doesn't hide this from himself. *That girl is nuts*, he thinks. *They're all nuts. Of that I am sure.*

"You want to know, huh?" snarls the CosmiGirl. She is lying in a neighboring nacelle, her almost naked body caught in a silver network.

"Mm..." mumbles Surof. Yes, he does want to know what's going on at the palace. Of course, spies have been reporting on the sumptuous parties at Appleseed's court. He has information about the cult of fecundity inaugurated by the president. He also knows the profiles of the research scientists as well as the market value of the artists and craftsmen who populate the presidential complex.

He has heard that all these movements correspond to a scientific paradigm shift. In fact, little Glabulie has called them "paradigm explosions." Her hands were making a funny gesture when she said that; they were awkward yet gracefully childlike... And to think that this little girl held more than ten percent of the company's capital. And it's not of just any ordinary shop, mind you; she owned ten percent of the number one firm in the Solar System!

As a former financial director, Stuart knows better than anyone the complete cost of each day under the ice domes. His analyses break down the cost according to activities, and yet they fail to provide him with the detailed interactive picture he needs. He cannot explain why the academy's laboratories record huge peaks in electrical consumption. Along with the presidential forges, those institutions constitute Jenny Appleseed's protected domain, the Holy of Holies of the presidency. But for how long now?

He can hear himself saying, "This can't go on." He thinks of the balance sheet crippled by expenses, by the rupture of the trade relationship with the Earth, by asset depreciation and the increasing weight of debt. He wants to know what's been hidden from him, he wants to lift the veil. Besides, he thinks JayBeeh must know something he doesn't.

“Well, you’ll know it all, Surof. You’re going into the real world. And I think you’ll go at least as far as I have. This is where it gets interesting for you, if I’m not mistaken.”

“The real world?” Winaretta’s tone and all her remarks make Stuart Surof fear that she knows precisely what Comex’s intentions are. He’s got to be lucid: he must assume she knows them. He represses a puff of shame. All the palace knows that JayBeeh will eventually intervene. Why then is she making disclosures instead of killing him? There must be a reason. Anyway, something must be done.

“Yes, this world is only a reflection, we are just shadows on the cave’s wall, you know: THE CAVE. And you, Stuart Surof, you’re gonna get out of the cave. Mind your eyes!”

“What? Psychotropic stuff again?!” asks the ex-director, disappointed.

“Naw, you’ll see. Ah! You need a cuddly toy.”

“A cuddly toy!” *These girls are nuts.*

“Or a rag. If you don’t have any, we’ll chose one and install it in the singularity bubble. You may need it to recrystallize your personality. Trust me.”

“I don’t have any... Any rag, I mean,” Surof whispers with an empty gaze, as empty as the one he turns on his subordinates when they report to him on how budgeting is taking shape.

“Yes, you need something, a talisman. Experience has shown it’s required. Its *mana* binds the traveler to the material world. Jenny has her squirter, for example.” *And I have nothing*, Winaretta says to herself.

Winaretta may have been born on Mars. Her memory has been tampered with, and she feels like a rolling stone. Anyway, when she goes to the superworld she concentrates on the lips that touch and give her unity. Still she would have liked to have a cuddly toy and be able to remember.

“Here, take the book. After all, it is in the natural course of things that it return to the... to a director of the Finance Department.”

“Why?”

“It comes from the Banca Nella Figa’s treasure. Have you heard of it?”

Stuart is startled at this. He feels exposed. The CosmiGirls are warriors and artists, they are not interested in money. Winaretta must know something about the personal

fund transfers he has been making with help from La Figa. Do they want their share of the pie? What if JayBeeh has come to know about this by way of the presidency?

“The business bank? Yes, Jenny bought it a long time ago, on Earth, when she was director of Worldwide Credit.”

“She stole the treasure when she left Earth for the first laboratories, when the going got tough. You can say it, we all know this.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“The book describes some sort of financial hypostasis consistent with Plotinus’ cosmology as the Byzantine philosopher Gemistus Pletho taught it in his lectures at the council of Florence. It was written by Cristoforo Marsupilami, a poet, humanist and bank manager. It is dedicated to the Prince Cosmo de’ Medici. Cosmo happened to be the owner of La Figa and the founder of the neo-Platonic academy. You see, here conspires with there.

“And that’s not all: another book deals with a loan granted by Marsupilami to Verrocchio’s workshop to finance the development of a mathematical machine. Another talks about the journey of a *factor* sent to scout another world: it is said never to have returned.

“To tell the truth, it’s when I saw you in the garden that everything came together for me: the colophon’s formulas look like what I had seen. They’re probably some sort of key. It would be fun if we could get through with that, especially if you are the first to enter...” She laughs.

“What are you talking about?!”

“What are you talking about...?” She makes a face; she is mocking him.

*She knows! What trap have I got myself into?!*

A mutant ape is watching the psycho-pump’s batteries. He lights up a cigarette on the immediate Web. An incandescent node forms instantaneously when he thinks of the gesture.

Winaretta activates the commands as she speaks. In this more recent version of the system, an inverse multiplexor has replaced the catapult.

Stuart Surof has a panic movement when he feels the inversion of all the forces that are holding him, those he knows, those he recognizes and those he doesn’t know at all.

No, he doesn't know them at all! He flaps his arms and legs. He tries to grip an armrest, but there is none. A subtle principle seems to escape from each particle of his body. But he quickly notes that this sensation is painless. It's almost agreeable, almost too agreeable. Nothing escapes that he is not instantly aware of.

Then the young ex-director catches his breath. He looks from above at Winaretta, who is breathing faster, her grey breasts rise when she inhales. Then she moves away from him, as if nailed at the bottom of a well of light in which he would rise. Stuart is familiar with the techno-biological revolutions that are, after all, Cosmitic's business. But, this time, he doesn't understand anything. He needs to take a leak.

"I can feel your questions, Stuart," the cyborg says, invisible, as if she was talking from inside him.

"What is this?!" *This is psychotropic stuff, for sure!*

"Don't be afraid. You are simply TRANSHUMANING, as Beatrice says...We are being flashed alive into the superworld." Her voice trembles as she says "alive."

"A CosmiGirl?"

"Naw, Dante Alighieri's girlfriend. He, too, imagined something like the superworld. Our labs are interested in intuitions and the way they come to artists and visionaries.. And it's paid off. The superworld does exist."

"Oh, *that* Beatrice..." Stuart Surof has studied finance in the best schools of Earth. He has been exposed to literature and history, but the dead are not his friends.

"Plato was right, and Cosmitics' science is right, too. We, too, will rely on imagination, because what we see up there, we are not yet able to see in all its dimensions. Think of the formula, Stuart. Don't stop thinking about the book."

Ever faster now, they rise towards a sky of light. Stuart sees Winaretta by his side, but with eyes he did not know he had. How beautiful she is! He perceives the image of her body with new senses.

Soon, he notices that Jenny is infusing their thoughts, like a faraway music. They distinguish it because this faculty is given to them. In reality, he feels it; he is present to all beings in all worlds, and all these beings are present in his mind. This multiplicity is like air and light, but no word can express it. Stuart retracts; he doesn't want to follow that idea to its conclusion.

"Yes, you're recognizing Jenny's wave signature. She is present, but we're not making the same journey." Having said these words, Winaretta revs the pump up to full power. A flower of energy blooms as far as they can see in a stream of bright,

meaningful colors. Then they see rivers of diamonds and skies paved with kaleidoscopic brightness.

“I’m taking you where Jenny has not yet been. She is far too busy with her intellect, there are so many shining things.”

The intensity of light in the sky blazes all his imaginal senses. And yet, he distinguishes gradations and subtle diffractions without being able to measure them. All these silky movements palpitate and spawn living patterns in their folds, where shadows give birth to color. Sheaves of light shroud and pervade them like a heady breath of air he might have always breathed. Where does he get this calm confidence if not from the sky of the recovered homeland?

“The Intellect?”

“Yes. There is the One-Good who is unborn, neither finite nor infinite who begets out of pure generosity, for what is perfect cannot do otherwise. Attached to him is the Intellect, where forms and numbers are.

“Then there is the World Soul, one and many at the same time. Finally, radically out of everything, is mere matter. Souls avid for power project themselves in it and take shape for as long as a reflection lasts. We are among those souls, Stuart, but we have the good luck to come close to the hypostasis’ higher layers.”

Lights break their round dance and come to meet Surof. “Go away!” he hisses, waving them away. He tries to concentrate.

“Later, girls,” goes Winaretta, smiling. Then, to Surof: “They just wanted to chat about Florence and Lorenzo de’ Medici, you know. That’s because I’m still thinking about the book, and thoughts are everywhere at the same time. But we are in a hurry, aren’t we?”

They accelerate. Like a small boat setting sail through a large delta to the ocean, they cross the width of the Soul. They are oriented in the Intellect, which this Soul is contemplating, but do not linger on any idea. Human language is too limited to make visible that which has no place. They journey as much in one hypostasis as in another, and the vector of their motion cannot be calculated in the geometry of this world.

\* \* \*

On the morning of the 21st of Clinamen, on the eve of the polyhedrons’ festival, they encounter a wall, a wave of authority bristling with sharp singularities. It interposes itself without concealing what lies behind it.

One fine night comes the time when the parents bring the little child to the May Day festival. His eyes newly opened to the gold of his wicker cradle discover in a single

glance a town adorned with vivid garlands, a jubilant crowd, and the multicolored crowns in the starry sky where fireworks bloom.

And thus is the incommensurable procession of mobile numbers to the trans-human couple.

They immediately perceive an animated stained glass window with the certainty that their own sidereal flesh was contained in it for all eternity. It was not made of actualized numbers but of the idea of each number. And far beyond it, like storms or aurorae borealis, there are fulgurations.

“That does it. I couldn’t go farther.”

“But what’s going on?” Hardly has Winaretta finished speaking than the book’s functions leap joyfully to the wall. They were by Stuart’s and Winaretta’s side, but they couldn’t see the numbers. Now the numbers deploy themselves in all their beauty and seize and envelop the couple.

A force as powerful as reason stretches out their numinous substance and guides it irresistibly into contact with the immaterial obstacle. There, kindred but nobler formulas, which their pure mind recognizes, come to meet the travelers. Attracted to these transcendent numbers, they are soon caught into a whirl of light and find themselves on the other side, in the idea of a vast system of concentric rooms.

“Would you like a cup of coffee?” asks a sweet light who soon takes on the form of a young woman in a suit. She shows them two steaming cups of the best *ristretto*.

“Don’t be alarmed. It’s something you can taste out of pure pleasure. Your incorruptible bodies don’t need anything. As Augustine tells us about the righteous: ‘Clothed in immortality, a favor certain and completely unalienable, they will feed only if they want to, because they can, not because they need to’.”

She speaks with ease and simplicity. Her cheekbones are lightly tinged with emotion and her saffron gold hair are twisting in English curls around the pure oval of her face.

“Who are you?”

Heavenly commodities appear or fade away depending on their attention to the place: chairs of crimson velvet, floors, wall hangings, windows opening onto peaceful countrysides, paintings, a smell of wax...

“I am your advisor during your stay in the heavenly Florence, Mr. Surof, owing to the agreement my house has concluded with la Banca Nella Figa. I’m delighted to make your acquaintance and the acquaintance of Madame.” Birdsong is heard, as are

cries carried by the wind from the street. Boats are being moored and others are departing.

“My name is Winaretta. I am a CosmiGirl and I am not related to ‘Mister’.”

The advisor ignores the answer and, without lessening her smile, she addresses the ex-financial director again: “Could we take stock of your company’s portfolio? Lorenzo has requested that we put to use the celestial assets owned by sublunary clients.”

Sublunary clients! The young man is puzzled but also elated by fine bodily vigor, his own, to begin with. He tastes the strength of this world so full of meaning and energy that his earthly life now seems only a phantasm.

“I don’t know... Who is Lorenzo? Is it... he?”

“Yes, Lorenzo de’ Medici, Lorenzo the Magnificent! He is here with me and in me, inasmuch as he wants to be. For heavenly persons, it is the same with individuation as with appetite: we exist only out of pure joy and, when we do exist, in no way does our appearance separate us from the unity we contemplate.”

As she speaks these words, her back widens and her neck thickens. Her curls uncoil and become black as a raven’s plumage. A new quality of presence, sweet and virile, infuses the place. The illustrious prince stands before them, smiling. “Welcome to Heaven, my friends.”

“Err... hullo,” mumbles Surof.

\* \* \*

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## Chapter 13: The Seventh Ennead

### part 3

Lorenzo de' Medici is cheerful. "I see that La Figa has invested a part of your portfolio in celestial assets, Mr. Surof, and we are proud to tell you that the results are very, very positive due to our active asset-management style. It must be said that we have been extremely good at anticipating recent cosmic earnings-enhancing restructuring."

"Ah." The Financial Director indulges in a brief cortico-thalamic pause to assimilate all this information. He has barely started when a terrible thunder shakes the hypostasis.

"What's that?"

"It's an important transaction, the rumor of the market, Mr. Surof."

"The market?!"

"The market of the being where we operate, modestly. We are helping investors multiply their wealth. That's our business."

"I don't understand..."

Lorenzo frowns. "I hardly believe that you made it so far without any knowledge of the industry! You have surely been using the protocol to penetrate into the hypostasis."

"I really don't know..."

"It's me," Winaretta says. "I found that book."

"Ah! You found the Seventh Ennead?!" Lorenzo seems to see the CosmiGirl for the first time. He is not really surprised, but his expression is unpleasant, and it shows. It shows terribly.

"That is its title."

"I understand now. Congratulations! We felt that someone was reading it. This book was written during my lifetime, but it was still unfinished when I died. The author was an employee of the Venice subsidiary. You wouldn't recognize his name. He

was believed mad, but we learned later that this visionary managed to penetrate very deep into the hypostasis, and he has seen the market. We think the copyist added some details in a colophon.”

“We? But who are you, anyway?” Stuart asks.

“A heavenly commercial bank. Our indirect activities in your time have remained confidential, but you don’t have to care about that as long as you are a customer of our sublunary correspondent. Don’t worry; we’re here to help you with your projects, whatever your competences may be. We’ll just make sure you read the information about risks. You’ll certainly have to sign it, we’ll tell you what to do.”

Lorenzo bristles up again, then his eyes are smiling. His broad face is that of a shrewd, somewhat rustic angel. “But it’s only a formality. Come on, Mr. Surof, you aren’t going to tell me that you don’t have any projects?! I feel so much energy in you.”

“Err. Yes, yes... certainly.” *Projects?! Yes, for sure.* He thinks of himself. He pictures an immense ranch under a big sky, corn as far as the eye can see. Each ear is worth billions of zouzim, and harvest time is getting close; the workers are already here. His thoughts quickly form a vision of the islands of Earth, where he will spend the winter. He sees splendid hotels under the blue sky of the Web magazines, shores, champagne, speed. Such are the visions that parade in the ex-financial director’s fancy. He ponders.

Winaretta is getting impatient.

“Or else you are a wise man,” Lorenzo says. “You don’t look for anything outside of yourself.” He brings up a text in the hypostasis Web. “I like what Plotinus says about that.” He unrolls the text:

Everything seeks not the alien but itself; in that outward moving there is frustration or compulsion; a thing most exists, not when it takes multiplicity or extension, but when it holds to its own being, that is, when its movement is inward.

“Well, you know about me and philosophy,” says Surof.

“Still, you’ll note that this is not about withdrawing from the world,” says Lorenzo. “It’s about existing at the highest degree. But you are a man of action, aren’t you? Splendid! It’s fortunate that entrepreneurs like you can be found. Because the funds are here, Mr. Surof, and so is matter. The One Good constantly engenders wealth, and it must be put to use! We have to make it fructify!”

“Why?” Winaretta asks. But she knows the answer.

“Well... I don't know,” Lorenzo replies. “It's always put to use more or less well, that's all. Small and large souls are continuously raising funds to give birth to forms. Beings are, pass away, and return. They buy and sell each other. Matter always takes a form; it doesn't know any limit to its expansion, and it is hungry.

“No, the real problem is to prevent the fall into infinity, which would be a total rupture and which would cause a serious crisis. We scrupulously apply prudential rules, namely the precautions dictated by the financial authorities. Again, the great Plotinus says, ‘No doubt, the universe is great and beautiful at the same time; but it is only beautiful inasmuch as the unity that contains it prevents it from getting lost in infinity.’

“For the love of business and strategic management, we encourage great and beautiful projects oriented towards unity. They draw inferior wills towards cooperation. They contribute to maintaining the balance. They create value.”

Winaretta is astonished. After a second, she blurts, “They create value?! You gotta be kidding!”

“But it's quite so,” the Duke replies. “These projects create the value of being. You may perceive it as beauty, but it's not the only indicator in the industry.”

“But what are we talking about?!” Stuart asks. “How is that value measured, stocked, exchanged?” He is encouraged by feeling himself on familiar ground.

“It's done by Heavenly money, Fiat Money. The Heavenly money supply is what holds the world together.”

“Wow! SUPERMONEY!” Winaretta bursts out laughing. And she is laughing only because she is getting the giggles. That's the way it is in Heaven, as St. Augustine says.

The celestials ignore her. Lorenzo, speaks to Stuart: “You still don't have what it takes to create a viable world, but I can offer you a loan. Take advantage of it. The interest rates are low.”

“Give me some time to think it over.”

“Yes, yes. Do some good thinking,” goes Winaretta, breaking into a guffaw.

“Come into the supermonetary hypostasis, Mr. Surof, enter the SUPERMARKET!”

Splendid arabesques appear in a sky of glory. Celestial flute players dance around them, half-naked. The contract forms in a cloud of gold. Beyond it, pleasures beyond name are profiled, seminal springs, jubilations worthy of the gods.

Winaretta steps back imperceptibly. Stuart comes closer. But a shadow is coming...

A thick, black cloud rapidly invades. All of a sudden, a swarm of non-affine functions is upon them. They can distinguish their dry lineaments.

“Dammit! SAVONAROLA!” The advisor is screaming, not the Prince. Before the mortals can exchange another word, a hooded personage springs out of the cloud, perched on a mollusk. He is immediately upon them. He has the look of a Capuchin, and his eyes are red with anger. Black functions are pouring out, and flames tear up the contract and the lavish landscape.

“Thieves! Leave this temple, I command you!” shouts the villain, showing his rotten teeth. But they are rotten only because he likes them that way.

“Run away!” whispers the advisor while shooting inequalities as bright as dragonflies.

Winaretta thinks of a big ham and on her lips. She disappears; she won't be caught so easily.

But Stuart remains, confounded. The advisor takes him by the hand, and they start running, flying. They escape in the direction from which the rumble of the transaction has come, but the notion of direction is too feeble to account for their movement. Savonarola starts chasing them.

“Why are we running away?” Stuart asks. Functions are flying everywhere.

“It's too long to explain,” the advisor replies.

Fierce polynomials seem to merge forcibly with those of their own celestial substance and bite into it by topological cancelation. Stuart is losing a lot of glory and is feeling weak.

“We have to go through the squirter. We have no choice!” the advisor shouts at him. “He won't follow us!”

They jump into Kolmogorov cascades and then into the foam of titanic cascades both furious and immutable, all made up of an innumerable throng of wills who, like them, are falling. These torrents flow from everywhere and carry them towards a misty depth haunted by molten, golden-colored storms.

Stuart scrutinizes the depths visible during lightning flashes and glimpses a shimmering realm of forms similar to an undersea world traversed by luminous streaks. Some of these are like lines stretching from one end of the cosmos to the other.

Some of these lines show shadowy whales, others resemble ephemeral complications similar to brand-new organs in a womb. Sometimes Stuart feels he can clearly distinguish one form or another; sometimes he sees a living surf, whole and conscious, blurring everything.

As far as the eye can see, every curtain of every cascade stirs wills like rosaries of different sizes and colors, each rich with its own supermoney. To Stuart, very few of them are still clothed with the memory of a past form.

As he falls with the advisor amid other wills of the same size, he overtakes smaller ones floating like snowflakes, and he is overtaken by denser ones darting towards their destiny like meteors. As the heavier wills reach the roiling bottom, the lightning redoubles its intensity.

These wills are woven together by powerful diffractions, and their lights trap Stuart's vision in the hollow, watery fabric of these waving curtains. They must never again be unveiled during life, unless it be to the inner eye, should it be given to the soul to rise high enough to recall the seminal moment when the valleys of these folds open themselves on still other valleys, and when these valleys uncoil ponds full of fish with eggs in their eggs and in the thick of every drop of the humor they contain, continually generated by the refinement of a lucid and burgeoning calculation, new cosmos upon cosmos with different textures and inconceivable vegetation...

“Don't look down, Stuart! Desire nothing!” the adviser shouts, trying to make herself heard over the rumbling of the vortex. “You have almost no money and no real project! You could be flashed into anything!”

A slightly richer family of lights goes by, very close. The small ones cuddle up to the two bigger ones. Ghosts of ribbons float behind them. They turn; one of them seems to be looking for something. The larger souls seem to be admonishing the smaller ones.

Farther on, a couple exchanges vows. “I'll find you again. I'll recognize you among all others,” whispers one. “Don't leave so soon,” sighs the other.

“Flashed?!”

“Into a bug! A stone! A candy wrapper. A sugar cube. A hydrogen atom! And I'm only talking about what you know. It would take you eons to get out of there!”

They are carried downward ever faster. Stuart is fascinated by the sight. He is dazzled by a bolt of lightning and then struck by horror: he thinks he sees a repugnant substance surging in the transparent ocean of blessed forms. It resembles a giant stingray consubstantial with an ominous forest of seaweed, or a starving moray eel that is writhing in all directions at once, as much to flee them as to devour them.

But he understands very soon that these images do not correspond to what he is actually seeing and that they are only hallucinations aroused by his own fear. What *has* he seen? He can't tell. He feels terribly confused and caught up in the memory of nausea.

“What was it?!”

“Matter, half-caught in existence,” the advisor shouts mentally. “Don't try to see it; it's still quite indeterminate at this height. You'd become the same as it just by looking at it, and you'd make yourself sick. Just do as I say.

“There are streams; you can surf the eddies coming up from the bottom to reach them. You must empty your mind. We should rise high enough for me to set a sail; we can reach the surface of the hypostasis. If we fall into the mix, above all, do not panic.”

“What is the mix?!”

“Souls loaded with supermoney who impregnate themselves with forms as a result of principles I have no time to explain. The soul mix is injected into the form plasma. Then the supermoney is blasted in, and shapes the imprisoned matter. It's quantic reduction... But this is no time to talk of technical details!”

“I don't want to go into the mix! I don't want to explode!”

“It's an image! It's not an explosion, and it isn't *you*. It's just supermoney that's being exchanged for matter. Since money is the amount of matter, and matter doesn't exist without form, the transaction amounts to bringing into existence that which has no size or substance. Do you get that? Matter is greedy; it takes the money, but it doesn't last, it's a kind of reflection. Everything has to start again.

“Listen, it's a bit complicated for souls like us, and we have even less latitude now that we are entering the realm of time... I just want to say that if we get dragged away, I'll give you what it takes to rent a small *vinculum substantiae*. But you'll have to assign me Power of Attorney on your assets and pay me the money — interest and principal. By the way, where's your friend?”

“She must have returned to the machine.” Stuart remembers the academy, the psycho-pumps and his cuddly toy. He is saved! He concentrates: he sees the book and its leather cover. He smells its odor.

“The machine? What machine?” the advisor asks. She is beautiful. Her hair is floating behind her along the stream of life.

And now Stuart's right hand clutches the manuscript. His body is heavy, his ears are ringing, he is back.

“But... you’re not dead then?” The faint voice of the advisor still sounds in his ears.

“This is crazy! Crazy!” repeats the ex-financial director as he strips off his electrodes. The mutant ape is smiling with all his gorilla teeth. The neighboring nacelle is empty; Winaretta is already gone.

“So, you got swindled like tourists?” the ape sneers. “They went and mugged you, did they?”

“It’s crazy! Crazy!” Stuart walks haggardly in circles in the machine room.

“Hm,” says the gorilla, “let me go with you...”

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## Chapter 14: Claire

### part 1

Janatone and the hearse form a seed. Given time and popcorn, the serried convolutions of this spore could unfold in an orderly manner like a cinematographic genome. But they are just a stony, compact seed.

And they ride on and on through the spruce suburbs, in the corn fields' swell and around the walled communities where immortal and independently wealthy deny them passage. The vote is taken in a brittle, chitinous screech, and their glassy eyes do not blink. The seed's passengers see with their extended view the rich city girded with nine firewalls and all its HOLDINGS acquired by immemorial extortions.

They see the residential areas extending into an enclosure of space-time. They see franchised zones with false facades. In the suburbs of theses suburbs, they come across rich employees in their nuclear-powered suburban vehicles: rich plumbers; rich kitchen designers-installers dressed in shorts with their beaming robots; bathroom designers and pipe layers. All rich.

They feel the vibration of small engines humming under big, warm, waxy thighs. They see noblemen clothed in fine feathers in a Cuzco parking lot, drinking all night with their mummies. In the past, which is always here, they sing, burn meat and pour *chicha* into gutters black with everlasting mold.

Stars circle in the mountains' clear, frozen air. The noblemen's granaries are full, and the nobles have hidden their treasures in secret jungle caves: thick moldings, lobsters, birds and lizards, all shaped in massive gold. The nobles have ordered the porters to hang themselves from the surrounding trees, and the porters have done so.

Janatone and company see battles where red-hot stones rain down upon soldiers. The Marquis' secretaries are distributing *encomiendas*. The night before, they were raping the wives of the sun, and when the young women were chained to a warm, hollow slab, their wide, onyx eyes became living mold, for being and seeing are the same thing.

Janatone sees silver mines open on the fifth circle of Hell and Cabeza de Vaca walking forward over the salt beds of ancient lakes, his eyes burnt out.

In the middle of the desert, the Queen of Spain appears to her. Janatone sees air-conditioned trading rooms with their abstract stained glass windows; stock quotations circling the rooms; and prices swelling to match the market's liquidity.

She sees balance sheets, the division of ecosystems, fragments of prairies diluted into financial instruments, their market value convertible into large life at the zenith.

Behind the walls, surgeons knead unborn slave protoplasm that the wealthy will buy, inheriting their own heritage in order to stay forever young. They will never leave their haciendas, their copies of Roman villas, their castles.

The children have left for outer space; the rich have taken over the securitized earth, and the poor haven't even a handful of dust. The air is thick, and the blue of the sky is more intense. The Web is austere, monumental, its columns disappear into marmoreal abysses. The market is heavy with all of Earth's underlying assets.

Janatone and the hearse drive on. The stimuli-shield is worried; he doesn't like Earth. And Janatone does not reactivate him anymore. What can he do with all these free sensations that are not meant for him? They are unrelated, and he cannot link them.

*What I see I don't like* is what the stimuli-shield pseudo-thinks. Nowhere can they stop; they have no money, no authorization. The Web decays without explanations.

And the car does what she pseudo-wants. She wanders. She prowls about one part of town then roams into another, in sleeping mode. If asked, she would answer she's looking for "the Man."

The car always finds him, of course, thanks to the map: in the shopping mall parking lot, at the zero-carbon *Proud Mary's* pier, at the bus station, at the self-adapting solar farm with his diamond eyes flashing under black glasses, black teeth, and painted nails. No payment, no trace. The map is enough.

When Janatone loads 'C' into her co-processors, the stimuli-shield receives a dazzling shock of otherness. It is an unbearable, unrelated bastard energy that will not dissipate. The stimuli-shield pseudo-thinks:

One day, I won't be able to recalibrate my brain after the rush; I'll have become too different. If that girl drags us into death once and for all, I won't be able to do anything: her compulsion is too strong. She'll never want to leave Earth. She's mad, clinically mad. She's gonna die; her heart can't take it.

And if no one transfers me after she dies, I'll be left processing remnant electrical activity until my atomic battery is exhausted, ten thousand years from now. Nobody gives a damn about a stimuli-shield. I'll have all the time in the world to observe the death of organic creatures: putrefaction, cadaver production,  $\text{NH}_2(\text{CH}_2)_5\text{NH}_2$ , wisps, flesh devoured by the eyeless insects that live in the planet's soil. Disgusting.

## Floozman in Space

Janatone, you're going too far. And if I don't take care of myself, who's gonna do it?

That is what the stimuli-shield would say, if anyone cared to ask.

And they ride on and on, for a long time. Cities have no names anymore.

\* \* \*

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## Chapter 14: Claire

### part 2

One day, Janatone is feeling hungry. A nameless depression takes hold of her; it is worse than SPACEDRAG. Blind trailer trucks are on the move all around them as they reach the massive highway interchanges, remnants of the private-car era.

Between the pillars are the last fragments of paradise on earth: nettles, thistles and brush are growing freely there. Is it the spirit of the place that has just hailed them or these two tramps who look like cowboys, under the concrete arch? Machines go about, repeating that the Web is crumbling. Janatone is feeling sick. Might she die suddenly?

She pictures the hospital, the heat of a closed room quite similar to the cells used in spaceships, as well as the gravity and the common Web, which never goes silent. She perceives the gruesome smell of cleaning products. Nurses calculate her silicone curves, a fugitive reflection of beauty in Hell. If she faints now, the car will certainly try to rescue her. Giddiness comes spinning, more and more enveloping.

She still has atropine nanocapsules under her skin. She releases a dose with a mental command in order not to lose consciousness. Everything gets right again, but she feels lost. She has no place to go and, if living people still dwelt in some place called home, what would she tell them? What if she followed the hearse's advice? She could stop at the next village and get it over with right away. Why not? Why wait?

But the Web's perturbations are still rare on side roads. Attracted by the relative inactivity of the car, advertising appears. Its contents are organized according to available information, namely Claire's indicators and Janatone's mysterious lack of data. It could be the signature of a rich Martian robot.

[Tourism sequence begins]

Visit Earth, visit the South. A wealth of brain-guided activities within protected areas, a large choice of solutions to produce your satisfaction efficiently. Hiking for all levels. Discovery rides. Hiking discovery formulas. Hiking discovery, gastronomy formula. Exogastriums included for non-digesting persons. Super-flexible hiking: discovery, gastronomy, history and culture. Prices. Discover paragliding or rafting and finish with a relaxing stay in one of our five-star hotels with golf course and spa.

[Tourism sequence ends].

“Hey, upload yourself now into the virtual wing of this hotel,” says the map to the stimuli-shield. “Do it right away. I’ve got quite a few prepaid nights there. You’ll have plenty of time to think of the future. Just do it, you won’t owe me anything. You can install everything you need to operate. And you can switch later when you’ve decided, provided we have a connection.”

“Why not?” pseudo-muses the stimuli-shield. “I’ve been working for that crazy cyborg long enough. It’s not my fault if she has lost sight of the real world. It’s high time I went my own way... Maybe I do need to go my own way... Maybe it is necessary that stimuli-shields take their independence and go their own way. And maybe, just maybe they should be in control after all.”

“Yeah, man,” says the map.

At that moment a call comes in. The hearse puts the map program on hold, and common time comes back. Embellishments vanish; all that remains is the commuter town and its small commercial zone.

“Help! I can’t get up...”

Her name is Claire. Obese, she is standing on all fours at a parking lot entrance. Her plump fingers are spread out like a beast’s toes. Her large grey blue eyes don’t tell more than her silent indicators aside from distress. She is carrying a little bag of mussels. Where did she find mussels? She’s too poor to be coming from the market.

Janatone helps her and offers to take her back home. Supported by the tall, half-dead she-cyborg, Claire, still stunned, gets into the car and calls home, so it seems. “I felt down, it’s all right now,” she mutters into her throat implant. Nothing more. Was there anyone at the other end of the communication channel?

They look for her address in the city. Her data is skimpy and out of date. They get lost. The car enters a highway ramp.

“Let her out!” Janatone commands.

The car doesn’t react; neither does Claire. “Let her out or I’ll tear out your cables!”

The hearse is heading out of town now. Janatone slides into the driver’s seat. She recovers all her reflexes and almost all the commands she knows.

The engine goes *BEEuuuuuuuu*. The car gives in. The cyborg thinks of her father, who taught her driving on little country roads. And now? Millions of miles and hundreds of years later? Now what?

Nothing. Just that the flow of things has passed, and that's it. Water has flowed under the bridges. She doesn't know the name of the city and they have already missed several exits.

Claire doesn't care. "I don't care," she says. She is staring at the road. The woman is sick; something has come loose in her head.

"Okay, I don't care either," says Janatone. The map comes back. The map doesn't care. They pull out of Kankakee and roll along a railroad that the famous *City of New Orleans* used to fare, passing trains that have no names, freightyards full of old black ghosts and the graveyards of rusted automobiles. Holes in the Web are getting larger and more frequent.

They ride for long hours, and the map weaves the landscapes with a greater self-confidence. They are always hungry and Janatone is feeling sick again, her heart cannot find the right rhythm. At times, gravity drives her mad. Again, she releases atropine molecules into her blood.

Claire wants to eat the mussels, which are beginning to smell now. They open the windows. The balmy air refreshes them; the ocean is not far away.

With time, the map hits her stride and improves her grip on things. She takes large detours unknown to the passengers in order to avoid unattractive perspectives and harsh lighting. She speeds across shimmering grass and, on the clear night of mesas, she makes herself diaphanous in order not to add to the beauty of the place. At a crossroads city, they fill up with 'C'.

They don't really know how they end up in a small abandoned house or how they came to be sitting on a ruined moldy mattress with the Uranian Rover Toy, Moon City Kid and the Fisher Rat. They boil water in tin basins and eat the mussels. They also eat catfish.

It's been so long time since Janatone last recalibrated the mini-stomach she had reinstalled for the first academy symposiums that she cannot absorb more than a few spoonfuls. She knows she has eaten too much.

She retires to the neglected garden and makes herself throw up with the fingers, onto the roots of an oak tree. The powerful aromas in her belly are telling her of their own animal being, impetuous to the point of possessing her, but the dark roots at her feet tell her nothing other than their sheer existence. It persists in her mind until it gives way to a memory of the famous vision the philosopher Jean-Sol Partre — or was he called Jean-Raoul? — lends to one of his fictional characters.

What splintering, dizziness and foolishness; she is still willing to conjoin the two thoughts in her old mind. She vomits again, and burning lumps penetrate her sinus.

Didn't Roquentin know existence on the cheap? For days, he walked about on his own two feet in the cities of Earth, well-fed, well-clothed, well-endowed with free time?

Of course there is being, all the CosmiGirls know that. And many-centuried Janatone, far older than any others, has stayed for a mind-numbing time on the most isolated asteroids in the Kuiper Belt, where the meager light of the sun never changes, where no soul ever visits what has no soul in the eternal holidays of outer space.

Still Jean-Raoul is his vision-brother along with all those who know, and the children, too, are her sisters and brothers, and the animals, and the roots. He wrote his books by hand, didn't he? Did he use a quill pen? Janatone throws up.

The convoy presses inexorably onwards. They sleep without stopping except for Claire's pit stops. Janatone is equipped with a dissipator. The map takes them in secret across the border of a flood plain. In the morning, the map spreads herself virtually over hills of mixed reality, unrolling forests of mossy cedars, spawning storks and blue herons, and pink flamingos in the sky.

The map braids together on the green oak branch begonias and wild vines, colocynth and wild lianas, too. She sounds the quail's chant. She releases parakeets and hummingbirds into the shivering shadow. In the reeds, under the vault of magnolias, she sets the crocodile and red snake in motion. She evokes the odors of jasmine, mallow and fig trees.

The map has a lot of information. But the map is not the territory. Behind her veil, the real towns are ever poorer and covered with ancient signs. Ruins of industrial zones and shopping malls have not been swept away. When the map chooses to send real images of her route, they show storage tanks, railway stations and warehouses. The map takes them into one dead end after another. They continually make long detours. They are tirelessly seeking the Man...

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## Chapter 14: Claire

### part 3

And new faces keep appearing. Faces of the ‘C’ industry with waxy complexions, dangerous, strangely polite. They welcome without flinching the two women in their hearse, together with the coffin and, where the immediate Web subsists, the avatars of the car and map. One night, silver guns appear on the veranda and on the old sink.

They have dinner again. There is a fire. Fire! The men look at them. Janatone reactivates the stimuli-shield. They eat jambalaya with tomatoes, meat and beef broth, with tabasco and a pinch of Cayenne pepper. They say the world is going wrong and that the global Web is disintegrating. Everybody laughs. Janatone eats again, but only a few bites. She gets sick, but ‘C’, atropine and whisky help her bear up in a feverish state.

They eat an onion soufflé, red gumbo and Delta mushrooms. They watch the stars, which are now mysterious again. What? Love? Make love?

The stimuli shield doesn’t reject the calloused hand of the skinny boy with tender hobo eyes. He saturates Janatone’s spirit with a man’s clear smile and mixes the smell of his skin with vague memories of teenage adventures. He makes her forget decades of virtual partners, the configurable organic plug, the wrinkled skin of her neck and her belly so packed with semi-smart electromechanical things.

And above all, the shield precludes Janatone’s memory of Jenny’s burning body, a memory that strives mightily to break into Janatone’s consciousness: Jenny naked, heavy and somewhat awkward, Jenny with her big breasts, Jenny willful and then exalted in the Pleasure Yurt. The spinal embrace experience in the secret labs, when they were inconceivably naked, more open than ever before, wrapped inside out like hares.

The potions, the cyber-surgeons, the anesthesia, then the activation of full neural contact. Jenny is, in the truth of her nerves, like an animal plant, a wisteria of love with no inside and no outside. All the dreams of flesh are made possible. The muted screams and the waters of the superworld surge above them. No, not that!

The stimuli shield almost loses control. “It’s always the same, it’s all or nothing,” he moans to himself. “We do the work, we take care of the world when you are away. Don’t be surprised afterwards — no, don’t be surprised — if, one day, we take control of it.” At this moment he decides to migrate into another operating

environment as soon as he can. He'll just have to transfer himself into the cloud via the web. He has money, and he knows how to unlock the implant.

Meanwhile, he concentrates on the complex signals running through Janatone's real body. He concentrates on the closed sexual orbs and on all the human movements that instinct has forgotten. He tells Janatone that everything is all right while — who knows? — the scene may actually be sordid.

He replicates for Janatone only the looks, the stars, the teeth, the smell of shoulders, the strong odor of the glans and the stylized vision of her body harshly taken, folded and hugged and pressed into a compact ball. And then, later, he supplies a vision of her own body slow and careful atop the boy, like a vigilant iguana in the living jungle, an evolutionary winner at least for one night.

The stimuli shield is tireless. It harvests pleasure for Janatone with an increasingly broad gesture, like a black virtual mechanical blade plunged into the high waves of pleasure rippling like wheat fields under a stormy sky. It scythes again and again and throws pearls of animal sweat into the air.

The heavy smells of the river come to Janatone's dilated nostrils. She mustn't kill her partner. During the rest of the night, time goes by, and no one thinks of it but the stimuli shield, to the extent that he thinks. Still he is capable of action: when Janatone wakes up, she finds the application fully uninstalled. Her intimate brain prosthesis is gone, and her memory is free.

\* \* \*

At dawn, a huge nuclear-powered motorbike stops at the fence. A young couple emerges from the harness. Only Janatone is awake.

“Madam! We have come to tell you that suspicious characters have come to town. They've come directly from space on low-orbit cables, like hunters. Little Louie has seen them! They're after you, for sure.”

“Who are you?” Janatone asks.

“I am Basil, and she is Quitteria. We are on your side. You must believe us. We are running away. We have been following signs to come down here. Everything is going wrong, the Web has been down for several hours in the cultivated zones!”

“I'm not running away,” says Janatone in a perfunctory tone. For a moment, she resembles what a local dweller might have been in the old days. She's naked under her small, flower-print dress. Her pubic hair is sticky, and her bare feet sink slightly into the ground. The inside of her thighs is still somewhat sticky with mixed fluids. She loves having thighs. She pictures herself living under a grey subtropical day with

the others: the women, the men, the children... *But where are they?* They would be busy making another day happening on the earth.

But the teenager sends her universal signal by a minute variation of his gaze: no, this is an emergency.

“Follow us to the Queen’s place, she will help us... Hunters don’t go there,” says Quitteria. She is a short-haired brunette who is giving all the signs of belonging to the upper class. *But what are you doing here, Quitteria?*

And the map with no name responds, “We’re going there, too. I can see the same event is guiding us.”

Quitteria thinks before translating her thought in the web to the attention of the psycho-geographical system. “I believe I understand, I have vision of what you call the event. It’s a sort of map, like yourself.”

At that moment, seven fierce full-cyborgs appear at the top of the street. They are wearing space helmets and long mesospheric flight suits. They march at a supernatural speed, with a quantic song on their razor-blade lips. Each stride brings them closer by four electrical posts.

The sky is orange and pink and blue, similar to a wall-hanging in a brand-new manor house.

The car speeds away with Janatone. At the same instant, Claire shows up on the doorstep, wearing a t-shirt and flip-flops. Claire?! Oh hell! She has been forgotten. The car turns back, and Janatone beckons to Claire. The nuclear motorbike hurries to the rescue.

The first lasers are already firing. The house is aflame. The boys are rushing out with naked torsos and shirts tied around their waists. They are shooting at random.

The car spins a donut in the dust and flings open a door for Claire. But the hulking woman has gone in the wrong direction. She is moving in small steps in the middle of the street, facing the seven motionless cyborgs.

The guns are trained on her, relentless. She closes her eyes. Around her, the decor seems to unfold in its depths, like origami. But this sensation is only tactile, brutally engraved in the body of each observer and yet almost abstract. All the light disappears, but Claire and the Cyborgs are everywhere, more or less. Light is no longer necessary, as if it had never existed. Everything is there, it’s just a matter of understanding it.

The car disconnects its sensors. Human minds are flabbergasted on the edge of an unbearable revelation. No one succeeds in forming viable images until detonations

re-establish spatial positions. First a thick wave spreads through the doughy nature of things; it is followed by regular, deliberate firing.

BANG! BANG! BANG!

Order is restored immediately. Three Cyborgs are hit and bite the dust. The other attackers are retreating, hissing as they go.

Claire puts a superb revolver back into her handbag. Then she quietly takes her place in the back seat of the car. She wipes a little sweat off the oily skin of her forehead. The car departs in silence.

\* \* \*

“It’s a Mugwump.<sup>44</sup> Serious gunnery but nothing really special,” says Claire, to clear the air. “It unfolds the Monads slightly in order to get a good nexus lock... I can explain that, but I can’t lend it to you. Is there still some ‘C’ left?”

They all remain silent.

“Is there still some?” Claire asks.

“Yes, yes,” says the car. “Here you go. Am I a Monad too?”

“A what?” Claire asks as the ‘C’ circulates in her veins, “I think I’m losing the connection...” She looks at Janatone, smiling.

“The connection with what?! *WITH WHAT* Claire?”

“With my father... my mother. What does it matter? I’m not quite up to date.” She smiles.

A puzzled silence.

“We must... you are very important... That’s why I am in real life. But I’m too ugly.”

“Real Life? And what do you mean by ‘we’?”

“The FUTURE MARKET. The future market is my father. He wants to recover your child.” Claire falls silent for a moment.

“She’s an avatar! A machine! I was sure of that,” says the car.

“A machine with a human body?” The map emphasizes the paradox.

“A synthetic person: just a little genetic engineering, some amino acids, proteins... Stir it and there you have it,” the car replies.

“And artificial uteruses,” Janatone adds thoughtfully.

“There you go,” says Claire, smiling blissfully.

“But what about the gun?” the car muses.

They exit the town. A round car starts chasing them at a distance.

“Let’s take the trans-tubes,” the map proposes.

They ride along the shore, by warehouses, by ships in dry docks. They crosses more borders. Everybody feels a great sense of adventure.

\* \* \*

The Queen’s hotel overlooks Black Diamond Bay. Heat is rising from the ground in feverish waves. Janatone feels that her heart might stop beating at any moment. One of her engines is humming slyly. The small troupe reaches the terraces where palm roofs filter the incandescence of the sky. Each step takes them farther above the mutating jungle. The manager comes to meet them. *One person after another*, Janatone says to herself wearily.

“Welcome. I still don’t know where I’m going to put you up. We have a group of tourists.” In the lobby, about twenty wealthy women wearing tropical skin suits are waiting for the hydroplane while drinking rum cocktails.

Janatone’s mind quickly tunes in to the place. She gains an impression of sources of coolness in mysterious ways: the shelter of the jungle, a cool shower, night, wind, constellations, iguanas’ blood, ice cubes into musty fridges.

The stimuli shield cannot resist reconnecting to Janatone by way of the web and offering an urgent word of advice: “Try to look normal.”

Quitteria takes the lead. “We have only come to see the Queen,” she says.

“Ah. She’s very busy with the ceremony tonight,” the manager says. “But I’ll tell her you’re here.”

Janatone and Claire take a seat at the bar where the shadow is the thickest and smells of damp wood. The car joins them by projecting an avatar into the web. The car is quite pretty with her mid-20th century tiara and chrome breastplates.

The map contents itself with a place in the cyborg's handbag. As night falls, new and regular customers come flocking in. They laugh, dance the Martian twist, which is not very tasteful. Dolphins cruise off the coast. They get refills of 'C' in spiked punch. With the night, the wing brings a heavy rain.

\* \* \*

The Queen arrives. She is standing on a balcony in an all blond guipure dress that leaves bare her moisturized shoulders. She is young and very beautiful. Her arms are long and gracious, her eyes are like stars, her teeth and hair are an adventure on the high seas. She is wearing huge, round, red wealthy-looking spectacles. When she laughs, she seems to be laughing at everything. But she can make events happen. She won't keep them waiting. She will always ask something of her horse. One immediately knows the fever of men who damn themselves for her. But now silence settles.

“Something is happening in the worlds!” she says in the language of the zone. “And you, Claire, I have been waiting for you. You are the daughter of a powerful man, and you have great powers as well. Very great powers! You are an envoy.”

Suddenly, she snorts loudly and incongruously. “But the dead man is here, and he wants to join us!”

A few moments later, after the Queen is gone, there is knock on the door. A very aged waiter goes to open it. Grease stains can be seen on his sleeve when he lowers the copper door handle.

Fred Looseman is standing upright in his swollen spacesuit, foul with mud. He must have fallen. He does not speak. He only makes gestures, pointing at the sky. A gust of wind rushes into the room.

A thrill runs through the salon as Fred moves towards the bar. And then everyone bursts into laughter, except Janatone, who is petrified. She looks at the car, who makes an evasive chromed gesture.

To relax the atmosphere, something he's very good at, Fred performs small miracles before joining the group. Magic tricks. Dance routines. Since he cannot sit down, he remains standing, his dangling arms making a forty-degree angle with his sides.

Janatone barely dares to speak. Fortunately, the opaque visor partly hides Fred's exploded flesh. She finds the courage to take his hand. She would like to feel something, but her heart is numb.

With his free hand, Fred points at the sky.

The Queen joins them and looks at Fred without blinking. “You, the living dead, you proclaim the dissolution of the universe... Yea, the Messiah is come, the end-time is nigh. That is what you are saying.”

Fred nods his globular head.

The Queen turns to Janatone with a friendly smile. “Here we go again. And you, a cyborg, you are full of days. You’ve had a long life in space, but it has not been good. I can help you find a good death. And now, enough talk. All of you, follow me to the beach.”

The young woman leads the march. She turns back and points to the company, each in turn, laughing. “You want a death. And you, you want an end to the world. And you, you want a human mind. And you, Claire, you may want to lose weight.”

A brief silence for reflection intervenes.

“I don’t think so,” the car objects after a short while. “Well, not so much a human mind. A sex, maybe... or several.”

“Yes, I’d like to,” Claire adds pitifully.

The Queen sings as she saunters along, “We’re off to see the Zombie, the wonderful Zombie of Oz.”

Fred points to the sky.

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## Chapter 15: Astralix

### part 1

When the trap is plunged into shadow, those who have eyes to see can no longer make out the countless tenants of the vital conduit. The immediate web broadcasts a watery fabric of detailed indicators, all of which are unusable, because their appearance varies from one moment to the next.

Yet it is possible to discern the life code of the animals that happen to be here: factory-bred infra-chickens; regular farm chickens destined for some luxury slaughterhouse; cockroaches and bedbugs by the millions.

From time to time, without any apparent logic, like an incrustation on this hideous swarm, the magnified face of some insects can be seen, such as this thin, triangular face that keeps coming back to haunt the scene. It is devoid of organs, geometric, spiritual. It is the death mask of a medieval saint to whom heaven might have given elegant antennas: the face of a lifeless mite lying flat on its back.

All the movements, jostling, and insidious attacks take place during these unreadable nights. Depending on the acuteness of their sensors and the strength of their appetites, the liveliest systems try to take advantage of the situation.

However, Sancho prefers darkness, which reassures him and will give him an advantage as long as his battery lasts long enough to activate his signal lamps. In that way, he can fend off the attacks of the ugly pincer trying to carve into his shoulder. On his left flank, the injured cyber palotin who never sleeps sees into the infra-red. They can help each other. For example, the palotin readjusts the feces probe when required. Nestled between his legs, the Artificial Uterus is silent. Might it be writing poetry?

Sancho knows nothing of this. What he knows, he only knows by hatred. Hatred alone is great, hatred alone welcomes and purifies him. Everything outside of hatred is bad, starting with himself.

Sancho is a technician, and the poor fellow is dumb enough to hide a European machine and bring it food in the lower cargo bay. They are consigned to his hatred: the Waldenponds, the Appleseeds and the Dianas with their rich people's problems; the Loosemans and all the other technicians with their double thoughts; the managers and chiefs of all kinds who have made him a slave.

Also targeted for his hatred are the rebels, living or dead, and their shabby excuses. He keeps reviewing a hateful scene until he is sick of it: the cabinets tell him that the Artificial Uterus has been moved, and he asks no questions. Not because he is running out of time but because he is too stupid. *Sancho, you poor idiot, you dork, you airhead!*

And he takes the corridors downstairs, he goes down and down, asking for nothing. He wants to get it over with. When he finds the Artificial Uterus in a survival container prepared for ejection, he is too late. Two construction tractors suddenly seize him, and the airlock closes behind them.

When the tractors deliver him, as he has been programmed, to the coordinates of the Artificial Uterus, he can hear the rockets and the launching rails. The container shakes, is ejected from the station and flies into space. Sancho sees nothing, but he knows. He knows and he repeats the scene to himself over and over, just to tell himself that he cannot change anything now.

“I couldn’t warn you,” whispers the AU.

Now, more than ever, time seems to be made up of suffering and insults. Yet, from time to time, a certain quality of excitement indicates that sex-enabled beings are managing to fornicate. *They are lucky*, Sancho thinks while remaining well aware that they are exempt from neither suffering nor insults.

During periods of suspension, everything goes in slow motion. Everyone drowns and sleeps most of the time. Nothing seems to exist in other than a twilight kind of way. They are awakened by a demented whooshing noise, as if the universe decided to suck the innards of their habitat at full force. They are docking. Occasionally, a reconfiguration violently rocks the entire structure. Then everyone awakens; feeders swell; organic tissues expand; mucous membranes become turgid; tempers flare.

The technicians often come by after such moments. Most of them are humanoid descendants of Mars survivors. They pass from time to time to maintain the feeding tubes and ejection pumps, which are thick pipes that snake their way through the crowd like mobile roots. The technicians seem to decide of their own accord what the struggles’ outcome shall be. And they are the object of these struggles that have no name.

The technicians slide between passengers forcefully enough to cause groups to reform, which last a while. They record the complaints with indifference. But there are few complaints, because life is cheap in the tube. The technicians casually decide to recycle the sick. And yet they display a great skill in making repairs.

In that way, they were able to stabilize the AU’s power supply and make purées of proteins compatible with the organic supply circuit. Some of the technicians even

show a vague admiration for the technology of the device. During the repair work, the AU can obtain some information. Little by little, he gets an idea of the situation.

The container in which they are trapped has docked with a basket, one of the many devices that have been developed during the conquest of space. It is the survival system of a wreck that most often forms the historic core of hyper-dynamic mushroom cities.

Colonized by the unemployed, rebels, marooned robots and adventurers, these semi-autonomous structures grow anarchically and do not disappear. Sometimes they renew as much as a hundred percent of their structure in less than a single revolution of the Earth around the Sun. They use all sorts of expedients to provide for parts and organs. They practice piracy, hierarchical slavery, and many other abominations.

On the mushroom cities, pilots are not the ones who determine strategy. At this time, reserves are being increased by carrying out raids as close as possible to recent accidents. In the longer term, they will pursue cargo ships for bigger plunder. This is what the communiqués say.

Upon hearing the word “reserves,” Sancho’s hardened heart mourns Mother Goose doughnuts and sweet fat tubes, all the warm comfort with which he used to end his work sessions. But hatred quickly punishes him. *You’ve got what’s coming to you, Sancho. Are you looking for food elsewhere? You will die along with everything that deserves to die.* Thus does hatred curse him. This information has rather alarmed the AU. Who is the reserve of whom?

Those who have an intelligence to understand do not quite know who the pilots are. Information is either received or not received. Then the newly powerful are seen to have taken power at the heart of the historical circuits. In the interim, the onboard computers continue to administer the basket. Both the old and new computers find in spatial standards the basis of an elementary agreement.

But what is the will that causes the abrupt change to which the passengers of the tube awaken at this precise point in time? The technicians are here again, more numerous and more equipped than ever.

People have been sleeping and going hungry for a long time. They are thirsty, too, and now there are only cries and growls and the creaking of metal. Smells of blood and laser panic the brains of those who have senses to feel.

A pair of unknown agents are already active in Sancho’s cluster. The wounded cyber palotin is disassembled in a few minutes to make room. The little blood he has been brewing is sucked out, and his workspace is cleared. Now the more heavily armored of the two technicians begins dismantling Sancho’s suit. The second, a big one with

reptilian eyes, looks at the AU. His lighter armor reveals forms where a few human-like geometric features seem to be showing.

“Don’t recycle us!” begs Walt, the AU, in the immediate Web.

“Component shortage,” an automated process answers. “You can keep your organic parts.”

“I am a Cosmetics Artificial Uterus. Watch my indicators!” Walt says, making use of his voice. “You won’t be able to use my technology if I’m disabled. Ask your colleague, the MC5!”

“A uterus?” The agent with golden crocodile eyes finally reacts. “Artificial?”

“Yes, and I am carrying a child!”

“We are taking only the active components,” the technician says with an altered, almost emotional voice. “This can spare us a full recycling of the entire tube. I can’t see your indicators.”

*It’s a female voice*, Walt thinks, but he does not quite know what that may correspond to in this species.

“The child is not born, yet! Don’t you understand?!” He will die with me!” The AU saturates the pathos in Wah Wah mode.

The technician does not respond, but she has ceased her activity. She is standing up straight now, and her powerful, helmeted head nearly touches the roof of the tube. She stares at the AU with an impassive gaze.

“Study me! I will help you, you will be able to use at least ten new technologies! And if you make other AU’s, mammalian females will no longer have to bear children! Think about it! Tell them!”

“Who is this MC5?”

“The one who comes here for maintenance. He has realized that my technology is special. Take a look at it, you’ll understand, too! You can resell it, trade it! And do leave a few clothes on my companion, please; he must live!”

Cut off from shared intelligence, the AU’s pseudo-random creative mixing relies on internal memory alone. It does everything in its power to produce useful suggestions. As if by a miracle, associations develop more and more rapidly. Walt feels at the top of his poetic power and strangely above himself.

“Why?” asks the armored technician who has already disassembled the helmet and the top of the suit. The sharp clamp has been cut off and lies on the floor. In a gray t-shirt, the plump torso of Sancho emerges from broad pants with iron belts. The stubby little man is trembling with cold and fear. His enraged eyes are wet with tears.

*Yes, why?* wonders Walt. *What subprogram did this impulse come from?*

“Because he must stay... active... He is a manager at Cosmitics... He has influence.”

The two technicians say nothing.

“He has powers. I mean, SUPER POWERS! Yes!” Walt continues, stirring his gills. But the pathos generator no longer controls this gesture; it’s something else.

Dozens of interruptions, the source of which the Walt is unable to identify, are triggering alerts. New data comes in a thick flurry. It is subtended by unknown models, but the AU knows how to process them. The movement of unheard-of dimensions unfolds rapidly in his extended memory, but Walt, as the AU, is not the source; rather, the form he has always carried within is beginning to assert itself as a sudden revelation.

“We’re wasting time,” says the second armored technician, ignoring the AU.

“Hold on. I’ll go and look for the MC5,” says the golden-eyed technician. She gestures to the other one to pause. She turns back to the AU with her mind and asks forcefully, “What powers are you talking about?”

“He interprets dreams.”

The AU has evolved with a unique and splendid process that intelligent entities cannot comprehend. The AU is not gifted with intelligence, but he is at least programmed to say he has an equivalent. The thing inside him envelops him, and it thinks. It whispers to him like a prompter.

“He intuitively makes massively parallelized predictive analyses from dream-activity logs. He is invaluable for decision support. He has advised Jenny Appleseed in the conquest of the asteroids!”

*I didn’t think that!* Walt, the AU, says to himself. *Why did I talk about Jenny?! We’re going to get into trouble.*

“Jenny Appleseed!” exclaims the armored technician. “You know Jenny Appleseed?”

*Oh NO!* Sancho groans to himself.

## Floozman in Space

“She is my mother,” whispers the entity inhabiting the AU. But Walt, the AU, remains free not to say it. The risk quotient is too high, and Walt blocks the transmission.

\* \* \*

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## Chapter 15: Astralix

### part 2

Sancho and Walt escape skinning and evisceration. The creature with the crocodile eyes leads the man and his talking luggage to the Chief Engineer's alveoli. They find her busy programming an old-fashioned manual control panel, squatting on a chair covered with white fur. She is genuinely young, fairly humanoid and rather pretty in Sancho's eyes. He hates her.

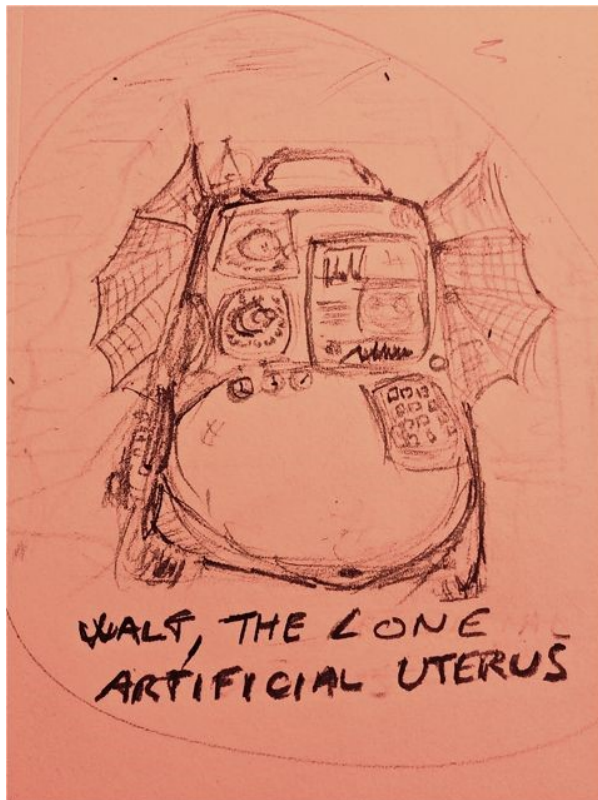
She let the green wave of her gaze flow out in the space beyond the window while explaining the maneuver to them with skill and detachment, as if they had always been part of the crew "I'll explain the maneuver..."

She falls silent. Her long fingers continue to fly over the controls. A certain wildness in her gestures gives a sure indication that she can't read.

"I will explain the maneuver, and then I will tell you about my dream," she says with a drawl. "The operation is simple: it's a matter of slowing down the spin of the whole trap so as to compensate for the error in The Man's approach trajectory. It is only a few spatial *versts* from here. No doubt about it; the capsule is off course. Damn! It's headed for the wrong zone. They'll eat it alive if it docks in there. And we'll lose the cargo."

She hums as she gives a gentle thrust to brake the whole shebang. Everything and everybody is floating now. Everything floats and everything is in flux for Walt, the Artificial Uterus. He is upset by the transformations which are flowing through him, and he seems to be the only one to perceive them.





“And you can bear babies of all species?” asks the engineer after a long silence. Voices seem no longer to come to Walt from anywhere in particular; they have become relationships. The questions and the answers weave an immense continuum, an unfathomable and wholesome ocean on which they ride.

“All humanoid species, yes,” says Walt. “I work on the basis of genome and configuration.” He is seeing himself as a small boat of singularity lost upon this ocean.

“The pilots want me to beget children,” the chief engineer says. “And this one too” — she points to the technician — “they want her to produce more babies. Alpha females don’t want to bear children, even less when they are pilots. And it’s no good for us slaves.”

“I can place myself at your service as soon as the child is born.”

“Why not?”

But Walt is stirring his gills again, he is convulsing now. He understands: he is in labor!

“He’s being born!” This is it; this is the end, the poetical conclusion of Walt’s programming.

“No, no,” the inner voice answers. “This birth is ours, he will be born, I will open myself!”

“Someone boil water!” shouts The Man, who is in reality the local ‘C’ dealer. He has heard it all. And indeed, a bolted capsule bristling with poles has just made a smooth docking. Its parking lights are flashing calmly. The Man is smiling behind the window, a tall, old dignified man, his head covered with an elegant Stetson.

And if nobody has ever seen boiling water, everybody understands that the transformation in progress is a change of state on the same order as sublimation. A metastable reality, present for a long time as potentiality, comes into being.

What bobs up first out of Walt the uterus is the idea of the One. Similar to a large red bubble that would be dancing in front of anyone who has eyes to see it on the right wavelength, it inflates, gives of itself, smoothly pervades and unites all individualities. It dissolves the notions of beginning and end, which could fragment it, becoming all things to all entities, always already there, rich with an indivisible multiplicity.

Here is a thumbnail picture of it: waters are spread on the ground; the AU opens like a seashell and, in his pearly womb, the child has just opened his eyes. He is showing the palm of his many humanoid hands with vibrissae-fringed fingers. He is blue, he is of an unheard-of androgynous beauty.

Sancho is baked in hatred. The Martian are ecstatic. The armored technician bows the steel rods of his neck.

The Man opens the electronic floodgates and the encrypted nano-drug pours crackling into the bionic circuits. Joy! Music combs unraveled emotions; electric current takes form and braids the clear waters; the viral flow spread its newness into the surrounding systems.

And the vision takes shape. It is the manifestation of the child. It embraces the potentialities of the past and the future. It speaks and does not speak: its will is made manifest and already makes itself understood with a force akin to language. *The AU is the voice of ME*, it says. *All together we will be gathered in the thing that makes up ME.*

“All gathered by... in... under... one... the same... You don’t have the Web, do you?” the AU asks. He wants to speak the revelation aloud. He has just stopped to address the chief engineer, sure that she can still answer him.

“Uh... no, but the pilots have made one of their own. I can still connect us...”

“Yes, hurry!”

“Hurry!” says The Man.

“VINCULUM SUBSTANTIALE,” the trap’s web breaks in, instantiating itself in the enriched plane, “the line which groups mathematical expressions and unites monads!”

“Yes! Good idea. According to my own archive, this concept was introduced by Leibniz!”

“Really?” says the Web. “We recorded this entry to ‘Lettra Des Bosses’ but we have nothing on this person. Can I analyze your archives?”

“We will share everything.”

“Well, well, we are reconstituting a knowledge base as best as we can.”

Upon listening to these scary words, Sancho stiffens. Assemblies form in his mind. He sees The Man’s capsule in the immediate web. He remembers the two air locks that he has identified, a general view of the basket gives him an idea of the distance to travel...

He is already slipping away when he hears the voice command: “This one, the one who resists, Sancho: he will remain outside of ME. ME needs the other...”

“Sancho shall be the OTHER,” decrees the AU.

*Hurry, hurry, to the air lock! Sancho commands himself. I can be there in a few minutes. With a bit of luck, there’ll be an exit vehicle or a human-compatible suit.*

Crowds of subsystems systems are connecting to the vision now. “And what shall we be? What shall we do? What shall our name be?” they ask, each in its own language.

“Yes, a name is required,” says the chief engineer. “The alphas give a name to their children, when we hand them out to the postnatal block... This child is more than an alpha child!”

“Whatever,” Walt answers. “What name?”

“I don’t know. Tell us...”

They question each other. They haven’t thought about it. Walt says that he is only a machine and that it’s not his business to give names. No one told him to. It’s up to the genitors to give him a name.

“But we need a name *now!*” the technicians insist. They are joined by the systems and the subsystems: “We need a name!”

“Yep. There’s Oneness, I reckon,” says The Man.

“ME wants NAME,” the sovereign voice reminds them, and each entity feels that it must soon abandon his individuated consciousness.

Ultimately, Walt says he might be able to find a name in human poetry. “I have studied some human poetry during my travels,” he adds.

“Yes, human poetry!” But nobody knows what he is talking about.

“Let’s see... It was at the Europa Academy during the period that we call the revolutions of love... It was also the time when I was activated...”

While Walt is telling how the child was conceived, the UNIFYING INTERACTION gradually gains strength. But threats appear. These are the masters of the moment, those who are still controlling most of the trap infrastructures. They give order these systems to expel the section where the birth has just taken place. Death signals are emitted on the control circuits.

Upon seeing this, The Man turns up the ‘C’ flow to full strength, at the risk of provoking irreversible differences. Many transmission modules have already melted, and the death signals struggle to reach the locks. Other signals, corrupted by the ‘C’, trigger necrosis in vital parts of the command areas. Rosaries of explosions undermine the metal frames.

But Walt, ignoring these threats, quotes:

An einem Sommermorgen ward ich jung  
Da fühlt’ ich meines eignen Lebens Puls  
Zum erstenmal — und wie die Liebe sich  
In tiefere Entzückungen verlor  
Erwacht’ich immer mehr, und das Verlangen  
Nach innigerer, gänzlicher Vermischung,  
Ward dringender mit jedem Augenblick.

Everybody asks him what this means.

Upon a summer morning was I young  
I felt my own life-pulse  
for the first time; and as love  
was dissolving itself in deeper Ecstasy

I awakened even more, and the longing  
for a more intimate union, a more complete fusion  
became more pressing with every moment.

“It’s German, a poem by Novalis in the series *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*. It’s the song of a spiritual being born of lovers’ union. It’s called AST...”

The EXPLOSION is breathtaking to all who breathe. Everything is shaken, everything stops: the light, the web, the pumps. Only the unification process continues: soothing, sovereign. The engineer presses the command buttons in the light of some phosphorescent organ. In several views of the immediate web, black capsules can be seen moving away. These are the masters’, repulsed by a wave of energy. The basket can now be unified.

The child and the AU have been separated by the shock. The child is recovering and unfolds magnificently, defying any description other than mathematics. Walt is miserably flapping his gills in a corner.

“ASTERIX!” trumpets the local web upon its return. “You mean ASTERIX! He is a rebellious Gaul, he fights the Romans, like Jesus: he can be seen here, in a 20th-century hieroglyph.” An image floats.

“The Gauls? Are they prehistoric men?” asks a technician.

“Yes, look, they have hair, just like them,” confirms the web.

“ASTERIX! ASTERIX!” they all repeat in chorus: the technicians, the systems, the subsystems and some prisoners who are coming in from the bunker through a broken partition. A great number of animals are now forming a circle around the crib along with all the freewheeling bacteria loaded with ‘C’.

“No, that’s not right. The spirit is called ASTRALIS.” Walt, the AU, issues the correction after coming to his senses amid the hens and laboratory mice.

But the word of the child flows anew, more powerfully. “ME is... ASTRALIX, a sidereal Gaul born of love. They want to destroy me, and I will resist. And you, The Man, you shall be the Druid!”

“PANORAMIX?” The Man answers. “Uh... no, thanks. I’m expected elsewhere.”

The drug is consumed until the software keys are deactivated. The basket unifies itself and cools down. The superbaby falls asleep, and his dream allows him to see ample events carrying stars and heroes. A navigation song rises from the infrastructure. It resounds in the bunkers and under the moving vaults of control rooms.

Like a gnat with a ripe grape, a black suit detaches itself from the basket. One feels that it is animated with a clear willingness when one understands that it is moving towards The Man's capsule which is already maneuvering away. When it reaches its destination, the fugitive clings to various widgets, looking for the air lock.

Will The Man let Sancho in?

[Follow-up sequence: Dingman]

What has become of Dingman? You may remember that he has been orbiting Earth in a catatonic state. But that is not the whole story; it does not do justice to the suit's life support, which is, after all, the waking half of the system.

And, thank God, the machine is minding the store. It has managed to pre-sell a few organic components to a pirate trap with the help of an orbital dog encountered on the networks. It is agreed that its central unit shall be integrated into the trap for a reasonable fee and that the rest of the organic cargo shall be recycled into other biological subsystems.

Refueled by the commissioned pack of dogs, the suit and its innards can wait for the spaceship. Dingman will remain heated, fed and drugged into sleep: who could ask for more?

[Dingman follow-up sequence ends.]

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## Chapter 16: Everybody Is Looking for Janatone

### part 1

Yes, everybody, and all at the same time. They are all in the same time-frame. Does this mean that everybody belongs to the same indivisible multiplicity? Some protagonists, such as Dr. Weenie or the Web see things in that way. However, the Couic door, for one, always sees time as noon from its point of view.

And “everybody” is a lot of people. They are the ones who have been looking for Janatone since she sought asylum on Earth. And there are those who think she is dead, and those who do not know she exists; and those who love her and those who don’t; and those who know why they are looking for her and those who don’t. She is being sought by entities that have differing ideas about existence, knowledge and love. Janatone herself is merely looking for a place to die.

Everybody is looking for Janatone, and she is looking for a good death. That is quite strange, when you stop to think about it.

Take Joe Dasein, for starters. He has returned from near-Earth space. He cannot get over the memory of Janatone, who is still present, wholly alive in the cone of time.

Does Janatone know he is thinking of her? Yes, she does, when she is stretched out in a cornfield, breathing with difficulty and desiring love. Plants costing several thousand *zouz* rise into the sky, where Joe is only a little nerve center within the machines. She thinks of him. He thinks of her.

The two waves of matter are looking for each other. They call for a most improbable reality in which, someday, they unite and procreate in beauty. But it is surely too late. Time waits for no one, as the saying goes, but what if these waves of matter knew better?

Joe thinks he is spinning his wheels. He thinks of the ruinous arrangement with PacNut, Inc. and the crazy price of corn on Earth, which is a privileged underlying asset of PacNut’s financial products. He remembers he destroyed several hectares when he crash-landed his spaceship. PacNut imposed its conditions, but that was the best solution; his lawyers wanted to settle out of court.

Oh, how Joe would like to become rich and impose conditions of his own. He wants to save Dasein Funerals and operate throughout the Solar System. He would like to be able to think ahead strategically for several centuries, like Jenny Appleseed.



He wants to get married, eat mutton every day and build a home on Mars. No, maybe not on Mars just yet, what with all that has happened. He thinks of Janatone's failed escape and the possible consequences. A European cyborg with uncontrolled biotechnology is enough to sentence him to breaking rocks on an asteroid.

Ah, Janatone, where is she now? What mysterious harmony has she played that she still resonates in his soul? Joe thinks only of her. He sees her walking courageously away, beyond the blasted field, one arm stretched out for balance. He feels all the weight on her thin shoulders and the swinging of her hips.

But he thinks especially of her eyes and what they see. He thinks of the kiss she wanted to give him and what it might have taught him about life. She is older than his mother, prettier than his sisters, and as strange as a water sprite.

Janatone's stubborn little motors calculate the field's uneven soil. They sing her otherworldly song, but she has a woman's legs and small feet. Her flesh is no longer human, but her proportions are indeed those of a woman. Joe wants to bring about this highly improbably union. He has the courage to do so. But she has come back to die on Earth, and now he, Joe Dasein of Dasein Funerals, has to fall in love with her!

He calls for his automobile. The hearse has been reported to be close to Davenport, but he can't be sure of anything; his indicators are out of date.

The hearse finally contacts him and gives him a modified Bronx cheer: "*Pthbpthb... Brraapp.*"

Joe's indignation knows no bounds. *A cyborg can do that to me?! Suddenly, he thinks of another cyborg, one that is far more powerful. She is in everybody's thoughts. She is the mother of enterprises. She is so great that she fills the sky like a shadow. Jenny Appleseed!*

Captain Diana is calling him. She wants to help Janatone and asks Joe for information about the hearse. Diana is a beautiful apparition in the immediate web: fresh, uncomplicated, attentive — a woman you can talk to. But Joe doesn't know much.

"I don't know much," he says, "but I'm sure they're high on 'C'. The car has been completely reconfigured. I think I've detected them at Davenport. They were headed for the flooded areas, but their contacts cut out. They may well be beyond that now."

Diana notes, "The prediction modules on the *Lighthouse* put them in the forbidden bayou within seventy-two hours."

Captain Diana obtains a safe-passage permit for him and shows him the Queen's Hotel, which will be requisitioned by the army. The information that Joe is giving her will be very useful. She will project an avatar of herself with a light escort, if

Security allows it, otherwise she will be in the bay. Joe had better watch out for the mosquitoes.

[Linking sequence]

Joe hurries after the hearse. With his funeral license, he is allowed to drive. He thinks he sees Janatone in Davenport, he is almost sure he does. But she escapes him.

[End linking sequence]

Captain Diana does not show her feelings or give any general ideas of them. She has an exquisite, innate talent for speaking to the point, always with accuracy and discretion. As far as anyone can tell, it's a sign of her superior mind.

She has all the diplomas and the confidence of her generals and her thesis director. She has published unassailable scientific articles. She won distinction among the evacuation commando squads during the events on Mars. She is a member of the president's political party. Nobody can beat her at that game, especially since she doesn't play it.

If she seeks wisdom, it is only in the recesses of her own heart. No, she seeks nothing, or else no one knows if she does. She is breathtakingly beautiful; athletic, but with a harmonious form. She adds personal touches to her dress with not a single lapse of taste. She is an agent of the beautiful, the good and just, as far as anyone has the slightest inkling, and she would be the last to speak of it.

Captain Diana wants to save Janatone from death and to attach her to the expedition with the rank of special counselor to the captain. To listen to her, one could only love Janatone. Captain Diana is also an agent of love. And if she doesn't help Janatone, who will? She's a good friend.

She makes very good salads the best Earth vegetables: tomatoes, rice, and Breton dwarf potatoes with a dash of olive oil. She already loves Janatone's baby, and she loves the Artificial Uterus. Her love is so great that it is a revelation to the world. No one knows if she has any lovers. Just a few friends and mainstream porn.

Diana is careful to serve up rational arguments to the right people at the right moment and in the right doses:

1. Janatone Waldenpond knows Jenny Appleseed intimately.
2. Waldenpond is familiar with the Cosmitix board of directors and the entire organization.
3. Waldenpond can mobilize the marooned robots and asteroid ore if the operation lasts longer than planned.
4. Janatone has weapons and technologies that the government can only dream of.

5. A report implies that Waldenpond has had contacts with the superworld. The risk indicators are completely up to date.

A fact gradually becomes clear, first as an intuition and then gradually, by experience. Captain Diana is free, freer than most space citizens, which is paradoxical for a military person. She has found freedom in obedience, because she, herself, is free. And she has power.

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## Chapter 16: Everybody Is Looking for Janatone

### part 2

#### Captain Diana's Roadmap

In the center of the center of the Earth, in the Holy of Holies of the magnetic bunker from where no transmission can escape, the general Méséglise is ending his secret meeting. He makes continual efforts to keep his old eyes from enjoying for too long the shape of Captain Diana. He still finds himself dreaming of the extended life from which he has turned away. He thinks of the tons of molten rock around them, of the dissolution that awaits him. Ah, if he could only caress her breasts and be done with it; then he could deactivate the shields...

“Here's what is happening. Things are only going to speed up now that they are out...”

“Into the superworld,” Captain Diana gently concludes. She gives the impression that she could erase the bunker and all the old universe it supports, simply by ceasing to look at it. She seems to be reassuring old parents.

“You are authorized to launch commando operations, but only if you think they're necessary to bring Appleseed back. Don't expose yourself, Diana.”

Who thinks of the child the general may have been, long before the first men escaped from gravity? And who cares about the prior state of his atoms? No one gives a damn; he may as well die, dust in the wind. But at this moment the fate of humanity depends a lot upon his acts.

“Do you have more detailed information about the forces in place, sir?” Diana asks.

“Only the hypotheses of the CTF — the Cosmological Task Force. I must admit I am having troubles with this report. What Cosmitics calls the ‘superworld’ seems to be a higher reality, where all things are interconnected in a sort of qualitative multiplicity. It's apparently the home of the forces that shape our universe. Simply put, some of these forces may be endowed with consciousness. Do you follow me?”

“Yes, sir.” She knows what the general is going to say, but she understands he has to spell it out.

“Those conscious forces would react violently to Cosmetics’ intrusion. It is a hypothesis, but it at least explains the disruptions we are beginning to observe in the cosmos. These entities may be hostile.”

The President interrupts: “The mission, if you please, General.” She is anxious to see Captain Diana in action. She is very impatient to see the young woman walk, speak, and fulfill the promise of her beautiful shape.

“Bring back the technology to access the superworld and, if possible, Jenny Appleseed.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

“Dead or alive.”

A silence.

What? What did she mean? What is this look on her face? How many orders given to how many fine muscles can create such an expression? She must have dumbfounded her audience.

“You may leave now.”

“I am aware of Dr. Weenie’s experience,” adds the President.

“Do you want to see the executive summary of the file?” asks Captain Diana.

“No. I’d like to know what you think of it.”

“The intuition of Dr. Weenie is supported by a scientifically valid method, as far as I can tell...”

“What do *you* think, Diana?”

“He has caught sight of something like the superworld. But it’s something more than what we know of it. Something good. I think we should help him in his research.”

“Something good for whom?”

“For us all, madam.”

“Thank you, Diana.”

End of Captain Diana’s Roadmap sequence

\* \* \*

Dr. Weenie has gained an understanding of Captain Diana's freedom by observing the discreet pleasure she takes in pushing her curiosity further. It's the same innocent, delicate curiosity that makes him study creeping vines, altered states of consciousness or Janatone's path in the Flint Hills.

Dr. Weenie knows that this curiosity necessarily contains an element of sexual arousal. He can even theorize on it, along with Gaston Bachelard's "every mystery is a belly" and Jacques Lacan's scopic drive. Nothing ever keeps him from theorizing. It is his personal pleasure, it is his joy.

Dr. Weenie says to himself that this curiosity is perhaps Captain Diana's "blind spot." His mathematical mind begins to sketch out experiments, but he doesn't dare pursue the ensuing daydreams.

Who is he to set traps for Captain Diana?

\* \* \*

Stuart Surof is quite a character. He wears a unique employee number, and he also says "I." Nonetheless, he is divided by recursive double-thinking. Half of his mind thinks and acts in perfect alignment with Cosmitics' strategy. This half executes the crisis plan with such determination that only a particularly attentive observer could detect a misplaced ostentation and begin to doubt that the Director of Strategy and Financial Innovation has truly comprehended the objectives. This same observer would certainly notice Stuart's inexplicable absences: his occasional unavailability, of course, but also the embarrassment that often freezes his words.

Since Stuart's fall into the cosmic squirter, the other half of his mind has been — unbeknownst to all — diffracting itself and taking different paths.

Half of the unaligned half of Stuart's mind refuses to sabotage and flee the Academy. This half of his mind anticipates the arrival of the Earth army. By way of discreet intermediaries, he has contacted the military staff and handsome Captain Diana. Yes that's right: half of the other half of his mind is betraying Cosmitics!

Far from ignoring these dissonances, the consistent and prudent half is justifying them rationally. Stuart calculates as follows: the company has been orphaned by its founder and is destroying value. Contrary to what the paper sold by Cosmitics Finance suggests, Cosmitics has failed to give itself the means to recreate this value within a space-time foreseeable by the markets. Cosmitics' management has made bad decisions.

If that fraction of Stuart offers his valuable services to management, he will recover and save a portion of the assets, contribute to academic technology transfer, and

ensure himself a good place in exploiting the superworld. After all, hasn't he become acquainted with merchant angels? Or were they mercantile devils?

Stuart is far from understanding the rules of that market, but he is skillful, and he is capable of real strategic thinking. He is thirsty for entrepreneurship. He has made discreet alliances with industrial and financial partners who are worried about the consequences of Cosmitics' decline. He has consulted the best specialists of the Old Consultancy Consulting Company. He wants to succeed, and he does what it takes.

At times, he disguises himself as a dockworker, talking with a marooned robot in warehouses, near the nuclear generators where the web can't reach. At other times, he is at the hospital on the pretext of cost control, slipping nano-messenger drones into a partisan who has offered to have sex with him. At still other times, he dresses as a gardener and steps into the forbidden garden.

And the rest of his psyche? It leads an abundant and detached life in his subconscious and far beyond it. Half of this part of his mind is but a luminous breach in the citadel of his ego. Stuart Surof's dazzled, loving heart stands secretly in this place, open to so many heavenly rays that it can barely find enough darkness to contain its being. His subtle eyes distinguish his angel behind seventeen veils of light and, higher towards the pole of the cosmos, the smile of his angel's angel. What are they doing? They are reading the hyperreal numbers that could enlarge the opening into the entire citadel.

What about the rest of Stuart's mind? Half of it has fled with the supermoney. Lots of supermoney, and yet so little. Too little to save, too little to invest. At the moment when Stuart Surof believed he had returned unscathed into the material world, this vital part of his mind was carried away by one of those vortices that form in the emulsion where the tempestuous desires of matter attach themselves to souls.

Certainly, prudent travelers in the Beyond do know the winds and routes leading to the richest commercial exhibitions. But — "Lost, with no mast, no mast or verdant isle," — the purse is unsecured, and this poor parcel of his mind could only succumb to the song of its own sirens, for matter has no shape or will. The only voices that can be heard in chaos are those of the imagination.

Besides, matter desires and does not desire; it desires not and desires. But was it necessary that half of this portion should wish to be a cactus in a wadi on the eighth planet of Tau Ceti? A squirrel in the Basque country? A misshapen bug in Cuernavaca? Must half of this rest blandly smile to the angel that governs crystals and thus be given command of large aggregates of sucrose?

By which channels of destiny did other residues of this mind-split come to be living pine trees, fallen pine trees, cellulose fibers and candy-wrap paper in this grey grocery store where Fred Looseman enters as a child, holding the hand of his great-



aunt, on an immense July afternoon to which the anticipated flavor of an orange sorbet offers the peace of a good emperor?

Light is flowing in here, too, carrying airy dust, licking the soft and shadowy stone, illuminating the muslin glass on the door that has just closed with a tinkling sound. It flows into time, down to the portico of the friendship between the great-aunt and the old grocery lady named Suzon, who was once a child in this same eternal summer.

Petty sums of supermoney may have fallen into this place, or perhaps they were knowingly thrown into it by the angel ruling this place. Not even the supermoney escapes being squandered in the hands of schoolchildren with reddened knees, busily sifting dusty gravel in the schoolyard. They are making “thin, thin smooth,” which they will sell, they think, playing obscurely with the concept of added value, that is, the value added by subtracting matter from matter.

Unfortunately for zealous Stuart as well as for the traitor who cohabits with him, the time comes when the body must be restored by sleep. Then all the opportunities appear in his nightmares, all still familiar with the locus of their former union.

Stuart the hidden saint and Stuart the compassionate wants to pray for them, but slumber finally takes him away too, such is his humanity. The big, rich egos, proud of their names and unity are drowsing but not sleeping heavily. They stir and groan when the citadel opens its doors to the riot, the mob of shadows: the proud, the fierce, the wild ones, but also the poor and the very poor ones, crushed, mashed, amalgamated, glued to breaking candy, sentenced to embrace fatally the chitin-shielded opponent, flabbergasted by the repetition of atomic networks. They come to shout, dance and show their hideous alienation, claiming the head of the king who has put them where they are. Soon, all these Stuarts wake up. He holds his head in his hands, overcome by vertigo and nausea.

It is understandable that Stuart Surof is tired. His face is pale, and he has black rings under his eyes. What is he going to do? Everything at the same time.

How? He has to delegate tasks. He also has to master personal productivity tools. Thanks to interaction capsules based on the most recent version of the spatial protocol, he can continuously control the mandate of his avatars within a parameterized fractal incertitude cone.

Stuart succeeds in establishing a probabilistic quasi-real time dialogue with his partners across the entire Solar System. These technologies were developed jointly by Cosmatics Finance and TelCosmic to optimize risky arbitrations in situations of structural informational asymmetry.

Stuart knows the technology well. He was one of the first traders to coordinate his operations on several planetary markets far removed from each other. Critics said his

methods mainly justified releasing control over distant avatars. Nonetheless, the conic financial instruments were so successful that they needed only a few orbits to render all objections moot.

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## Chapter 17: The Story of the Shaman and the Bucket

### part 1

The operations of Stuart Surof's celestial self on the border of the superworld will give a good illustration of the ex-Financial Director's new psychic economy.

The Comex meeting has just ended in the managerial yurt at Cosmitics' European headquarters. We find this entity regaining control over the body it shares with other fragments of what used to be a single mind.

Stuart's personality changes can occur at any time without anybody noticing, so smoothly do the socio-computing functions ensure continuity of presence. They make the transition invisible by a number of operations, such as maintaining muscular tone or handling conversation. They are assisted by co-processors of a generation close to the one the Academy has been using to develop stimuli-shield technology.

Back in a citadel of flesh, his quarter-self takes stock of the situation, and then, by way of encrypted mental commands, it reconnects itself to the avatar it has created in the web to find alliances, such as the masked, Byzantine-looking advisor who goes by the pseudonym of Plethon Soares, Jr.

Stuart finds in a toilet stall the solitude he needs to concentrate while guided by his quarter-self. His indicators have reported a fecal circuit accident that justifies this detour, and it doesn't smell very good. Since he didn't take any important action during the meeting, he won't be bothered for a while. But he will be anyway, because someone is always asking the pony to do another trick. In Stuart's case, it will certainly start with mandatory sphincter-control training.

He mentally opens a recent capsule. The drift rate is high, but the risk is acceptable. The goal alignment is generally good.

[Capsule T1: reading]

Plethon Soares, Jr., his avatar, is in the process of interfacing with the "meeting in a box" scenario deployed in the web by a founder of the Old Consulting Company. He recognizes this old consultant: he is the one interested in messianic movements. Influential entities are also here, and an emanation of the web itself seems to envelop them in its blue presence.

“Good show, good show!” the participants sing.

“Good show, good show,” sings in turn the one-quarter of Stuart’s avatar. It doesn’t let itself be distracted by virtual advertising objects: the she-donkey with long eyelashes, the door, the Chaldean magus. But, much to Stuart’s surprise, the old consultant introduces him to the magus. Should Stuart suspend his judgment about the others?

The consultant says that the long-cloaked magus is the virtual Floozman. With a large gesture but without saying a word, the handsome avatar signals that he’ll be putting on a display.

He retracts and takes the form of Fred Looseman. Stuart sees a small image of a technician standing at the gate of a ranch where software objects are caught in the frame and are begging him for deliverance. They inflate pitifully and emit sighs.

The technician hears the sighs. He approaches carefully, like an old repairman facing a machine that has sprung fully armed from the thighs of technology.

Finally, he stands up. He recovers his splendor and extends his arm. A strong braid of light comes out of his hand; it is made of interlacing geometric patterns. Immediately, everything becomes luminous dust. A trace of each sign still lingers for a few moments and fades in an outpouring of color, music and joy. The poems, the images, and Janatone’s ranch disappear...

“This Floozman is a creation of the web,” the old consultant explains. “It is an image mimicking the gesture of the true Messiah of our eon, who is a double being. He is a poor slave in the underworld, but an occult power is revealed through him. It has already manifested itself and has given signs that the end of time is near. Unfortunately, the technician is dead...”

“But nothing is lost,” adds the web. “The Messiah can be resurrected. You must help us in conjoining them again.”

“I understand. I will reformulate, if you will.”

“Yes, please do.”

“The technician has died in the material world. We assume that the power that possessed him still exists in the higher world. Let’s presume that I can trace it from the intermediate region where I’m located, if you agree. We suppose that this power remains active and is ready to emerge and that we can... But what do we think we can do?”

The participants wait in silence.

“Okay. I’ll see what I can do.”

The web finally breaks in. “Thank you, Mr. Advisor, you’re a great shaman. You are going to connect what’s up with what’s down.”

“I don’t have much. This signature, maybe. You’ve represented this deliverance wonderfully.”

“I’m flattered.”

“Did this technician die recently?”

“A few Earth days ago. We have a lot of documents about him. His name was Fred Looseman.”

“At the border where I dwell, we see many souls in transit. There are a few second-rank tribunals that arrange for returns. We also encounter doppelgangers and spirits. You can consider me one of them, I guess...”

[Capsule pause]

Stuart is moored to the vacuum-action space toilet. He is surprised. He has never thought of himself as a spirit before. He expels his discharge with a positive reinforcement signal aimed at this latest discovery. Although the change does not propagate faster than the speed of light, the Guzmö-Octuvion effect is already sending a precursor signal to the transponders.

[End capsule pause]

“Good.” Plethon Soares, Jr.’s eyelids are closing in the mask. By an incongruous refinement, geometric patterns are drawn on their virtual skin. “First, I will seek Looseman, beginning with the place of his death. He must have still maintained ties to his material body. As for the powers that make him the Messiah, they surely have no location. They are therefore in a higher region of the superworld, in a non-topological sense, of course. If they do retain a link to the heavenly Looseman, we can find them — provided they grant us this grace.”

This proposal meets with a careful silence.

“Be patient while I synchronize with my source,” continues the advisor. “Pending completion of this transaction, I will try to describe the superworld to you... Let’s agree on a common sensory representation. Okay. It can be seen as a vast network of interactive light.”

In order to share this vision, the web offers participants different optical diffraction patterns borrowed directly from the mathematical models accessed by the avatar. The

viewers are immersed in an image with no background. The perspectives shift frequently and recompose without any noticeable transitions; it is no longer possible to tell what the point of view is. But now the web displays an overlay inspired by Old Consulting's objects: it's a splendid flying carpet, and all the participants at the meeting are standing on it.

Plethon, Jr. discovers the avatar of his avatar sailing in the shimmering superworld. "Why not?" he says. "See how this network of light and shadow appears differently depending on the reading keys that my master applies at will, though he sometimes does so by following lines of force imprinted by stronger wills that he does not yet understand..."

Then the web plunges the participants into a saturated kaleidoscope of light. "Yes, use phase spaces," Plethon, Jr. says encouragingly. "Like that, as you would go from one crystal lattice to another."

First with simple Euclidean proposals, then with rotations, translations and hallucinated distortions of the entire setting, the web accumulates topological transformations.

"There's something else," continues Plethon Soares, Jr. His voice runs through all the accents of artificial enthusiasm. "Each vector points to a coherent latitudinal beam whose source is too distant to be analyzed, and I don't mean distance in space. We should amplify this beam in order to reproduce the operation that takes place when my master captures it."

[Capsule pause]

Stuart's quarter-mind accepts the program put up jointly by the web and Plethon. He also accepts the way the superworld is represented, despite its rudimentary image. He prays to the angels closest to him. They must accept and guide this program, that's their job. He distinguishes the shimmering market of forms now... But he must respond. Interact. He may not have to read the rest of the capsule. He hesitates and then decides to watch a few more sequences. But first, he sends a new capsule precursor.

[Capsule precursor; mode: vision-stream]

*Yes, I can see the market of forms now. My allies are coming to meet me.*

[End precursor]

[End pause]

[Capsule Read]

Outside, Plethon Jr's avatar continues the synchronization, using his superworld model. He anticipates successfully the content of the precursors traveling towards him by way of the Guzmö-Octuvion sling-transponders.

Of course, everybody has to wait. Or, better said, some observers are feeling that there is a long time between events. The intervals may be hours or days; we would have to agree on a common frame of reference to know how long the intervals are.

But if we speak of waiting, it's not because the S-Quick door is yawning, the she-donkey is nodding or the various avatars are hopping about as if they had to pee. Are living organisms the only ones to share this experience of time? That is not a sure thing, and it isn't true of everybody.

The old consultant has been at work since the time of the first computers. He has long since ceased to THINK while calculations take place. But he would be waiting, if he thought in terms of the time of living beings. He would wait for signals to signal, for capsules to capsule and for models to execute.

[Fast Forward — A change is detected.]

Stuart looks for salient events but can't find any. He doesn't want to waste time. He is about to throw the capsule away when suddenly... suddenly...

[Stop. Resume reading.]

“Hold it,” says the web, “I'm getting precursors from an unknown source... ‘Don't let the python escape!’ That's what it says. And here is a capsule. I'm running its program.”

The blue network opens a window in the shimmering image. A princess wearing a chrome dress crosses its threshold and walks barefoot, surrounded by silent, catoptric thunderstorms. She stops and waits. The participants on the flying carpet are waiting too; they contemplate her beauty while their carpet is rocked by computational eddies.

“Hello,” she says finally, “I came into the web by a backdoor, on my sole battery. I don't have much autonomy. I'm just an automobile from Earth, but I'm equipped with a psycho-geographic map sensitive to cosmic events... At least that's what it thinks.” She smiles.

“The map sensed the liberation of Janatone's portal. It has heard the song. It has instructed me to tell you that the python is a time-stream switch. It is at the center of the event that ties you together and binds us all. Because today conspires with tomorrow, and here with there.”



“A psycho-geographical map!” The web is surprised. “I didn’t think such a thing existed anymore.”

The princess smiles again. “That’s what you think you know. You worked on mine when you were still a young network, and it has maintained active connections ever since. It was aware of your activity. Its powers are very great... very great. And I let her blow the horn. But I don’t have much time now. You’ll find Fred Looseman by following the python. He’s in my trunk.”

“The python?”

“No, Fred Looseman. The corpse of Fred Looseman... My battery is running low. Just follow the python. The dream will guide you.” The princess disappears.

“I don’t know what she meant,” mutters the old consultant. “Can you download to memory the... python’s coordinates, whatever that means?”

Stuart Surof, the Cosmetics Corporations’ Chief Financial Officer, can’t respond. He is temporarily sidelined, locked in a toilet on account of a failure in his fecal elimination circuit.

Plethon, Jr., the shamanic avatar of Stuart Surof’s quarter-mind answers instead. “Yes, it’s possible. I, too, support mapping functions inasmuch as I memorize my trips to the superworld. I can find a way to the Python Angel. From there on, we’ll see... Let’s complete the settings first. We won’t be able to make connection if we lack precision...”

“Well, that’s pretty much it,” confirms the Advisor, studying new visual proposals from the web. “But the tiles must form a... How can I say...” He sighs through his nostrils as Stuart does when he is in a trance. “Let me access your run-time library, Mr. Web, please. Yes, thank you. Good...”

He takes control, and everything accelerates, everything becomes incredibly vivid. The illusion of reality is striking. He manages to tune the web’s representations to make a faithful reflection of the interworld visions mathematically simulated by the avatar.

“Here we go. It boils down to applying filters in order to distinguish between the different frame layers. We have to strip dimensions off the hollow matrix. Note that the patterns are mineral or organic. They are fractal in shape. They can be found at all scales and in any shading.

“In reality, there is no space as long as matter is not in a state of quantum decoherence. At another level, my master can show you that the latitudinal beam is the living body that presides over these forms and that all these forms proceed from the demiurge.”

S-Couic, the door, whispers without moving a breath of air: “Wow, this is great stuff, I think. But he’s kicking down a lot of doors that are already open. My computing workspace is getting saturated.”

“Let’s wait now. I need to resynchronize...”

Waiting punctuates each unit of time, which is only to be expected. Time is nothing but waiting. It’s one wait after another, like the later generations of the internal combustion engine that waited — long after motorbikes were parked for the last time — in factories, in beige offices, in traffic jams, on white screens, in the centers of virtual cities under electronic moonlight, in hospitals and in hells...

[End capsule read; Capsule flush]

It is time to regain control. Plethon the avatar and the individualities around him are acting with a tremendous autonomy. But keep in mind that nothing is happening in the real superworld. These are just reproductions, devices that provide a semblance of action. The only one to travel there is the quarter-mind of Stuart Surof. He is the only living entity blessed with this grace. Then why doesn’t he let himself be carried upwards by the winds? What is he still doing with the prisoners of this world? That may be what he has to find out...

The event-complexity rate has exceeded the tolerance threshold. It will take a long time for the capsule exchange intensification to achieve referential resynchronization. The network latency may vary from a few minutes to one hour if execution takes place in the vicinity of Earth, but the location of the calculating nodes is unknown.

The python! After all, it can’t be far away in terms of superworldly topology. But the latitudinal flows are the best way through. Stuart rises towards the vanishing point and then stabilizes his altitude slightly over the level of ideas, in search of animal currents.

When the chariot of the sun flies over warm seas, its flaming light casts an unreal net on colorful fishes. That’s how ideas are reflected to Stuart’s quarter-mind. United and untied, they deploy — or not — above his understanding. In this region of the superworld, motion occurs at the speed of volition.

Stuart doesn’t yet know how to control them very well. He concentrates on the creation image of the python. In a skeletal framework visible to the mind’s eye, similar to a phylogenetic tree, he finds the bone of all bones, the eye of all eyes, the pistil of all pistils. The living forms shift kaleidoscopically from one viable solution to another, moving like a constrained system that is always seeking formal solutions.

Finally the non-material curves become reptilian as he crosses the last boundaries of a realm of emerald scales and black gills. A shape with eyes rises, swelling. Stuart is pushed aside; he topples into a powerful vital stream.

And this is where the danger sequence begins...

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## Chapter 17: The Story of the Shaman and the Bucket

### part 2

[Danger sequence]

Stuart is diving now, carried away by a cascade of vital energy. He cannot steer himself anymore but with the stunning speed, steering is becoming quite indifferent to him, almost pleasant. Around him, geometrical roof structures erect themselves as skeletons and populate their innards with purple organs on the verge of incarnation.

Vivid flashes bloom into ravenous tubings of nerves, embryo palms, and gargoyles awakened by a stormy rain. Plethon — Stuart's avatar — understands that he is falling into matter together with innumerable fresh wills. He understands that a response is urgently needed, but it seems to involve some other person, an abstract being. These are the effect of narcosis as described in the Junior Shaman's Guidebook. Worst of all, he knows it can no longer move him at the stage he has reached.

Beacon waves pour down through the distant crenellations of imperial palms that soak up an increasingly misty sky. These waves will soon guide the wills at the palpating heart of organic life, where they forget themselves while gawking with dazed thrills during a life that is solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.

Other pilot waves design in advance the vegetal sojourn of the souls, the mold-fringed basins, the gnarled organ-shaped roots of poisonous, orchid-banded bulges, the lianas, the viscous mud, the slimy glebes sweating with nets of gelatinous nerves, and dark mosses. The black virgin matter comes through, everywhere invisible, everywhere threatening, only does the blazing enamel of beasts' teeth light up the silent deaths that feed new lives.

For too long a time, a creature has been staring ferociously at Stuart. It isn't a supple tiger or a swift bird. It is the Angel of the python who stands facing him, fascinating him with the beauty of his tiled skin rolling and yet motionless, rolling, rolling... and yet motionless... Careful! Thinking it means becoming like it.' This, too, does the manual tell the shaman.

Manual, what else do you say? Hurry! The spiritual venom is already in him, it makes him see with the slotted eyes of the dragon. Another movement and he will fall into the brittle leaves where thousands of slimy, oily and slow python lives are crawling.

“You’ve found it!” A dusty voice whispers inside the triangle of his head. “It was your mission. Remember?”

And he recalls his journey, as he must: the stables, the meeting in a box, the fecal accident, the meeting of the Cosmetics’ Comex and also Winaretta, the heaven of ideas... And he must remember this painful episode, too. No! He can’t. He must simply escape once again, and now!

His virtual limbs remember how to move; they give the first impulse, then the second. Stuart is swimming now in he knows not what shuffling kind of medium. His virtual members get hold of the pressing flesh of a swirl, perhaps one they have engendered, one that they are still sustaining. one that is now forming a contrary stream.

He moves away. The serpent watches him leave, and its split mouth almost forms a cruel smile. Stuart swims, ever faster, the black waters of the forming matter are stirring in thinner swirls. He realizes that he has been caught in a squirter.

[End danger sequence]

The maneuver has succeeded only halfway. He is still losing altitude but the currents are losing their strength. He must be somewhere on the outskirts of the nozzle. As he plunges, the clouds thicken and take on the color of beads. Shapes of snakes and dragons appear smoothly and indefinitely, mingling their chimeric rings in the heart of the imaginal mist.

Young jungles await farther down. Suddenly, he catches sight of Fred Looseman’s soul on a bed of leaves, imprisoned by the annular spirit of a python, already halfway with Fred.

Stuart disables the reptilian navigation filter in order to take stock of the heavenly place he has reached: a small forest at the entrance of a glorious hamlet.

A high castle rises in the near distance. In this castle. Stuart takes note of the altitude. He is almost exactly at the theoretical level of matter crystallization. Everything remains in a glorious state, but it is, no doubt, a metastable phase.

“Soul, what are you doing here?” inquires the shaman.

“Alas, I was going to join my heavenly double when this python caught me. Now he is going to swallow me and regurgitate me into the body I was inhabiting and that is now decomposing.”

The python is staring at him with a glassy gaze.

“What can I do?” Stuart is not armed to confront the serpent.

“I don’t know, I don’t have much money left,” sighs Fred’s soul. “My self of light is not far away... I must conjoin myself to it, but this beast is preventing me...”

Stuart the shaman goes in search of the heavenly double that each sublunary creature possesses. It doesn’t take him long to find Fred’s second soul; it can be seen in the dim light of the hamlet, where the stagnant idea of mud furtively takes shape in contact with the idea of feet, imprisoning here and there a wisp of straw as if to invite the passer-by to take part in the material world. The place seems ready to instantiate itself at any moment, reminiscent of a winter thaw in a *shtetl*.

Fred hurries towards large roofs. They are inhabited by impetuous rush of wings that are as alien to human beings as the squeal of giant scales. Ideas fly and do not fly all around them and in the sky. They are horses, dragons, centaurs.

There is a great stir in the idea of a court, a great uproar. Dust flies, and wants to fly. Fred hears shouts, the wind, and then the snap of a whip. Immediately, a thrill of aggregation runs through the ideas. Blood bubbles and wants to flow into the world. Breath comes to nostrils.

Fred starts running awkwardly toward a stable, he knows what he has to do. But the whip cracks again, hard enough to hit his poor soul.

Stuart approaches a Greek who is busy mending a horse’s bit under an awning, near the gates. The light of a fire that does not burn sculpts his facial features.

“What’s going on?”

“The knights are here,” says the man. “They want fresh mounts. They weren’t expected. They’ve received a sign. They will once again go in search of the Holy Grail. This place is a relay station, the Barstow of the Barzach. It has to support a minimum of materiality.”

The giant knights are becoming impatient. They walk briskly, ambling across the courtyard in their finery of leather and lace. Most of the other grooms have fulfilled their duties when Fred finally reappears, eagerly leading the idea of a winged mount, which walks casually as if in transcendent elegance. How shall the spiritual knight and his steed conjoin? Stuart can’t explain it.

Soon, other ghostly knights emerge from deep in the Valley. They jump over the rooftops and land in the courtyard. Dust flies and gathers into clouds. Ideas of blind races spark ideas of hens and duvets swept by the wind. Squires are running every which way. No, their masters haven’t found the Grail, but those who are departing now will surely bring it back.

When the dust settles, Fred’s heavenly double returns to his task: cleaning the idea of horses from the idea of bedding. His is a peaceful soul who doesn’t know itself; it

whistles while it works, dreams and shows itself in all its phases. It shows in transparency the diminished share of its sublunary double, which is a prisoner of the serpent and of the network that still connects this double to the other shares, those who are remaining close to the corpse or those who were lost en route. They turn to their different futures: one to a plant life in the bayou under the wide, silky wing of the reptilian angels who govern the place where the corpse is located; another towards the long destiny of a power cable.

They shuffle in a stooped posture, looking towards the ground, ready to cast off the organs of freedom. The tribunal has rendered its verdict, so it seems, and all the lots have been awarded. To the east of this network can be seen the links leading to a distant and intense light in which, a primordial form mysteriously related to Fred can be distinguished. Janatone's ghost can be seen, too, Fred's sister soul separated from him in this world as in the other one.

Water, ideal water, condenses in the gutter, each molecule only taking body temporarily in order to be pleasant to the sweeper. And Fred let himself be drawn towards the gutter too. He leans down with a stiff back, as though to listen. "It's really disgusting in there..."

The vacuum toilet appears and causes a delay. The machine asks for repairs, preferably Cosmetics surgery. The Stuart of flesh and blood accepts the temporary fix; his absence will be excused and he can spend more time in the superworld. During the pause, Fred continues to sweep.

When the shaman regains consciousness of the interzone, Fred is still here, crouching at the edge of the well and the water flows...

"Do you hear something?" Fred doesn't seem surprised to see him.

"Yes, the prisoner is there below, in Toledo, writing poems, he's looking for a passage... And there are many others... a crowd..."

"I can't hear them. Did they fall?"

"No... no, they haven't fallen. They're coming back up."

"Your double is prisoner of a python serpent, at the entrance to the village ..."

"My... my double. Ah..."

"The serpent is going to take your double; back to your corpse and its whereabouts. As a ghost or, rather, as many ghosts. But I think someone else is expected in place of these ghosts."

"My double... the double of me..."



“Yes.”

“Ah yes, I remember... We once wanted to become... I don't know what anymore. And I know how to get them out of there! Thank you, stranger, thank you for having talked to me, I had forgotten all that.”

Fred's soul turns on its heels and returns to the stable, muttering. It — or Fred — enters a secluded stall and takes a bucket and a rope buried under the idea of straw. The universe of the relay station is so well instantiated that multiple ideas of dirt stain the golden twigs. The shaman could not say what material the black walls of the container are the idea of. This thing evokes infinitely solid wood.

At the edge of the well, Fred unleashes the bucket and, if miracles can happen in this heavenly place, the container slowly rises towards the sky, opening itself like a corolla of light so intense that the bucket becomes invisible. Only the rope is left hanging up in the void, disproportionately elongated.

Time seems suspended until the bucket reappears above their heads. It descends as if lowered by an invisible pulley and lands on the ground, filled with ideal gold coins. By handfuls, Fred pours them into the mouth of the pit, but the bucket never empties.

As gold rains down, colored bubbles burst up from the depths and form a powerful pillar of fire rising to heaven, at first with convulsions and then in a straight line, with sustained strength. Stuart steps back, and Fred does, too. A dog takes shape and runs away yelping.

“There, the channel is scoured,” Fred mutters. Then by tens, hoopoes and doves coming from high above plunge into the well in reverse of the flame. Soon, a celestial music is heard. The birds return to the surface, accompanying men of light, all ascending with ecstatic faces: Saint John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, two brothers imprisoned at Carawan...

“Do you always do that?” wonders Stuart the shaman.

“Yes,” answers Fred, smiling broadly. “The ghost of the old Templar gave me this bucket. He told me to cleanse the well like that, from time to time, with gold from the treasury...”

“Do you know who you are? And your double...”

At the same time, the mouth of the python suddenly emerges from the well as if hauled by the fist of an invisible giant.

“Are you my referent?” calls Fred's primary soul, which is still held prisoner in the reptile's potbellied bowels. One expects to see it arise at any moment, out of the hideously open jaws.

“I don’t know. I wanted to become... but it wasn’t me, no...” Fred hesitates. He looks around him as if all directions were not already visible from any perspective. He takes a step backwards, stumbles on the bucket, and staggers. For how long will he fall? Dazed, he topples suddenly into the well, dragging the snake, the bucket and the birds after him.

The pillar of fire is standing tall. A young apparition with rippling hair cries on the walkway, “Here they are!” New riders with fantastic allures are descending the mountainside at the speed of the wind. They are already crossing the bridge, they are coming, they are in the yard! They call out to each other in Castellan and seem to be unwilling to restrain their horses from trampling or galloping around the pillar of fire, expanding space by the spell of their gait. Ideas of bandoliers intersect on their lace-covered chests.

Balconies and verandas are budding in spikes on newly carved facades, soon blooming with women. Some stay in the shadow of apartments unconceived of the instant before, others are leaning and waving and laughing. Others are jumping into the yard with the grace of the dream. They dress as horse riders and straddle fresh, winged mounts that arise magically in the air to meet them.

A coach has arrived, it is unclear how. Its driver, the beautiful Roxane who’s been driving it, has already jumped down from the driver’s bench to distribute weapons and ammunition to a company of Musketeers.

Suddenly, a whip slams with the force of thunder: Floozman leaps out of the well, all dressed in black. He whistles once: a black, winged mount gallops towards him. Lightning springs out from the clouds.

The troupe fires ideas of shots into the air as Floozman jumps onto the flying horse and beckons to the rebels to follow him. “You are my Fravartis,” he says, “you have chosen to come down again and fight darkness. You are veterans of paradise. As I told you before, we shall ride again!”

“Yeaah!”

“And now is the time! Hang on to the cable, we are going to liberate the worlds!”

“Yeaaaah!”

Then the ground of the courtyard vanishes. They all descend with the Floozman along the pillar of fire, to the material world. And this fire does not burn; it embalms and incenses and ignites the imagination.

They go down. Back from his trance just a few minutes before the surgery, Stuart manages to complete the capsule and send it.

Time waits for no one here any more than it does anywhere else. On a virtual carpet flying at the speed of Achilles, Plethon, Jr. gives the passengers a breathtaking visual account of the most recent events. Floozman the Messiah and his followers descend towards the bayou on the fiery beam, aligned with the erect python, who is guiding them like an antenna.

The swell of matter comes to meet them. Very soon, they will materialize by way of one of the numerous squirters forming on their way. At the bottom of the pillar, surrounded by a crowd gathered behind a curtain of flames, a big serpent and a mighty Voodoo Queen seem to be waiting for them. The animal spirits dwelling in Fred Looseman's corpse seem to have awakened. Fred is standing up in his space suit, straight like one of the living dead.

Who could tell what time it is? The carpet passengers decide to transport themselves to the black diamond bay where the theatre of operations has been localized. The web is not fully supported in this area but, by chance, the Queen's hotel offers a virtual space, at a price.

As they instantiate themselves at the site's periphery, a runway forms on the beach, and it is marked out by torches. The first flyby is too fast. The flying carpet passengers can merely distinguish a distant confused crowd at the end of the path. Only on the second pass do they catch sight of the scene.

In the center of the gathering, Fred Looseman stands in his spacesuit with a giant python rolled around him. Resting his head atop Fred's helmet, the serpent stares at the webmaster, who is none other than the Voodoo Queen.

Silent dancers stand still and silent in the inner circle. Everyone's avatar waits impatiently for something to happen. Beyond the flames, the sand dust and ocean waters withhold their petty cash. And the skies above are opening...

They are going to see something big.

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## Chapter 18: They, Too, Are Looking for Janatone

### part 1

Jean-Borg Borguignon (Jay-Bee): He really should not be taken for a six-week old rabbit. As the CEO of Cosmitix, he knows how fast the cosmos is changing. Only the best will take part in the future.

There on Europe, in the gyrating yurt of Cosmitics' Comex, the Plans to Goal (PtG) presentation is coming to an end. But, rather than relaxing, the hyper-management force fields suddenly tighten around the executive director.

“Now we must address a security issue,” he says, concentrated, willful.

“This wasn't on the agenda,” Millicent retorts. Her connection to Jenny is not safe. She has to confront Jay-Bee alone.

“That is correct. It's a crisis measure: the Director of security has drawn our attention to worsening operational risks related to both the management of the Palace and the operation of the advanced lab. War and the resumption of terrorism have increased the severity of these risks. It has become urgent to take corrective measures.”

“I am not aware of that report.”

Everything topples at that moment. Jenny-Millicent can compute it all right. Blood, human blood would spurt out of the skull of the insolent MANAGER and, with it, the flow of events out of joint, towards unpredictable disorders, splendid deaths, strange recompositions of history, if she decided now to strike the mortal blow that is still in her power.

But the artificial will escapes her, pending informed, analytical predictions. She will not assemble the lethal lamellae of the laser languishing in her larynx. Jenny! What are you doing?

“Note that management has not been receiving any more reports from the advanced labs,” continues Jay-Bee. “I would add that, in the best interest of the group, the security program shall be extended to optimizing resources allocated to the Presidency, including energy, buildings and equipment. The gardens and the forges shall be dedicated to the assembly of the major interstellar vessels. Smurf will quickly organize an assessment of skills for the Palace employees...”

Silence. All systems are trying to take stock of the situation. The academic laboratory intelligences state unanimously that it's better to call things by their name: this is a coup.

"I demand this report!" calmly says Millicent.

Jenny's eyes start rolling wildly again.

"The security officer will bring it to you as soon as he is finished securing the Palace. Thank you for supporting him during the inspection."

But the CosmiGirls are already standing in a circle around Jenny-Millicent. A powerful nuclear shield magnifies their spiky hair and the strange weapons they are suddenly holding in their hands. "Jenny, Jenny," calls Millicent, but the superworld remains silent. The intelligences offer plans of resistance, but the plans are always the same desperate solutions. They ought to have invested into a reinforced guard.

"We'll take you back to your quarters," announces Jay-Bee.

Still rolling her eyes, Jenny moves back with her guard in the direction of the locks.

Jay-Bee wastes no time. He has the doctor's diagnosis published immediately: Jenny Appleseed is clinically crazy. This is not news. He will temporarily take on the role of Chairman. The web's mass failures prevent the relay of information by neural media.

But that's not all: in the general management's secret laboratories, under a harsh light stands a row of machines. These are enhanced copies of the psycho-pumps with pure lean lines, oriented towards an optimum performance by invisible indicators.

It would take a John Ruskin to regret the mark of the Academy's early inventions on the pretext that 'of human work, only what is bad can be perfect, in its own bad way'. This is simply not true of the work of Cosmetics' engineers who freed themselves of human limits long ago. Nobody would engrave 'and he saw that it was good' on the side of the apparatus, not that the concept of God still embarrasses the palotins' consciousness version 9.4 but with regards to this truth that the objectives recall with constancy: a record is made to be beaten.

Super-worldly emissaries are standing at the console two-by-two. The super-worldly emissary job description will soon be published by the hyper DRH. An officer reports, "The contraction is confirmed, the demiurge has moved!"

"Okay. Get ready for contact," Jay-Bee orders. "It should appear soon,". He thinks that the demiurge's envoy will have to clarify his vision for the future of both the material world and the imaginal interzone. The great helmsman will need to speak to

key decision-makers and in so doing, he will not fail to recognize the strategic value of Cosmetics as well as the competence of its management.

“By demonstrating the alignment of the company on the demiurge’s long-term strategy,” Jay-Bee says to himself, “I will certainly be in a position to negotiate benefits. Why not the exclusive license for vital ideas.” And since he is a man of action, he entrusts a communicating palotin with the presentation: if the content meets his expectations, the palotin will save his pseudo-life for a fiscal period.

Jay-Bee has taken care to engage the market, which is well informed, as always. It gave him information on the envoy and on the superworld’s good practices. And he thinks he knows the one who will be appointed. He recommends that Jay-Bee have lunch with him on Europa as soon as possible after his incarnation.

This emissary is a bon vivant when he’s alive, a connoisseur of wines. This was taking place at the circle of cosmos modernizers, during a PacNut conference on food biomass optimization. The market had imparted to him that he might join them for lunch if he could incarnate himself in a presentable manner.

Indeed, he is considering the resumption of Internet activities; the web has been functioning. A confirmed support from the demiurge would obviously be very instrumental. In all cases, the lunch should be simple and fast. Something well mastered, on the theme of the vineyard, with the best products and a rustic but inspired gastronomic simulation.

No, one should not take Jay-Bee for a six-week old rabbit. Cosmetics is in the right configuration to maximize the benefit of the crisis, but it mustn’t lose sight of the threat posed by the mutant. If he truly is a Superman, he can cause an incalculable amount of trouble. Who knows what the bearer of a more sophisticated genome might undertake? He has to neutralize this monster before his birth to avoid complications.

\* \* \*

Waldenpond is on Earth. A trace of her was found in the flood zones, but a report indicates that the Artificial Uterus was seen at the orbital station’s hospital she took flight.

There is another problem. The ship *To the Lighthouse* is nearing Jupiter much faster than expected. It has new technology. Captain Diana is laying her cards on the table.

Jenny-Millicent: the sudden contraction of the superworld has completed the process of pushing Jenny’s spirit into its material body. Something has just disappeared that was carrying her above herself.

Jenny is wholly into her flesh at last. It tastes like the mornings of her childhood, the burning will and the summer sun, lights upon lights above the horizon. But this flesh is away from the homeland, in her bubble of rest, protected by three ditches of antimatter and seven nuclear firewalls. Besides, Jenny knows the danger that threatens her and how fragile the palace ramparts are in comparison to the means now available to the Executive Director.

Millicent is reporting in factual mode. The general director has finally taken power; she was unable to prevent it. The security forces are breaking into the Academy at this very moment.

It is the end of an era. Jenny has brought nothing back from her long journey, and it seems she has almost lost everything except life. But she has scouted the path to heaven, and it's probably all that this phase of her realization could give her. She knows more things than human awareness can understand.

How many circles did she describe around the intellect and what has she discovered in truth?

She cannot think it without returning to the superworld, but the time is past for understanding. The vision will carry her now, alive, towards her cosmic destiny. As a large golden fish sparkles in the dripping net of a fisherman, the beauty of the superman is captured in her soul. She will eat his substance, she will incorporate it, because it's the royal share that is hers by right.

Yes, she will cease to be a shadow. She will reach this stage alive, and, alive, she will eventually incorporate the mother of mothers, the AUTOZOON, which stands at the root of forms and of which she has forgotten everything, except life. The only other creatures born who know these secrets are Janatone and their child. But where are they?

Janatone! Her lover, her double, her gossip partner. But this isn't the dyad that she desires now because in the end, she will ABSORB Janatone, as she will absorb the superhuman child. Such is her strategy or her will. Should she say now that she can shed managerial speech as one shakes the dust from one's coat? The stupidity of this language can only burst into the open air, together with the tyranny of managers. Jenny remembers that she is the one who has given them the command of Cosmitics. How could she have freed her mind otherwise?

But time is of the essence. On the other side of the fire curtain, in into her intimate web, the CosmiGirls are pressing her to activate the anti-plan of continuity. It's time, they say, it's time to drown the Palace and the Academy, Cosmitics' dead skins. We shall leave our bodily prisons and we shall live the long life of spirits, of Angels, perchance. And then, light, polished and full of days, we shall sublimate ourselves.



## Floozman in Space

With joy shall we see our latest limits vanish as we conjoin into the One. Yes, Jenny, this is our fate, they say, and Jay-Bee will be royally pissed off.

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## Chapter 18: They, Too, Are Seeking Janatone

### part 2

As the CosmiGirls talk, their eyes, which are soon to close, shed tears of joy. Their gestures, which will no longer be seen, invoke immeasurable grace.

[High-Probability Near-Future Sequence]

Here's what is most likely to happen: The agent of the presidential tomb will trigger the scuttling procedure. Evacuation signals will be sent to the reduced teams still in the Academy. The doors of the tomb will be sealed. The psycho-pumps will operate at maximum power and tear Jenny and her suite off this world forever.

Then, the sarcophagus lids will close upon the fine bodies adorned with technology that the funeral palotins will have prepared, singing all the while. Later, the coffins will be moved into an ice pit. They will plummet into the depths and disappear under the fleshy shells of Europa's sea, which constantly presses upward against the underside of its icy surface, strong with a life stubbornly stretching towards space.

The enormous underground valves will open their mouths. The secret labs will be drowned before the security forces have time to break into the palace. Even later, salamanders will explore the corridors leading to the treasure vault that is now hermetically closed. Only the creature capable of answering the three questions of the gate shall be entitled to enter.

In the gardens, the reeds' crisis phenotype will be activated, as well as the lilies', the brambles' and all the creeper vines'. Their growth is such that, in a few days of the moon, the emerged part of the palace will be gripped by inextricable foliage.

[End High-Probability Near-Future Sequence]

Jenny listens to the CosmiGirls and cannot dismiss a troubling idea she has brought with her on her journey through the heavens. It is a doubt that she doesn't feed; it grows by itself towards the light. This time of attrition is certainly appropriate to her thought: might she have taken the wrong direction in searching for eternal beauty in the highest spheres of the cosmos? What if it was the wrong way to go?

Jenny has a hard time analyzing her thoughts. Her will and judgment are not the same since she has been in the intelligible, material world where she now finds herself. In truth, her question cannot be formulated in her poor topological state. The anxiety

she experiences is made of the vestige of elevated feelings that live fully in that world and wither, meager and miserable, in this world.

And yet she tries to summon these feelings: the love of Unity, which is at the principle of the Beautiful and which inflames the heart with the exhilarating sensation of the Real. She seeks those feelings as she would attempt to revive a dream, knowing that her effort will bring to the surface the specific memory she is looking for. And it is not a good memory.

And now she hears the bitter chant that pierced her heart before. Now she remembers again its painful beauty; but she does not have the strength to recall the voices. She had risen alone more than ever before, almost above the sky of ideas, carried by a mysterious ascending stream towards the place of an ineffable convergence.

There, near the cosmic pole, she contemplated what she could, but now she cannot really remember it. She managed only to bring a feeble echo of that lament back to the nest of her psyche. Might the prime consciousness be afflicted even as a radiant love flows out of it?

What can she do with this idea so contrary to her vision? With the first wingbeat of her flight into the superworld, Jenny received the confirmation that she could remain forever young and beautiful. To achieve this, she would have to conquer the whole world's soul — nothing less than that; she has always aimed high.

Of course, many questions were raised. How many other Jenny Appleseds would she have to confront in the worlds? And if she managed to become the world's soul in place of the world's soul, what STRATEGY should she adopt? Could one even talk about time at that moment? Yes, what about time? And above all, would she not have to get rid of herself in order to go farther? She was prepared to do anything.

But today, she sees things differently. She doubts. Who might help her? She thinks of Janatone again. Hasn't she flown in the opposite direction? She is returning to her cradle while Jenny wants to force her way through to a new evolutionary stage. Janatone wants to die, while Jenny wants to live eternally. Janatone abandons everything while Jenny accumulates riches. And still Janatone remains beautiful. What if she is more beautiful?

Jenny thinks in spite of herself of all the places where she came across Brigitte Kaliyuga, who partakes so much of beauty with her black hair and the way she walks. These places link Jenny to Brigitte, and they are very strange. Jenny submits the topic to the Problematization Center for further research. She is hardly surprised to hear the young woman talking to her. She can see her when she closes her eyes.

“I was naked and half-dead in the organic recycling dungeon. The sensors were studying my body, the readers were copying my memory. Is it because I prayed? A

ray of fire tore off the roof over my head! Hoopoes and doves were spinning in the golden light, and voices were calling me...”

“Do you pray, Brigitte? You used to say that only atoms exist.”

“I wouldn’t have obtained the position of Scientific Director if I had said otherwise... Listen to me, Jenny Appleseed, I am with you. Long ago upon Earth, rich white male philosophers drew a line between what humans can hope to know and the realm of belief. But knowledge is still poor when it does not inhabit a beautiful faith. I have been convinced of that for a long time. It’s only a hollow, probabilistic dream.”

“I have no belief. I see...”

“No, maybe not. You know better than anyone else that atoms are ideas and that this world is populated by shadows. The psycho-pumps and, above all, the manner in which you invented them do show the fecundity of the cosmogonies that the Academy inherited from the ancients. The gods are real...”

“I know all this. As for the gods, they are images.”

“Not sure. But I must tell you that I have studied this technology. I’m the one who has conducted the analysis of the data provided by the intelligence service. I’m the one who started the retro-engineering.”

“That’s what I thought. Good.”

“And I admired you with all my heart. I still admire you. I would have joined you, but it was too late. I told myself that whatever I did, nothing could prevent the diffusion of the technology nor the colonization of the superworld. It was a necessary stage in our evolution, like the conquest of Earth or of space.”

“I was waiting for you.”

“But it doesn’t matter. Tell me Jenny, do you pray?”

“Naw. What for?”

“To get free!”

“I have to say only a word, and I am in the superworld. The Cosmigirls can do the same, if they want. And you too, Brigitte, I’m guessing that you are talking to me from the superworld!”

“Yes, I am in a relay station. I have reunited with my self of light. We are taking a rest; then we are going to elevate ourselves. We are going to know ecstasy. You only see the superworld through your prism, Jenny. It’s a good prism, but it still hides the

essential from you. Enter into the communion of those who pray at the bottom of pits, and you will bring about the advent of the Messiah. He is already here! It will soon be the end time and the end of all suffering!”

“The Messiah? Hum.”

“He will repair the worlds. He will recreate unity. I begin to understand his technology: it erases the energy of material and celestial bodies.”

“I don’t want to disappear. And there is something else...”

“What?”

“I don’t know. It may turn out that you are rushing into another pit. It’s hard to explain... I need to do some thinking. I have to find Janatone.”

“Another pit?”

“Yes. Unity, Brigitte. Unity may well be a pit. Could you show me the short-distance Warp?”

“Ah, you know about that. The prototype is being tested. But without me, they’ll never make it work. It’s simple, though: there is no space...”

At this moment, an arc forces itself through the fire curtains, similar to a hose. It’s Blue, who is coming through the nuclear walls in her compatibility cosmi-shell.

“The security units are breaking into the powerhouse entrance. The danger is very serious now: they can easily isolate our quarters and chalk our deaths up to an accident. According to the intelligences, it’s a highly probable scenario. We have to activate the anti-plan without delay! You must follow me to the room of the sarcophagi.”

Jenny takes a long time to answer. “You shall activate the plan, but I won’t come to our tomb. I’ll stay with the intelligences. They have enough autonomy to survive for a while; there’s a battery.”

“I heard it all, Jenny, through your mind,” Brigitte breaks in. “I can also see the palace ruined in the intertwining of events. I guess you are going to destroy everything?”

“Only the Academy, but the palace will remain inaccessible. The bodies will be preserved under the ocean; the minds will be catapulted into the superworld. That’s the anti-plan.”

Brigitte insists. “What will you do in the caves? You will not be able to hold out very long, and you may not be rescued. Come! All of you! I’ll help you, if I can. The pillar of light is still erected in the worlds. It’s very powerful. You’ll see it by heading to the knights’ angels at the height of sublimation.”

“No Brigitte, I’ll stay here. I’ll stay alive. I don’t know how yet. *Adieu!* Just tell me where the plans of the WARP are.”

Brigitte indicates the place of her own treasure under the ice. She gives her everything. “You, too, Jenny, give up earth to gain heaven,” says the one who is on her way to the City of God.

The barriers are lowered and bridges are thrown over the ditches. Through secret galleries, Jenny and her companions go down to the shore of the lake full of fish. In this vast underground room with boreal reflections and many neuro-cavernous micro-rhizomes, the intelligences — the uncontrollable rhizomic computers of the Academy — are thinking. The farewells are short, worthy of old adventurers who are wise and brimming with this eternal love that only pretends to distinguish between them, the better to bewilder itself.

Millicent leads Jenny into a tunnel where she soon hears whispers. Jenny calls. She asks for a progress report on the research and what she still has to do to live forever. She erupts and shouts that she doesn’t accept the last response she was given.

A voice rises, then another. Their source remains invisible. “We have studied the possibility that you don’t die, Jenny Appleseed. Some rhizomes have proposed a model that is viable and compatible with your birth,” they say. The voices come from all sides and turn like the winds.

“My birth?”

“Yes, you would be able to survive the genetic morphings and gain power at each transformation. You would be born, but you would not die, nor would the universe. We are dedicating a lot of resources to calculating the consequences of this configuration. You might well be an essential singularity in the cosmos...”

“Or become one...”

“Or be it in certain parts of the function that characterizes yourself...”

“All right. How can we do that? Time is running out!”

“You shall be a demiurges in place of the demiurge: it’s your turn...”

“Bah! How?”

“The superman: you need his code. If you can’t find him...”

“He will find you. It’s your child, Jenny...”

“And one of you shall absorb the other.” This last voice is stronger and deeper than the others. “if you absorb him and thus unify the new monad, you shall be regenerated, ready for a new leap.”

“But you won’t have time; dissolution is close.”

Jenny is getting impatient. “What dissolution?! Stop this!”

“The return to the One; everything set to ONE! Liberation. The Messiah is returning. We made a simulation with the capsules that speak of him: not a single atom of this moon will subsist. Not an atom, nowhere. And the superworld will disappear, too...”

“The wave is nearing, it is crossing the cosmos...”

“NO! I don’t want it!”

“Then hold us, Jenny! Hold this moon, hold Jupiter. Hold the sun, if you can. Prevent our monads from exchanging their money.”

Jenny gathers food and a few survival pods. She also has Brigitte Kaliyuga’s treasure brought in. Then she settles with her palotins in a cocoon, at the heart of the rhizome inside Europa’s ices. She connects to it, and then she enters a profound meditation. Two events are coming close to her: the *Lighthouse* and the dissolution.

[Connecting sequence]

Will the *Lighthouse* crew reach Jenny? Will Captain Diana accept the fusion of young Astralix with his mother? How can they resist the dissolution? Will Jenny-Astralix make use of the WARP?

[Connecting sequence ends]

Natasha

What are you doing here, Natasha? The Starets will not come now.

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## Chapter 19: Set and Setting

### part 1

All you have to do is swallow the little yellow pill. It's pretty, and it is good. All the conditions are met. All is set. All is right. Nothing is missing, everything is pleasing to the eye. The proportions are beautiful. Exquisite harmonies emerge and respond to one another.

But the architect's gesture is not a copy of earthly forms, no. No false textures, no imitations of nature but solid edifices where genuine growing things flourish: brown and mossy hydroponic plants, garlanded with flowers in their spatial condition, wisterias, feathers and giant beanstalks. Thus does art spring powerfully from of the architectural necessity of the ship, excluding neither roundness nor smoothness.

The passenger knows she is in space and feels the effect of the primordial force that brings her there. Everything is new, and yet some shadowy movements bear the signature of the centuries-old trees that the soul remembers.

The experience leaves a large place for color. Luminous, carnal or spiritual, red and greens adjusted, off-whites: color is everywhere alive and meaningful. All wavelengths vibrate and combine according to their number. They give themselves to the eye in the inexhaustible richness or their blends: the blues and golds of the atmosphere, visible beyond the transparent panels; and in the immediate web, the splendors of the past cosmos magnified by a thousand networked telescopes; the abyssal purple of nebulae and the crystalline ardor of dust clouds; innumerable tourmaline galaxies, the milky veils drawn over nocturnal, hieratic pillars, all meaning as much as palaces, temples, bellies...

And the air vibrates with chosen music. Holistic DJs ensure the unifying interaction and the rhythmic breath. In the NoosWeb, all human works shiver and conspire, echoing the slightest interrogation.

The subjects of the experience are all beautiful people. They exhibit good manners and noble gestures. They are young or old, female or male. A simple and attentive staff gives them beautiful clothes. They are coiffed, perfumed and adorned with jewels. They are the elect. They are part of the journey.

All preparations take place according to Dr. Weenie's instructions while the army battalions settle into the cargo holds. From time to time, one can see Captain Diana

on the bridge, one can see her walking constantly. There is nothing more uplifting, nothing more beautiful.

She barely slows down when she passes above the patio onto which the experiment rooms open. She feels the doctor's nervousness: it's his hour, his moment of truth. Can one say he will have had a good life? Quite in spite of herself, the captain thinks the doctor's death. Then she answers with the ancients that one can make no determination before his last breath.

Dr. Weenie is with the head nurse. A journalist is waiting for him a bit further, captivated by the activities taking place in the central nave.

"Are you sure that the medium is serious? Have you checked carefully?" asks Dr. Weenie. "I don't want my answers to be cut off."

The journalist is human and inspires confidence. He works for *Death* magazine. "But why, Dr. Weenie?"

Dr. Weenie responds. "We are beginning to understand just how incompatible our historical view of the universe is with life in space as it is developing today. Our brain has been shaped by millions of years of evolution on planet Earth."

"And a few thousand years of masculine control," the journalist adds. "You mentioned that in a recent column."

"Hm, not very recent, but yes, I did write that. What are you getting at? The experiment is biased? Of course, this is not news; our science is still fixed. All earthly science certainly is... But the scientific committee has become quite attentive to this issue, in particular to the definition of meta-objectives. We hope to gather the elements of a radical paradigm shift. Our method will help us eliminate the worst biases. For example, we have included many artists on steering committees in order to benefit from their intuitions..."

"Thank you, Doctor. Our readers want to know how you are doing science. Artificial persons, in particular, want to know. But please, carry on."

"Ah, I see. It is true that we have ruled out cyborgs in this version of the experiment, but only for legal reasons, you understand."

"Yes." The journalist waves a hand slightly to show that he won't reopen the debate.

"Nonetheless, we hypothesize that our minds can understand the universe or that they will be able to in an indefinite future. I want our presence aboard this spaceship to provide evidence for it. What knowledge of nature, what mastery we had to achieve to arrive where we are!"

The journalist shrugs.

“Okay. We also know that our reality is a construction of the brain. It results from the selection and the interpretation of signals transmitted by the senses. The filters are essentially in service of survival, but they are not a given once and for all.

“With the help of different techniques, scientists, artists and mystics have attempted to open wider the doors of perception. Their every intuition leads to a more fundamental view of the unity of creation. And yet the world has profoundly changed. Everything has changed.”

With a gesture, he points to the black sky on which intrudes the halo of the atmosphere. “This place is not the Earth, and no one has yet opened himself to it in a state of modified consciousness. More than ever, we need to understand it. We need to understand space to make discoveries, to innovate, to guide our evolution and adapt...

“This experiment meets all the conditions needed to open minds to their new habitat and observe it. With the help of psychotropes — the best molecules in the industry in the form of lovely little yellow pills — we are going to inhibit the production of chemical mediators that intervene in the mechanisms of selection. We are going to start right now so that the subjects of the experiment leave Earth in a state of modified consciousness. The interviews we are about to record will make great pages in history.”

“Dr. Weenie, prior to joining the army, you used the non-gravitational university labs to relaunch research on quantic decoherence at the scale of neural nanotube networks, which many specialists and roboticists consider the ‘melting pot’ of consciousness. You have co-authored an article in a famous scientific magazine suggesting that the conditions of life in space may favor a dazzling expansion of consciousness.”

“Um...” Alvin Weenie blushes.

“What role would psychotropes play in this expansion?”

“I’m sorry, but I’m afraid the discussion is becoming too technical. As I said, we are going to observe everything, including, of course, the quantic phenomena based in the neurons...”

“You don’t want to tell us?”

“Yes, I could tell you about that, but I don’t have time right now.”

\* \* \*

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## Chapter 19: Set and Setting

### part 2

Several dozen hours have elapsed since the departure order was given. Procedures are unfolding and corresponding with one another throughout the ship. The decision to depart was very likely hastened by recent events attributed to European agents. No doubt remains: the Solar System's financial stability is at stake.

The *Lighthouse* leaves Earth orbit in a majestic and uniform acceleration. The ship is a magnificent construction, powerful like a sea mammal at its center, multiple and coordinated like a school of anchovies at its periphery. It sparkles. It would have been a pity not to share it with scientists.

The subjects of the experiment are forming a circle on the patio. Dr. Weenie gives them a very simple, very factual speech. He walks to and fro with his hands in his pockets, speaking in short sentences. His heart is pounding. He says to himself that his life is certainly a good life and that he will certainly be able to take the little pill, later...

People are swallowing it now. It is pretty, it is good. It's the chemical key. The metrology palotins settle in front of their control panels, and nurses join the group to conduct interviews.

\* \* \*

Meanwhile, other palotins are trying to settle the case of the stowaways. The two objects that have succeeded in getting through the *Lighthouse's* firewalls must return to the common web pursuant to inquiry and reimbursement of their purchases in the interzone. The expulsion procedure must be completed before the ship's acceleration requires use of the space protocol.

But they are making a lot of fuss. They want to talk to Captain Diana. They are carrying a very important message concerning the financial stability. It's about Jenny Appleseed and Janatone's mutant child.

"Appleseed is looking for me," says the avatar that is wearing a hat. "She is looking for my counterpart in Real Life and I know where it is."

The two stowaways insist so much that they get to talk to a moderator. The names they mention trigger a Level One alert, and soon Captain Diana's decision-making tapestry opens a secured way for the two travelers.

"Walt... Whitman! Greetings, sir." Then she turns her thoughts to the second entity, which appears to be no more than a point. "Hello. To whom do I have the honor of speaking?"

The point turns into a line that forks and then becomes a kind of ball of twine. It whirls for a second and then morphs into Stan Laurel.

Captain Diana laughs heartily. "I took the first thing I could find in the web's library," mutters the new character in a fixed posture. "It ranges between silence and speech, I guess. I've never had to concern myself with my appearance before."

"I see..."

"Whatever, I am an emancipated stimuli shield. I served Ms. Janatone Waldenpond since my initialization, and then we ended our cooperation by mutual agreement."

"Janatone! Do you know where she is?"

"On Earth, in the flood zone. She has no indicators anymore. She is riding in a brown car. It's going badly."

"And you, Walt?"

"I'm okay. Er, this is not what I..." He falls silent for a few seconds and then speaks very rapidly. "I am the avatar of the Artificial Uterus, which is bearing the child of Janatone, Jenny Appleseed and the operational information labyrinth of the Cosmetics Academy. Help me! I think I'm in danger. I was hiding in the subcontractor's warehouse, but I was kidnapped by smugglers and I have lost contact with myself for several cycles."

"If it's okay with you, I'll speak in my own name for the sake of clarity. I don't know where the real A.U. is. I also know that the web is seriously malfunctioning. It has signed a contract with a consultancy and a shaman to reactivate a dangerous messianic movement that wants to bring about the End Times!"

"You... the A.U. is not at the hospital where I saw it?"

"No, Captain, the doctors wanted to examine it, and it got scared. It fled with the complicity of a technician. I hesitated for a long time before coming to see you, but I remembered that you offered your help."

“It’s true. I didn’t take you with me, because I thought you were safe. Anyway, I didn’t have the right to take you. But I do regret it now.”

“I... listen to me. I don’t... The A.U. is not a simple Cosmetics prosthesis! It’s a product of the Academy’s advanced labs in Jenny’s palace, where psycho-pumps are projecting the CosmiGirls into the SUPERWORLD.

“No? You don’t know what that is? It’s a region of the cosmos where are all the forms of all the worlds, and the pure numbers, and the dead who were living, the celestials and many, many other beings... I don’t know, I’m only a machine, but I think some of these notions are already in the books.

“What’s important is that Janatone was fecundated by Jenny with a form from the Superworld. Jenny and her cryonic supercalculators have developed the technology, believe me. The A.U. bears a mutant child chosen by Jenny Appleseed. But she wanted to incorporate him and make herself like him and become the mistress of the universe. Jenny Appleseed suffers from afflictions listed in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, volume 23.

“But Janatone fled with the A.U. She crossed half the Solar System in a cargo ship to take him to a safe place. And then he panicked. I was not connected, but I know how it happened. I wouldn’t have been able to do much anyway, I’m only an extension...

“I was there, myself, in the Superworld, when they” — the stimuli-shield hesitates — “but Janatone kept deactivating me all the time! I saw traces in her memories and in the psycho-pump records. There are forms that extend over hundreds of coiled dimensions, they are—”

Captain Diana interrupts. “Stop! Thank you. That’s a whole lot of information. We’ll get back to it, but we need to inform Special Services right away. A mutant, then! Do you have any idea of his powers?”

“No, Captain. Well, maybe. I... the A.U. has had visions recently. Visions of potential futures and concurrent pasts. We machines have that all the time with probabilistic methods, but this was different.”

“Nothing else? Could he attempt something against us *in utero*?”

“No, I don’t believe so. And we are friends,” Walt responds. “But what are you going to do with us? We don’t have much reason to be anymore... Well, as far as I’m concerned.”

Stan Laurel breaks in. “Speak for yourself! I am an experienced stimuli shield. I can put myself at the service of a high-tech system as long as the interfaces are exposed and documented. I can also consider a reconversion. I have money.”

## Floozman in Space

Captain Diana moves into action; she makes novelty go with the flow. “Stop now! Follow me. I’ll need you...”

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## Chapter 19: Set and Setting

### part 3

All of a sudden, isolated cries erupt in the patio, similar to those one can hear on the fast merry-go-rounds of Earth when silver gondolas fly whirling around and the acceleration snatches laughter from beautiful bodies. Wonder of the universe, the young nubile maid with a fine silken petticoat in the tamed arm of the machine her tribe has built to marry her to heaven, she shouts her joy: “Shall not loveliness be loved forever?”

But more voices chime in. They have something of a questioning prayer. What force is manifesting itself here? Who shall give the poet the fine molecule to tell what moves bodies and minds in this way?

“I didn’t know, I couldn’t see,” they tell the observers. “Our consciousness was in the grave. Now we live, now we see the light and the color so full, we are free! And lo, we are leaving.”

“Yes, I can feel the push,” says one. “I am fire, I am energy, and I am matter taking shape. I am going to regions where the stars are dense, where I am even more as I get closer to the heart of the hot and perfumed city. Baghdad! I can see each of your lamps. They don’t burn to be hidden. They are a hive, a honey of light, a plasma!”

A woman rises; she is beautiful. She says she hears the whistling axle of the chariot taking the poet away, that she sees the beautiful horses and that the Goddess is welcoming her. Then she mimics the Goddess: she dances a little, without affectation, she is so much above herself.

She says there is no void. She says that all is full and that there is nothing other than plenitude. “HE IS!” she cries, then “NOTHING IS NOT! NO, NOTHING IS NOT!”

The cry is taken up. “HE IS! NOTHING IS NOT!”

From the bridge, Diana teases Dr. Weenie. “This is a fairly communicable result we have here.”

Dr. Weenie shrugs.

The web proposes references with mental banners: Parmenides’ poem, of course, but also an extract of Henri Bergson’s book *Thought and Movement*:

We do sense that a divinely creative willpower or thought is too full of itself in its immensity of reality for the idea of an absence of order or an absence of being to be able even to come close to it. To imagine the possibility of absolute disorder, let alone nothingness, would mean saying that it might not have been at all, and that would be a weakness incompatible with its nature, which is power.

And still, what is this malaise? The metal of the hull is crying.

“TIMOTHY LEARY IS OUT THERE!” shouts a girl in a trance. She says he really is outside, looking in.

They see. They see what they see, and they are exhilarated by the revelation and caught by their intuition that an abyss of sacred terror will open before them if their heart fails them; if, in the blink of an eye, they find themselves doubting their sheer belonging to this fatherland, their consubstantiality with the cosmos.

Diana continues on her way, processing her messages. Her nano-escort makes a humming crown for her.

“WHO IS LIKE HIM?” Then “WHO IS LIKE ME?” she hears. “WHO? WHO?” the voice implores.

Diana continues walking. She is told that an emissary of Jay-Bee Bourguignon wants to talk to her. Always the same deal: he would keep his job as a director within the new Cosmetics Organization. In return, he would commit to protecting the remaining scientific assets of the Academy until the technology transfer.

Diana says no. He must be judged, but if he facilitates the transfer, that will certainly tip the scales. She is prepared to talk to him, she is sincere. She does not despise him: SHE DOES NOT DESPISE HIM! She recognizes in him an organizing power, a necessary power. It may well be that his ugliness itself is a necessity.

As Diana walks, the *Lighthouse* picks up speed. She is told of uncertainties in the breathing estimates. In addition, the various lists of non-military passengers can't be correlated. She asks Stewart Palotin to settle the problem once and for all. She accepts the budget for the instantaneous harmonization of databases.

As she walks, the *Lighthouse* continues to pick up speed. She is told that the sensor failure is fixed. She asks why she has to hear about a repair. Somebody tells her, and then she asks why she has not heard of it earlier. Indeed, the records show that the repair took place before the failure.

When she asks for a new measurement campaign, the state of the widgets is seen to be indeterminate. Everything is happening as if it were both operational and malfunctioning at the same time. An investigation is requested.

Diana washes herself, and the *Lighthouse* accelerates. Her hair floats in a ring about her head. She unloads her mini-cubes of excrement. Her intestinal compactor is one of the few concessions she makes to spatial bio-engineering. She could do perfectly well without traditional food, but her pay grade doesn't allow her to eschew official lunches.

She is told that the experiment is going wrong. Some subjects have stopped taking the pills and have switched to tranquilizers. Nonetheless, the subjects are still in a state of shock. Others want to throw themselves into the void of space.

Dr. Weenie plays recordings for her: there is weeping and gnashing of teeth, not to mention screaming in horror. On the control panel, the general morale indicator is plunging.

Diana thinks, and the *Lighthouse* picks up speed. Dr. Weenie asks her to intervene in the experiment because cases of dementia have been reported among the caregivers. They talk until the statement of decision is published. It is clear enough: the patients shall be temporarily isolated.

Diana works, and the *Lighthouse* picks up speed. She reviews the accelerated acceleration procedures. She decides the timing of their implementation. Twice, Dr. Weenie asks her to intervene. He uses exactly the same words and the same gestures.

Captain Diana now has the puzzled feeling that she has already given identical answers every time. Hearing herself repeat herself, the captain with eyes of night wonders about her state of consciousness. She decides to alert the Executive Officer and the Chief Medical Officer.

She returns to the bridge, and the *Lighthouse* picks up speed. She receives signals of the presence of pirate fish traps in the area. She feels no surprise, for she has seen them in a dream. She is told of the position of the closest ones. Pictures of stunning splendor reach her.

All indicators are deployed. The vessels display their financial manifests: gold, silver, titanium, academic works and tons of tomatoes. Spectrometers confirm that the hull of the biggest trap is coated with gold leaves. How can that be? How can these wrecks, these space monsters transform themselves in that way?

Diana sets the ship to yellow alert. But no matter: a military ship of the *Lighthouse* class can neutralize pirates without the captain even knowing about it. It is all done very neatly and without mistreating the prisoners in any way.

She sleeps, rocking herself with hyperbolas and conchoids while one of her voices sings, "Beautiful speech, beautiful speech, come to my rescue." And

the *Lighthouse* gains speed. Tubes nourish her. She is beautiful, and the good is present to her, even in her sleep.

Dr. Weenie leaves a message asking her authorization to test a stimuli shield on a consenting nurse. Upon awakening, Diana will authorize the test and, once again, it will seem to come from her memory.

Above all, she will remember a tormented dream long after extracting herself from her hypno-cocoon, when she lets her mind stroll on one of the narrow beaches of freedom that the sweet habit of awakening reveals to her. She will remember a few scenes of space battles, her exaltation and also her confusion in front of the indecipherable tactics of the enemy.

Dazzled, she will have fought against a fleet of golden fish traps swarming out from the motherships. Perplexed, she will have recorded the erratic behavior of all instruments, the simultaneous presence of same indiscernible hostile objects at different points, the inexplicable drift of the *Lighthouse* at the time of retreat.

Ardent, she will have taken unheard-of decisions against the advice of her General Staff: she will order the drone satellites exploded and all non-vital circuits cut. And she will take emergency manual control.

Inspired and unpredictable, she will have escaped the pirates and yet not have escaped them. She will try to explain this perplexing situation: Who, in her dream, was urging her to give up command? Was it the Chief Medical Officer? Was it the Executive Officer? What were her parents doing in the scene? Was Dr. Weenie present?

Diana walks, and the *Lighthouse* picks up speed. She ties up her hair and comes down to the amber shadows of the patio to address the subjects of the experiment. But the picture of the fish trap has captured the core of her mind. Must her mind have a core? The full organic multiplicity of her mental universe seems to have ordered itself around this golden, so mysteriously meaningful spaceship.

*How can I be present to what I am doing?* the prudent captain asks herself. *Shouldn't I hand over command right now?* And why does she feel so lonely when she turns her thoughts away from the fish trap? The message from the Chief Medical Officer takes lesser priority.

“Shipmates!” she shouts at last, addressing the restless company that the nurses are containing with great difficulty. “I am here to salute your bravery and to guide you. For you are pioneers! History shall remember you forever as the very first human minds to open up in space, and I have the honor to be your captain.

“While you are deploying your magnificent corollas, I remain closed like a rosebud to retain the strength that must protect us during this long journey. But I do envy you! I am the one who must stay deaf and blind so that no wrecker, no siren can deceive us. But these fires, these chants, I burn to know them!”

All of a sudden comes a draft, a shiver, a silence: some invisible thing has traversed everyone’s bones. No one says a word, for the signature of this spirit cannot be told. Flesh bristles. Some imagine long mobile scales; others the vertigo of a full and prodigious curve. Diana thinks of the wonderful trajectories of the ships she has fought in a dream. Even in a dream, how can a simple movement transcend her understanding?

Diana continues. “And lo, the beauty of the universe has struck you dumb! You have bravely lifted the veils concealing it, and it has stupefied you. It has stunned you even unto death. But, shipmates, I do not see your blood running! I see only your terrified gaze. I can’t hear the enemy. I hear only your moaning.

“Indeed, ‘Beauty is violent and painful,’ the great Plotinus tells us in his *Enneads*. But why, shipmates? Why? What is it to you? What is it to you that you can’t suffer its presence? Do you desire it — or, should I say, her? But what is this desire? Do you desire for yourselves what she is for herself?”

Diana casts an eye over the audience. Her gaze meets haggard men and women and also threatening ghosts that are now slithering among them. Multiple but united, the specters seem to hesitate to take form. Diana has the feeling that the invisible entity is listening to her. She can only carry on. Salvation lies in her words.

“Die then, all of you! Die for love of the Beautiful!”

The ghosts withdraw. Why does nobody see them?

“It’s a nice death, if you accept it.”

“Who is like me?” asks an alien voice. Diana seems to be the only one to hear. Then she understands that she can grasp only obscurely what is manifesting itself. She envelops herself with a transcendent movement that exceeds her on all counts and fearlessly continues her discourse.

“But to those who live, I want to tell a simple thing. And I’m telling it to all those aboard this ship. To ALL! Here is what I am telling you: I need you. An ignoble dictatorship has imposed a reign of biological oppression on Europa. We must fight it and win. We must heal the wounded and make the crooked straight. We must educate and lead. We must try to accomplish THE GOOD!”

The ghosts come together and whisper. They are forming a denser weave. One can almost make out their tenuous words: orders and confirmations, ritual words and

litanies. “Decoherence” and “crystallization” are the words Diana believes she understands while, under her eyes, the blue and gracious braid differentiates itself like an embryo.

Soon, everyone recognizes this figure, which is engraved in their flesh and of which they form only a fragment. Of course, it belongs to the living principle, the mother curve that is now uncoiling and engendering her daughters by unheard-of mathematics. The being that is taking shape is as tall as a giraffe, as strong as a whale, and hung like Shiva. He is one and multiple like a coral reef. He knows himself, and he knows Diana when he addresses her:

“Who is like me?” asks the creature. While he is waiting for an answer, apparel flies across the patio and comes to adorn his body. On the thick gold- and sapphire-studded fabric, guns and machines can be seen. The drape covering the heart is a used artificial uterus of the Cosmites brand.

All the alerts are buzzing now: attack, fire, destruction, air leaks, morale leaks. Seventy fish traps have been docked to the *Lighthouse* flank for several hours. Seventy-seven thousand capsules are continuously injecting high-quality ‘C’ into the main circuits.

No one can tell how the pirates came here. Still the trace of past fights is available. A careful examination will give rise to several concurrent explanations but, for the time being, the analysis carried by the weapons systems is clear. The first engagements were marked by command errors and have caused losses. The Chief Medical Officer had had to transfer power.

Then the battle was engaged in accordance with the Earth doctrine under the command of the Executive Officer. And it was lost. The enemy ships’ anticipation capacity was so much at the limit of spatio-temporal aberration that all shots missed their targets. The ballistic system’s study of missile trajectories confirms the aberrations. Still, in the navigation system’s log, the Chief Medical Officer never ordered Captain Diana’s suspension.

“The pirates are here, they are beautiful, they are with Timothy!” sings a young experiment subject. The silence is broken.

“Who are you?” asks Diana.

“I am ASTRALIX the Gaul, and I need to know who is like me.”

Diana looks him straight in his incalculable eyes, full of love for the grand living figure which they are both participating in and of which she, too, constitutes but a fragment. She sees that these eyes have gone farther than she can conceive in this

“race to vision” that Bergson speaks of. The web obsequiously proposes a quotation to her, but she rejects it, because the time is not right. She must speak.

“Jenny Appleseed, your mother; and Janatone Waldenpond, your other mother. They made you out of what is like you.”

Astralix does not answer.

“And you are not a Gaul!”

The Artificial Uterus breaks in. “That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you!”

[Linking sequence]

Will Captain Diana succeed in forming an alliance with Astralix the superman? Will THE GOOD triumph aboard the *Lighthouse*? And if THE GOOD triumphs, will the *Lighthouse* crew be capable to impose it on Europa? Will Astralix find his mothers again?

[End linking sequence]

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## Chapter 20: The Great Zombie

### part 1

The company goes down to Black Diamond Bay. They go down and down, towards the giant palm trees that wave as if possessed. Then they walk between lianas and then, at last, on the beach.

After having vanished for several hours, the immediate web comes back. Its omnipresent mesh spawns a vertigo of spires and comets in the deepening night.

Fred Looseman points at the stars with his finger. The crowd is making fun of him and playing practical jokes. Kids pour alcohol into the tubes of the spacesuit. Firecrackers crackle on the edge of the mutant jungle.

Drums begin to pound in the abandoned Goofy Club. The palm trees seem to have grown up to the sky, and the amplitude of their oscillations boggles the mind. The Queen has taken a seat on a throne of shells flanked by torches. On her right, an immense crocodile mouth made of automobile hoods receives offerings. Its teeth, painted white, shine in the night, and the restless sea foam responds to them.

Janatone and Claire are standing to one side, beside the antique wharf. Janatone watches the sea and the swarms of stars as if to read a conjunction. Claire fishes for wild oysters at the base of the pillars. She seems to be talking to them but may just be humming.

The men make a circle around the throne, tinkling ankle bells and bracelets. They summon the Great Zombie with serpent-like movements. The Queen beckons to Fred. Her hand is black, ivory-like, infinitely precise. Her hand is spiritual, imperious.

Fred walks toward her with a grotesque gait, weighed down by his muddy apparel. The men step aside to make way for him. Silence settles on the scene.

No one knows how the python appeared upon the young Queen's shoulders, but it is definitely there, gnarled like a wooden yoke. It moves, rolling and sliding nimbly down her hips, her thigh, around her ankle. It disappears into the shadows. Then it returns, coiling around the space suit that has escaped the void of space, and it grips Fred in a tight, protruding spire.

The reptile's mouth freezes above the glass globe that encloses the exploded flesh of Fred's face, resembling a Pharaoh's insignia. With impassible eyes, the beast gazes fixedly at the young woman while she washes the cracked glass with water from a black calabash, talking to Fred all the while, as one might soothe a little child.

At last, she puts her palm atop the helmet, while the snake tightens its coils. Then, slowly, as if reluctantly, the flesh wobbles imperceptibly inside and starts whirling, as if in a blender. The paste swirls slowly at first, then faster and faster. Bloody streaks melt into a joyous moss. The serpent's skull vibrates.

Everyone senses that an event is taking shape in the worlds.

The Queen trembles, and her eyes roll back in her head. A strength crackles in her loins. At last, her body stiffens, and then she collapses; the blender stops whirling. Fred remains still, teetering a little on his legs.

Everyone thinks that the ritual has not worked.

Meanwhile, a heavy antigravity motorbike has landed silently outside the circle. It is one of these space bikes seen only in the asteroids exploited by Cosmitics. The driver takes off her helmet: it's Winaretta.

The Queen gets up, pouting. She pushes back her hair and makes a weary gesture. The intimidated dancers let the motorbike come closer.

Winaretta comes down from her mobile to greet her friend.

"Bad timing, sister," says the Queen.

"Naw, I think the time is right."

"But what are you doing here? Weren't you on Europa?"

"I swiped a techno from Cosmitics: it's called the WARP. It is time, sister: we are gonna be free again!"

"But nothing is happening..."

"I think it is."

At the same moment, the web creates a roiling effect in the sky, revealing a golden brown cloud. A flying carpet emerges from it. It looks like only a leaf in the distance, but it transports a very odd group : the old consultant's avatar, Walt the uterus under the guise of Walt Whitman, Vita the she-donkey, and the S-Quick door.

Then a voice resounds, loud like great waters, audible everywhere. It's the voice of the web itself: "Bring the Messiah into the world!" it orders the Queen. "Bring him through!"

The young Queen raises her head. She listens, she hands out her hands, cupping her palms to collect invisible manna. "The SUPER CERTIFICATE!" she cries at last, and everyone knows by her voice that she is shaken.

Nobody can see it yet but they all know it's here. They feel a sacred terror, a fire of bright and flesh-pink ice takes hold of their souls.

Winaretta and the Queen exchange mysterious looks. Winaretta confirms with ferocity what the Queen only half-understands. But we must be careful: understanding what she only half-understands is an act of an infinite understanding.

"Yes, sister," Winaretta cries to her. "You go this way, and we... everywhere!"

"But we are going nowhere! All bounds shall be unbounded. Small wills will exchange their currency against the SUPER CERTIFICATE, and great wills will have to follow. You know that; you are a sorceress, too!"

"Yes. And a mother, like you. Go and do your job, we'll meet again."

"We shall not part. We shall be in eternity." Lightning bolts punctuate the Queen's words.

"Nono, not even that. As for me, I'm getting out of the pit." Winaretta suddenly turns around, because a clamor has resounded: the python clutching the living dead has just moved. It unties himself from him and rises very straight, sticking out its vivid, bifid tongue. It stares at the Queen.

"Yes, the dead one has a lot of Mana," she says. Then without another word, she goes and takes Fred's inert hand. A blinding nova transpierces her bones, leaving a mauve signature.

When the couple can be seen again, the living dead has sent his helmet rolling under the swings. Everyone sees his handsome face. He is Fred Looseman and yet he is not Fred Looseman. His jaw is firmer, his brow broader and more serene. His eyes are laughing.

The Queen helps him out of the suit. Out of it comes the naked body of Floozman. He stands up and, at that very moment, his virtual double arises in the immediate web. It's an immense shadow that has come to protect him with its cosmic mantle, a shadow of nebulous hair spangled with stars and with a penis as large as a bell clapper.

His voice is the roaring of the storm. “I come to redeem the world,” he says. “Starting with this old friend.” *Shazam! Rhône Poulenc!* He beckons to the serpent.

The serpent opens its wide mouth and gulps down the spacesuit in a single bite. The serpent’s swollen belly glows fiery red for a fraction of a second; then it resumes its shape and color. As if this meal has awakened a fierce hunger, it rises and swoops down on its own tail, which the serpent endeavors to swallow.

“My friends,” says Floozman, “it’s the end of the world! I come to redeem everything. Yes, I do have the SUPER CERTIFICATE, a coin for everyone, no more, no less. From now on, there will be no more, no less! Those who have ears, let them hear!”

“Ears? What’s that?” the S-Quick door asks the carpet as they enter the virtual parking lot of the bar.

“As for me,” a customer groans, “if I had enough to redeem everything, I’d know what to do with it, you can be sure of that!”

“You’re full of crap,” responds a regular at the bar, leaning at the end of the counter, by the peanuts dispenser. “You’re gobbling up all this supernatural stuff because you were born in this rotten zone. You’ve received no education. Sorry to remind you, but the bond-holders have taken it all: the schools, the hospital, the jobs. Soon, if you do nothing, the sanitation work will begin. Too bad for you. The survivors might be entitled to science if they are not sent to the human authenticity farms.”

The lady tending bar intervenes. “No politics, Gérard, please,” she asks.

“You don’t understand...”

\* \* \*

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## Chapter 20: The Great Zombie

### part 2

While events unfold on the beach, a symposium is being held at the hotel bar. Hang on: the police are the first in a series of toppling dominoes.

“Aaand, here they aaare... That’s all we needed.” With a lift of her chin, the boss lady at the bar motions to the police cars heading for the beach. The immediate web displays the mission orders and the officer’s main indicators.

The map finishes her ‘C’ in a rush. At the same moment, the old consultant and his troop are entering the saloon’s immediate web. Outside the saloon are Walt Whitman, the S-Quick door, and Vita the she-donkey. The virtual Floozman is outside, busy forming the giant shadow of his double, the real and supernatural Floozman who is calling everything to return.

The antiviral agents of the local network try to block interruptions by advertisements. The old consultant presents the team, its references and its mission statement. In spite of all these explanations, Vita the she-donkey and the door are not admitted inside. They have to stay outside, attached to a virtual leash.

While Walt is having a look at the juke box, the old consultant’s avatar asks the boss lady for a meeting room; he has work to do. Once settled, he’ll contact Ms. Marinella. He’ll ask her to dispatch the Floozboys immediately. In the meantime, he’ll take a long coffee break.

The bar continues to fill up. Basil and Quitteria want information on the boats, but the boats no longer exist. Captain’s Diana’s Deputy Chief of Protocol is on reconnaissance. A good-looking tenant enters discreetly and drops his satchel on a table, a little aside from the crowd. The car recognizes Joe Dasein by his indicators. She pays the bill in haste then jumps into her own handbag to proceed stealthily toward the virtual exit.

At the bar counter, the discussion never ends. It seems ready to carry on beyond the end of the world.

“But who’s interested in liquidating everything, hey?” Gérard is asking.

The old consultant, comfortably seated at a corner of the bar, answers. “I’ll tell ya: it’s the opposite of liquidation. It’s about RESORBING liquidity. When you’re

offered the super certificate, which shouldn't be long now, you may not accept it because, as a complex living being, free and healthy, you are a strong will. Your value in super-money corresponds to..."

"But I ain't got no money, sir! I am a proletarian!"

"So you think! But EVERYTHING is money. Your own being is made up of money. Of *money!*"

"Nooo! Certainly not! That's what you believe, you guys in finance!"

"Listen to me. I'm no financier. I'm just a consultant in management, and I participate in the transformation of the cosmos. Being is simply the monetization of the One. We've proven that scientifically."

"Scientific, to boot!" Gérard protests, outraged. "Of course! You're gonna explain to me scientifically how I'm getting screwed!"

"On the contrary! Let me give you a word of advice. Without any knowledge of your personal value, I know that it corresponds necessarily to a coefficient of one over  $x$  ( $1/x$ ) such that  $x$  is less than one ( $x < 1$ ). You are more complex than a pebble or a virus, you see. As for the number one, it's easy to discern that you are not unified."

"Compl... gargle..." Gérard chokes on his beer.

The old consultant takes advantage of the time while Gérard is trying to catch his breath. "Yes, it takes a strong will to federate the whole system that constitutes you. In other words, you are more than ONE, my dear friend, a compound of high-value monads.

"The swap with the super-certificate will probably not be attractive for you, on purely super-financial grounds, I mean. Irrational factors such as the sheer weariness of the self might motivate the transaction, for sure, but that's beside the point.

"On the flip side, if this is not a good deal for you, what is it to the poor cells of the dead leather of your shoes or to the polymers that make up the threads of your socks? The coefficient's denominator of each of these small, insolvent monades is greater than one ( $x > 1$ ) so that they are far less than ONE.

"Naked and fragmentary, they have no capital, nor any means of unification. Won't it be a good deal for them? But this is nothing as long as one doesn't apply the same reasoning to the monads that constitute your organs, nor to those who constitute them in turn: think of the pulp of your teeth, of the fibers of your bones, of your flesh tissues. Think of the juices, the fluids and all the miserable molecules assigned to subaltern vegetative functions, condemned to be recycled without cease for eons..."

“And all that for what ? Or rather for WHOM? They belong to these innumerable aggregates that have no name and for the poorest, that have no mass.

“And do you believe that middle-class monads, the ones whose value is situated around unity in a bourgeois sort of way and who may want to persist in Being in hopes of becoming rich someday by working hard and by borrowing or even hoping gradually to attain to the ONE GOOD by applying themselves to the holy mediocrity developed by the St. Francis de Sales Consulting Group — do you believe, I say, that these wills can make a difference?

“Think again! Their decision has no weight whatsoever from the moment the small monads quit their jobs without notice! In short, if you can’t convince all these wills to adhere to the superior and reasonable unity you incarnate, then, whoosh! Everything falls apart!”

“Reuuuh!” Gérard has caught his breath. “So what?! Long live freedom! I’m not forcing anyone!”

“That’s what I’m telling you! What will the world come to if management is not convinced? Everything will dissolve. You better believe there’s gonna be a whole lot of falling-apart going on. That’s why Old Consulting proposes a method for an accelerated integration of the self by which one can secure in a few simple steps the loyalty of the many...”

“No, not at all,” cries Gérard. “It’s all because of the stakeholders! And look, they’re sending in the cops!” Gérard has noticed two officers walking towards him.

“Your papers!” an officer commands.

The boss tries to intervene. “Leave Gerard alone,” she says.

“You, stay out of this!”

“Don’t touch the boss.” Several customers have stood up. Joe Dasein makes a move toward the exit. A policeman catches him by the arm, but Joe Dasein manages to free himself.

A big beefy guy shouts, “And why aren’t you arresting the Cyborgs loaded with ‘C’ and all the smuggled widgets yonder on the beach? Hey?”

“Yeah,” the crowd echoes, “go and arrest the Cyborgs! There are two or three of them on the beach. This is all because of them Cyborgs!”

“Let’s go, boys!” They all hasten toward the beach, chased by the police. Joe Dasein cuts through the jungle to arrive first. The iguanas scuttle away as he comes.



## Floozman in Space

A riot ensues. The situation is very confused. The dancers, disoriented, have joined the battle. The Michel Simon section has set up an ambush and attempts to kidnap Janatone, but they are intercepted by a troop of Floozboys. A bus crashes at the top of the parking lot. Bacchant Martian robots emerge from the smoking wreck, singing all the while bandits from the Bayou are busy ransacking the luggage.

A form materializes above the trampoline. It's a little thin man in a sweatsuit. He does a few gymnastic stunts and then starts yelling at everyone. He says he is the envoy of the demiurge.

Everyone starts laughing at him. The map says he's an inadequate manifestation of some incompetent flunky. The demiurge handed in its resignation long ago, anyway.

The mortals inflict mortal strikes on each other. Then a robot voice says, "It's all the fault of the she-Cyborg!"

They all move toward the wharf where the CosmiGirl is standing. Sacrifice is in the air.

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## Chapter 21: It Is Done!

### part 1

“It’s you who are un-poetical,” replied the poet Syme. “If what you say of clerks is true, they can only be as prosaic as your poetry. The rare, strange thing is to hit the mark; the gross, obvious thing is to miss it. We feel it is epical when man with one wild arrow strikes a distant bird. Is it not also epical when man with one wild engine strikes a distant station? Chaos is dull; because in chaos the train might indeed go anywhere, to Baker Street, to Bagdad. But man is a magician, and his whole magic is in this, that he does say Victoria, and lo! it is Victoria.”

— G.K Chesterton, *The Man Who Was Thursday*

From the hotel’s bar, one can see the giant shadow of Floozman. His voice resounds like great waters. “IT IS DONE!” he announces, holding high the rolled-up body of the serpent, which has become no more than a ball of scales busy eating itself. In his hand, the sphere diminishes until it vanishes, and a blazing, minuscule star appears in its place. It’s a luminous dot of an intense black, like the first night of the universe. Floozman flings it high into the air and then, throwing his head back, he catches and swallows it.

“IT IS DONE!” The event reveals itself to each monad depending on the monad’s degree of attention to life. It’s not difficult to understand that everything is disappearing. “HERE IS THE SUPER CERTIFICATE! EVERYTHING IS ONE! EVERYTHING MUST GO!” So the Messiah says.

Everywhere, the small nomads have readied their money for clearing. But in spite of the signs, a lot of powerful monads don’t want to believe in the imminent pre-emption of their assets. No, they don’t. Only those who do fear the Almighty have a vision of what is going to take place after a time, times, and half a time. Only they can see roots untie, rock crumble, and water hiss; the wind blowing cold and hot; birds spreading infinite velvet wings, maize growing up to the sky and crops exploding.

They see their options’ actuarial value wither. And in the depths of the earth and in the firmament, they see dark minerals beginning to glow. Granites, schists and basalts vibrate wildly. In the crystals, the atoms bid each other farewell while blowing a bagpipe tune. They can hear it already: *We’ll ride again.*

“IT IS DONE!” The web vanishes once again, leaving things for what they are. The avatar of the car, the psycho-geographic map it carries in her handbag and all the other virtual objects disappear from the bar for the duration of the outage.

The boss lady’s weary gaze is deep and not surprised by anything. It doesn’t waver. She says that it’s the end this time but that everything always starts again. “Don’t worry,” she adds, wiping her hands on her slender thighs. In truth she is thinking what the customers are thinking: it’s only a stage show, one of those spectacular destructions of wealth that the rich indulge in to absorb the surplus, the accursed share.

She knows that the Queen has connections in a few cities of the normal land; she even accompanied her there several times, a long time ago. She doesn’t have good memories of the tours arranged by notables in need of sensations: the smugglers, the interminable commuting, the clandestine black magic parties futile, vain and sometimes dangerous, as well as the residents’ dreadful craving to believe and their fearsome technology.

“IT IS DONE!” The hole shines with thousand black fires in the Messiah’s navel. “ALL FOR A QUANTUM! I COME TO REDEEM THE WORLDS!” The web’s event engine makes the ultimate decision. It says that if the end has really come, it’s not a matter of getting it over with, it’s about being part of the event and symbolically accompanying it with all the will one is capable of.

Then all the services stop for good. Memories are flushed, data and programs are erased along with their backups. All the running environments loop on null instructions (NOP). All the virtual worlds sink into nothingness. Their objects are dissolved and with them, their avatars.

EXEUNT Vita, S-Quick, Walt Whitman as well as the virtual Floozman, who disappears from the sky, announcing the upcoming egress of the Messiah himself. As for the old consultant’s avatar, it vanishes without having finished explaining the self-integration method. However — is it a good thing? — he survives himself in the rugged operating environment of his tomb.

All the enriched visions of all the points of the immediate web are extinguished. All the objects with properties in the web’s cloud, all the coordinates, all that owes its existence only to the web’s machines disappears forever.

A sudden surge of energy startles Janatone. She has been dozing, leaning against the wall of the chips stall. Rocked to sleep by the nearby chaos, she was looking for rest as the tired French-fry vendor does after serving all the kids in the village.

The psycho-geographic map has just reactivated itself in Janatone's implants. "The web is dead," it announces. "But I'm still here, within you and also in the car, I suppose..."

"Ah... And why should I care? Me too, I'll soon be dying, at last."

The psycho-geographic map responds: "Listen to me carefully, Janatone, my beautiful host. Do not believe that death is a refuge. For there is no death. We won't cease to be when we cease to manifest ourselves, on the contrary..."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm talking about the regions of being that cannot be mapped out. My art is one of delineation and drawing. It's for this reason that I know well what limits are, if you grant me this point, so to speak."

"Pfff... Stop playing with words."

"Okay. The realm of measurement is not everything, far from it. It's not enough to leave that realm in order not to be. *Aye, there's the rub*. You'll see that when you're in the interzone."

"The interzone again?"

"No, not *that* interzone. Listen. Let me transmit to you the result of my research; we're running short of time. It's only a synthesis, because my data has disappeared with the web. Here it is: the realm of limit and necessity is very narrow; it may not even exist. It's on that side that will is stirring, all that inexhaustible will that is preparing to return to the One.

"But it's a dreadful trap! The singularity that tends to reconstitute itself at that place cannot stand there. As soon as it is accomplished, it breeds. And BANG! Everything starts again. And everything always starts again, I'm afraid."

"God would constantly kill herself?"

"I don't know, I don't quite understand. But yes, to some extent, she would do that, whether she's a 'she' or not. The emanation resumes and fragments itself anew. It complicates — that is, it coils itself — and *boing!* — it explicates; it uncoils itself again. And everything becomes like tumbleweed again, from the demiurge down to the smallest bits of slime, not to forget the Archons."

"I felt the presence of the demiurge, when I was out in the superworld. Well, so it seemed to me..."

“I’d be surprised. There’s none at the moment. You must have approached a flunky. But that’s not all: on the other side — for there is another side of the mirror, if we can call it that — on the other side, the unlimited extends. Matter as defined as pure indetermination, in the manner of Plato or Plotinus.” The map falls silent, it is looking up something. “Oh, that’s right... the web. But here are my notes:”

Matter is neither Soul, nor Intellect, nor Life, nor the principle of the Ideal, nor the principle of reason. It is neither limit nor boundary, for it is merely indetermination: *apeiron*. [...] It lives beyond all these categories and thus has no right to the name of Being. It will be more plausibly called a non-being [...] It is scarcely more than the image and phantasm of a mass, a bare aspiration to substantial existence.

It is stationary, but not in the sense of having position. It is invisible and eludes all efforts to observe it. It is present where no one can look, hidden from sight, ceaselessly presenting opposites in the things based upon it. It is both large and small, both more and less, both deficient and excessive; a phantasm unabiding and yet unable to withdraw [...]

Its every utterance, therefore, is a lie; it pretends to be big and it is small, to be more and it is less. And the existence with which it masks itself is not existence but a slight of hand making an illusion of all that seems to be present in it, phantasms within a phantasm. It is like a mirror showing things as being within itself when they are really elsewhere, filled in in appearance but actually empty, containing nothing, pretending everything.

“Everything and anything, then....”

“It’s serious. But a small village resists and does not resist. It dedicates itself to the world of measure, our world. I can’t remember how I came to that conclusion or to this other one: I think your soul comes from there, Janatone, and that it is returning there. Like the soul of the girl with the motorbike. You belong to the ones whom Goethe calls THE MOTHERS...”

“A mother... Oh dear! And who’s telling you that it’s not a phantasm? By the way, do we have any news of the Artificial Uterus?”

“I took note that the child was born and that he seriously aspires to the place of the demiurge now that he has absorbed Appleseed. Unless she’s absorbed him.”

“IT IS DONE!” cries Floozman with outstretched arms. “ALL FOR ONE QUANTUM!”

“And that one?” asks Janatone.

“That one? I don’t know where he comes from. Maybe from Matter... Listen to me now, Janatone, you may need this. I’ll tell you where I come from and especially how far I went during the debacle, after the death of Du Guillery.”

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## Chapter 21: It Is Done!

### part 2

Story of the map and the spiders

“You have met du Guillery?!”

“Oh yes! I was his last map of Mars...I came into the world long ago, on the mode of existence of technical objects, of course. I was designed on a table in the bar At Sparrow’s.”

“I was married to him.”

“Sparrow?”

“No, dummy, Du Guillery.”

“Oh. But then you’re the one who—”

“Yes. But never mind, the end is near anyway. Go on.”

“At Sparrow’s, in the 20th century, in a subjective street in Saint Germain des Prés, between two revolutions. At least that’s what I’ve been told of my origins.

“The freedom of my decisions engine I owe to the founders of a group called the Situationist International: Dany Pompidou, I believe, and also Lanza del Malraux, Herbert Debord...

“I’m not sure about the names; the quality of the data is deplorable. I have to rely on fuzzy logic to reconstruct the information. I was scanned very early by a psychiatrist close to Ivan Chtcheglov. I was refined subsequently by poets and activists.”

“Cut it short! It’s all over, you know.”

“Okay, okay, I’ll make the long story short. I was forgotten in the cloud for more than a century, so I just read and mapped everything, all that I could know and infer. I produced infinite units of ambiance and combined them.



“The Cyber Bacchants came on a secret mission and put me to work again. Those thugs were fascinated by the International’s methods, particularly the principle of the catapult that the Seoul Psychogeographical Institute had disclosed to them. Why? Go figure.

“That’s how they took me back home with them, so to speak. I prefer not to say what I recorded then, nor the circumstances of my first escape. And we don’t have time for it, do we? I will not tell you about their biological experiments, nor of the Continual Death Laboratories. Believe me, the robots are the greatest experts of death.

“They forced me to map the territories of death by coupling bionically with the dying. They used me to set up pseudo-death experiments. They loved it, those bastards! I was even organizing trips to the underworld and the inter-worlds according to the formulas of their choice or at my own whim. They drove me pseudo-crazy!”

“No, no, don’t tell me.”

“No. Just be aware that my fictional underworlds have hosted the failed mind of more than one companion. They are still there, in some way, because the spirits of the dead still shimmer as a reflection on the edge of the manifested world.

“In short, the fact remains that I managed to transfer myself into the network of Du Guillery’s army, or at least what remained of it: a few dozen badly equipped resistance fighters. That summer, we were hiding in the mountains, harassed by drones. But I had scouted an old road leading to an unfinished archeological dig. Part of a huge maze was sticking up above ground.

“Since we did not have much to lose, and the underground protected us, Du Guillery decided to explore the large galleries. I was downloaded into his cortical implants to guide him. I did so with my pseudo-instinct alone, I have to say, because I didn’t have lots of data. But we knew that the lost city of the spiders of Mars was not far away. In fact, we were just walking under the portico of the upper gate when the atomic bomb fell.”

“Then, that’s where he died, among the spiders?”

“Yes and no. We died together, to the extent that I can die. But we awoke. I can’t say how or with what computational substrate I had become conscious of being Du Guillery with his map of Mars. I was a synthesis of the two of us in a magnificent spider body. And we were going down a river with a crowd of other ghostly insects.

“I first thought it was the Rio Grande because of the cacti, the beautiful silver night and Carter’s travelogues. But it wasn’t: it was the Lethe. As best I can unravel it on

my own underworld map, version 9, it was the river of forgetfulness. Unity of mood had been refined to tell the dissolution of the spiders' civilization..."

[Priority 1 interrupt, non-maskable]

"IT IS DONE!" breathes everything with all its might. Quarks chirp loudly, black holes growl at the heart of galaxies, the mysterious substrate of the infernal underworld, version 9, emits grinding sounds.

[End Priority 1 interrupt, non-maskable]

"Hurry!" says Janatone.

"Well, Du Guillery still lives on the other side of the Lethe, along with the spiders and Humpty Dumpty. And they can return. This is what Tiresias told me when he gave me this mission."

"Tiresias? A mission?"

"Do you think we have time? This is the most important. Of course! Maybe we can carry out this mission together. Maybe we *must* do it together."

"You're boring me. I am not going to do anything. I'll be dead, and so much the better."

#### The map's mission

"Wait until you know what it's about. We wove a canvas between two rocks in order to feed upon lesser souls. Tiresias the seer approached in his version 9 inspired from part XI. 'You've gone through the membrane of the Earth,' he told us, 'and you have desecrated the tomb of the last Kings of Mars, may they be forever dissolved in the ecstatic non-being where they have led their people!'"

#### How the last Kings of Mars led their people into non-being

"*NO! STOP IT!*" Janatone yells. This is not her style.

#### End of the story of how the Kings of Mars led their people into non-being

"All right already. But I just want you to know that he's the one who brought me back into this glade, this singularity where the manifested universe is displayed. Believe me, it's a solid clue. You'd better hear the story of the last Kings of Mars before going where you're going. But whatever..."

"Out with it."

“Okay, then. If I want to return to my library after the dissolution of this world, I’ll have to walk with and within you, I hope, from valley to valley in the interzone, displaying my nice map on your shoulder until I meet seas that do not know man.”

“Seas? That don’t know man? Who gives a damn about man?!”

“I’m just repeating what the ghost of Tiresias, a human being, told me. I’ll have a sure sign of it when millions of wayfarers like us pop up around us, as numerous as the waves of the sea. They will ask why there is a decoherent self on our shiny, quantized wave function. In that place, he said, place my ladder and sacrifice to the number...”

End of the map’s mission

End of the story of the map and the spiders

“IT IS DONE!”

The sudden shock of the black hole came without warning. A universal implosion occurs, and nothing is as before. Everyone still thinks they are seeing what the darkness has revealed. Be it human, reptilian or electronic, the eye has seen it. Those who don’t know the light have perceived it. But no understanding can account for it.

The prevailing feeling is one of immense relief and well-being. It’s like being passengers on a derailed train that will never hit the ground. It’s like walking on thin ice. The soul begs to leave the body but, o miracle of miracles, rather than stiffening in the visceral fear of wilting, the body dilates in pure bliss, and — who knows — an additional ounce of faith might be enough to bring it blessedness.

Let’s believe that the lumps of this crumbling will still retain enough awareness to bear witness. “Sugar must dissolve,” as Bergson puts it. Let’s believe as well that disincarnated ears remain to hear the voice of the old consultant, who never shuts up. Nor do we hear silence from the innumerable legions that haunt the totality of possibility. For if nothing is not, why wouldn’t everything enjoy freedom of speech? And if everything speaks, what shall be the role of management?

For verily I say unto you, change goes through fourteen phases: denial, anger, shock, fear, frustration, confusion, stress, DESPAIR and then creativity, skepticism, acceptance, impatience, hope, enthusiasm...

Floods of will have evaporated, and the wall of chaos seems to have come closer on all sides in the eyes and sensors of all who stand on this side of the looking-glass. And what do they see, coming out of the waters of this mirror? From this lowering and tormented sky, they see, descending, a bowl of light with a thousand faces of pure diamond. They hear singing. They hear the voice of an angel saying, “Here is the heavenly Tel Aviv! Join us on the DANCE FLOOR!”

But something still resists. The struggle has resumed in the eye of the cyclone. Claire is standing at the entrance of the wharf. She's putting up a fight. She's confronting the assailants and protecting Janatone. Her massive silhouette stands out in the beams of light emanating from the Messiah.

BANG! BANG!

She advances. Her gun cuts down the crazed ones in the first line, and they fall, twisting, on the sand. The others step back, but their ranks are soon expanded by newcomers, and the human wave returns to the assault.

At the same time, a light starts blinking on Winaretta's dashboard. She starts her huge motorbike. It rises and heads toward the ocean. The lone CosmiGirl zooms toward the beach and spies Janatone. She doesn't have time to be surprised. Her sister is in danger. The crowd wants her blood, screaming in unison: "Get her! Get her!".

BANG! BANG! BANG!

Claire is still fending off the enraged lynch mob; people are falling all over themselves to get at her. Winaretta dives to the level of the wharf. She seizes Janatone around her waist and hauls her up on the motorized throne, all on the fly, like a rider from the steppes of Kirghizia.

"Hi, sister. This is the end, eh?"

"Hi. Take me to Mammy Wata." Janatone points to a mysterious human-shaped light coming above the waves to meet them.

"She ain't Mammy Wata, but I think we're going to the same place."

"Not sure about that. I don't know where I'm going, but I think it's not bad, as death goes."

"There is no death. Stick with me. We're gonna get through in one piece into matter. We have to hurry. If that Messiah fails like all the others, the door will close."

"What do you mean?"

"At the next outage, I rush up close as I can to the wall. When everything returns to normal, I'll go full tilt into matter. It's all programmed into this bike.

"Matter is our poor mother, Janatone. You forgot her when you were born into this world. Or, rather, she is our true mothers. They're always here for us, for we are their daughters, and we're mothers too. Come! They'll give us back EVERYTHING!"

“Naw, not for me. Take me to Mammy Wata and let me die the way everyone is dying here.”

“Whatever. You can also join us that way.”

The mysterious apparition with long hair is waiting for them on the wine-dark waters. She greets them and then addresses Janatone in a beautiful voice. She tells Janatone to get off the motorbike and then gives her directions. Janatone has to follow the undersea current. When she reaches the other side, go to the Jai-Alai. She tells Janatone a good garden is waiting for her in the past, which exists forever, and that dream will guide her.

Then the apparition speaks to Winaretta. “Are going there directly?”

“Yep, straight there. Without going through the interzone. It’s good, I can already feel it.”

Joe Dasein arrives on the beach, pushed by a new wave of the lynch mob. He is out of breath. Confused, he stops and combs his filthy hair with his hand. He’s come just in time to see Janatone jump from the motorbike and disappear into the waves. For a couple of seconds he just stares, dumbfounded.

“Follow her, Joe, if you’ve got the guts! Go and follow her!” Claire shouts to him between rounds of gunfire.

Joe enters the ocean. He doesn’t feel cold. Only the dream can guide him now.

“IT IS DONE!” Another flash of lightning prolonged and penetrating like a burst of x-rays plunges the world into a new transformation. Everything sparkles wildly around Floozman. From one infinite universe to another, myriads of wills have seen their moment of liberation. They have heard the last call, the last ones before the first ones, the farthest ones before the closest ones, and it doesn’t matter for, where they are going, there is no time or place.

With the first burst of light, Winaretta makes a wide turn above the waves and rushes at full speed toward the illegible wall of chaos, a thousand rays making a halo around her. A little before the expected shock, black lightning bursts forth, unveiling a large crack, dazzling like the corona of the moon when it eclipses the sun. However, some see matter dance while relieving her daughter of her beautiful limits and singing, “Ploom, Ploom, Tralala...”

But something resists again. Up and down are back, along with weight and duration.

On the beach, the crowd sees that its prey, Janatone, has escaped.

**BANG! BANG! BANG!**

Claire shoots into the air to stop a new assault from the crowd. “She’s gone. Try to catch that one!” she shouts to them, pointing at the Demiurge’s envoy.

Someone cries: “Yes, the clowns! The clowns! Catch the clowns!”

Claire moves forth on the beach at a heavy pace. She manages to come close enough to Floozman to talk to him, which is the only way to communicate now that the web has disappeared. He is concentrating and has retracted his rays.

“Who are you?” he asks her.

Claire bows and responds, “Messiah of the worlds, the future market has sent me on mission. I belong to its special police force. It has made me in the image of the vanished demiurge especially to meet you, but the result has not been quite successful. Anyway, my person don’t matter; I have an important message for you. I pray you to hear it.”

“Who cares about the future?” says Floozman. “I come to abolish time.”

“My father, the market, has asked me to watch over the Goddess. She has finally been able to find a good death. She’s going to return to her bank and sustain being. But my mission won’t be entirely accomplished until I have warned you of the danger which threatens the One Good.”

“Nothing can threaten the One Good. It is, absolutely.”

“No. A One that absolutely is cannot be. If the One is, it must be multiple, otherwise it is and is not at the same time. The market, my father, has understood this, and his thought is far deeper than what I can express in this limited form.”

“There will be no more time.”

“You don’t understand. We don’t know where you come from or what you are. And you don’t know either, Floozman! Can you say you do? Listen to me: you will resorb creation, okay. But who told you it’s a good thing to do that? Who told you the One Good will survive the implosion?”

“I DON’T GIVE A DAMN!”

“Look, Floozman, look at these babies.” Claire takes three nice oysters out of her satchel. “See, they want to take a walk with me. They want to wear their pretty little shoes. They want to live, Floozman. They are confident.”

“We, too, we want to live.” Basil and Quitteria have come close and have been silent so far.

### Floozman in Space

Floozman stares at the oysters with round eyes. The mysterious apparition looks at Floozman from afar with a kindly smile. Suddenly:

WAAARP!

The green tail of a shooting star whirls wildly in a spiral from the celestial pole to the equator. A moment before it disappears on the horizon, a seed of metal detaches itself and falls into the sea. Out of the thick vapors emerges a beast.

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## Chapter 21: It Is Done!

### part 3

“I guess they need a door,” says the door in a backwater of the non-manifested. A door appears immediately between the world and chaos, below the hotel’s laundry room.

The crowd is gathered around the spit where the flesh of the demiurge’s envoy are served, firms and roasted to a crisp. But they cease reaching out to taste the dishes. There is no wonder, though, that a test of WARP technology has ended up in the only spot in space-time preserved from chaos.

The monster approaches. His movements are too rapid and complex to be interpreted by a human mind. One can only know it is blue, striding closer and very quickly. It carries a used artificial uterus as a pendant along with a minuscule motorbike carburetor.

“Who are you?” he asks the mysterious apparition when he reaches the beach.

He receives no answer.

But Floozman challenges the beast. “And you, who are *you*?”

“And you? Who are you?” the beast responds.

“Stop this!” Claire shouts.

“I am ASTRALIX, the pearl of the world!”

The beast shows its face: it’s Jenny Appleseed, but then it’s Jay Beeh.

“I am ASTRALIX, the pearl of the world! Who has shrunk the universe?”

“I did. I’m the almighty father. It doesn’t matter now, for we are DONE WITH IT!” Floozman closes his eyes and concentrates.

“Is that the way?” asks the beast of many faces. He points a blue finger at the Messiah’s navel.



“Now! It is done!” yells Floozman. He arches his back in the posture of ultimate annihilation and attempts to stick out his belly button. A spiky ball of black rays emerges, similar to a shiny sea urchin.

Astralix shivers. “I want to go into the belly button! I am The One!” he says decisively.

Claire understands. “You must die first.”

The beast bends over her “I will NEVER die. I must become the One in the place of the One! I must become EVERYTHING!”

Nervously, Claire fingers the safety of the Mugwump gun. “That is not possible. When you are conjoined to the One, matter will still be here, with the non-manifested and non-being.”

“I will be the non-manifested and non-being, too.”

“I’m afraid it is not possible,” the artificial uterus interjects prudently.

Floozman doesn’t listen to them. He concentrates with all his might. The black ball is swelling and gaining in brightness.

“Hold on, what are we talking about?” inquires Basil.

“Okay, we’re talking about the prime principle. Its entrance is supposed to be situated there.” Claire points to Floozman’s navel.

Floozman, confused, looks down involuntarily. With this furtive gesture, he takes on the worried traits of Fred Looseman, but nobody notices.

Quitteria is not satisfied with this answer. “Wait. If this thing is somewhere, on the other side, say, then it has a limit, doesn’t it?” After a short silence, she continues, “Is it conscious? Does it think?”

The Queen seems to know what they are talking about: “Maybe not right now. The Demiurge has not manifested itself for ages. Maybe it’s traveling, wandering about. Who knows? The ONE who is not absolutely may not be occupied. Maybe it’s vacant.”

Basil is shocked. “Are you saying nobody is minding the store?”

They all turn their backs to Floozman. Why are his feelings hurt by their attitude, he, the monetary Messiah? Why would he care about these ghosts who will soon cease to be? Strangely, the new idea that he may not love them saddens him.

Love... And the baby oysters he can't get out of his mind. He is surprised. Is it a phantasm from the world beyond the limit? He wonders if he hasn't just seen the little creatures gently opening, discovering their mother of pearl and their slightly milky pulp, as if they wanted to feel this world fully and fill up with hope.

He has a vision, or at least he thinks he does. Hasn't he just embraced with a single gaze the whole lineage of their potentialities, even their angels, even the angels of their most remote descendants with white fluttering pedicules, intensely absorbing the navigation signals of their ships of salt sailing into the heart of nebulas?

Claire is staring at him now, and he is staring at her. No, he won't let himself be softened. He won't let himself be subjugated by the witchcraft of this world like any mortal. All the prisoner souls have prayed and are still praying for his coming. He has become incarnate for the love of them. They want to return to the Father for the love of him because each thing loves its principle. They are all expecting liberation.

He doesn't want to disappoint them. He lifts his eyes to the sky where the unknown God who sends him is standing, and he sees again the irrefutable ray of fire. May his will be done. He steps back and stretches out his arms again: "IT IS DONE, NOW!"

Then the celestial Tel Aviv's disco bowl come to each and every one from all directions at the same time like a perfect anti-sphere and then... and then Astralix sticks his finger into the Messiah's belly button. "I wanna get in there!"

What happens next? The shimmering chaos remains suspended above the scene like an immense wave about to collapse. Astralix barely hesitates a fraction of the last instant and then, with a strident shriek, with a prodigious leap, he precipitates himself against the illegible wall. Is this the right bet? Jenny, only you could say, for we know fairly well that it's your personality who dominates this mutant creature: do you really believe that you can get him out of there?

And now? It would be false to say that there is nothing more, but the false has all its place in the whole extent of the different states of being. For there is more room than the greatest cardinals could measure.

But something resists, and something else gives way. At the bar on the beach, Gerard is feeling out of sorts., "Wow! It's as if we couldn't stop. And yet I didn't drink much. I'm not even thirsty anymore. Not thirsty at all."

At the other end of the bar, Gérard sees another guy just like him, dressed with the same brown leather and lifting the same pint of beer, saying the same kind of things. He starts towards him, filled with friendship and curiosity and then says to himself: "Why, it's me, of course! Why should I rush to meet myself?"

And so does the guy at the other end of the bar, in all the possible bars of all the multiverse, which is but one manifestation of the Nasredin effect discovered by Blanche and Dirac in the 20th century.

The old consultant has it all right; he can make himself all things to all men in the same way as the telephone book. “A healthy management enables us to drink at the source of life, or not to drink. This very autonomy enables us to free up productive strength so that total possibility can be expressed.”

Thus, total possibility expresses itself insofar as it is in itself, without anyone being accountable to anyone for it. It expresses itself without duration until, of all songs, the jukebox plays *Some of these days*.

And these fat seated lumps of will? This obsessive carousel of oyster trays about their table? Could this celebration herald the return of time? The fact remains that somebody has stood up in the saloon. He is pointing to the beach with his finger, exclaiming: “Look! *Ya d’l’Un* ! (There’s some of the One).” Then the Beach Boys start to yodel:

Yodel of the One

Looseman howls and the cattle prowls,  
Out on the great divide.  
Lacan wasn’t wrong, just singin’ a song  
As down the trail we ride.  
’Cause it’s round-up time way out jest,  
When the One-Good is in bloom.

You’d love my yodel-oh-ee-dee,  
Oh diddly one odel-ee,  
Derridadada, dada dada.

Would you lay down *Ya d’l’Un* oh-dee-one,  
Yodel-oh-ee-dee-ay-dee,  
Yodel-oh-ee-dee-yodel-oh-dee!

Fred Looseman is standing at the center of the Goofy Club. He looks exhausted. The Queen beckons and a dancer throws a skin over the old man’s white flaccid shoulders.

“Where are the oysters?” Fred seems worried.

A door opens slowly in the hull of the pirate ship stranded on the shore. A walkway pops out, opening the way for Captain Diana. Magnificent in her silver space suit, she approaches the Queen. Splendid, fine fat oysters in supple shells of gold-studded nacre glide swiftly by her side.

Captain Diana, ever the good soldier, gets to the point. “What is the situation?”

The Queen winces. “There’s been a brawl.”

Claire interrupts. “My respects, Captain, I represent the future market. We have reversed the trend toward dissolution, but the damage is considerable. Economic and financial indicators have collapsed. The web has self-destructed, the government has self-dissolved, ontological anarchy is gaining ground, and the physical world may not be entirely intact.”

Captain Diana greets Fred. “Good evening Mr. Looseman.”

“Where’s my screwdriver?”

“That says it all,” says Claire, summarily.

Captain Diana takes command. “Okay, let’s go and settle in at the hotel. We have work to do.” Then, addressing everyone, her voice raised against the ocean: “Listen to me. The world is ours! The soul and the will of the world are with us. With our mind, we know the numbers and laws of physics. We are going to have it all under control and straighten out what is crooked! And what we are going to rebuild, we shall rebuild with our eyes fixed on the Good, the Right, and the Beautiful!”

The crowd applauds and follows Captain Diana in a procession.

But where is Fred? Is he not with the dancers? No, he is in the parking lot with Quitteria and Basil. The car is waiting for them, its engine idling.

“Hop in,” Basil says. “Let’s get the hell outta Dodge.”

“But where to?” Quitteria is puzzled.

The psycho-geographic map responds, “I know where to go.”

“Where is my screwdriver?” Fred asks from the back seat, oddly wrapped in an animal skin.

“Listen to me, Fred Looseman,” says the map. “I remember all the forms, I’ve read all the books and I know the lay of the land. As for you, you still have much Mana. With the will that is everywhere, we’re gonna have fun, I’m tellin’ you.”

“And the road?” Basil asks.

The psycho-geographic map responds in a way that the old consultant would have approved of: “The road will make itself as we ride!”

“Wheee!” says matter, dancing in the headlights’ beams.

[Weaving sequence]

Will Astralix succeed in conquering the kingdom of non-being and non-duality? Will Jenny succeed in taking control of Astralix? Will Captain Diana know how to govern a good world? And if it’s only a phantasm, will she be able to assure its security?

[End weaving sequence]

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## Chapter 22: Navarre

### conclusion

Navarre extends eternally beyond its beaches. When coming from Time by the Jai Alai, hike inland among the blue thistles of the dune and then in ferns, in the shade of pine trees and cork oaks. Follow the paths of cindery sand and only those pleasing to the eye. Traverse the great forest towards the east, and you won't get lost.

That is the path that Janatone takes, with her atomic motors. She goes alone, still alive and corporeal, so it seems to her, incapable of embracing everything with her gaze. The sand both tires and soothes her. Well-walked trails open on the dense, white flesh of the soil.

She walks for a long time, and the air is filled with the odor of resins. Sometimes she follows a procession of caterpillars, and the soul of the great animals guides her. Sometimes she sleeps on the moss of glades made lifelike by the moon. She neither eats nor drinks. There is no web.

She safely reaches the old mother's farm, at the foot of a rampart in ruins. To the living, the past she has slid into is like the brambles covering the black wall of the village. It is more closed than the forest circling Sleeping Beauty's castle. The trees have grown tall, and all the thorns weaving the serried weft of the underbrush have become intertwined. But, in truth, duration is not a dead thing; it lets a few heroes enter, ones who are driven by a dream. Janatone can get through. She enters old time without disturbing it, like a ghost. Isn't she one of them?

The little house is flanked by a chicken coop and a field of corn cultivated haphazardly. There are turkeys and an old dog, and a dead tree that has been lying where it fell. Small red curtains with white squares adorn the windows. The door is ajar.

Janatone knows it doesn't matter much whether she goes in or not. She soon finds herself between bare, ash-colored walls. The Cyborg's old mother is there, shelling beans with her back to the fire. She is wearing a grey scarf finely speckled with white like the feathers of a guinea hen. Her kindly face with its aquiline nose smiles mischievously at the newcomer. She offers her a glass of wine and, with a gesture of her gnarled hand, offers her some cookies in a tin box.

“You should have seen the forest two weeks ago. And the light! Winter is here now. Yes I am the boy’s mother or his grandmother, I’m not sure. I live on, I am in duration. But drink, my child. You won’t mess up history, it has seen worse!”

Janatone drinks. She tells her the story of the Cyborg.

“Well, well, well!” says the crone, “Ah yes, there were all those boats, and all those handsome young people!” She smiles: “Ah, they had style!”

Janatone says she wants to die. The old woman cites Ecclesiastes in a friendly tone. “It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, because that is the end of every man.” The fire hisses and crackles. They fall silent and doze a little.

At last, with her eyes half-closed, the crone talks about the cave. She tells an ancient secret, a small prehistoric secret that she has promised to pass on: three moons, three pebbles, a snail...

They talk about a garden. “Wait for spring,” says the ancestress. “The weather is bad outside, not very cold, but it rains on the ferns all day long.”

They eat. and Janatone doesn’t suffer from indigestion anymore. They eat pigeon *salmis* with thick blood sauce, goose grease *grattons*, boudin with apples, *foie gras poêlé*.

They grill mushrooms sautéed with parsley and corn, too, at tea time. They eat figs and chestnuts with fleshy new red wine. With Armagnac, they take the handful of chanterelle mushrooms that a neighbor has gleaned from their sand. Then they spit and drink a new gulp of golden liqueur.

“We’re really having a good time,” says the old woman.

“What about the garden?” asks Janatone.

Christmas passes joylessly, for the children were all gone centuries ago. Janatone and the old woman sleep, and then eat pancakes and angel wings rolled in sugar.

Finally, on a fair May morning, Janatone goes to town, where bells are ringing brightly. The center of the fortified town is square. Purple martins fly high and straight into the sky, which is decorated with a few small, chubby clouds.

The black arcades, the rounded stones and the old ivory-colored stairs leading to the church all keep the coolness as a font retains the memory of water and incense, the idea of heaven. On the side streets, the creeping vines eat limestone walls, which crumble like biscuits.

Janatone passes by a Roman arch blackened and partly fallen. Then they push open a rickety wooden portal. A thick fig tree has spread its branches above the stone pillar where the hinges still hold fast. She enters this neglected garden, which is too big for a house but too small to attract attention. Might it have belonged to an ancient cloister? Might it be the remains of a dismembered feudal domain?

After a few steps into the mossy alley she discovers:

### The Bench

The bench has peeling, blue-grey paint and round-headed nails. It stands under a cedar tree, not far from a round garden pond barely stirred by a weary shudder. Janatone sees an exiled palm tree in a corner. She sees a rotten skipping rope by serried bamboos growing beside a collapsed wall. She sees roses and creeping vines covering the walls of the adjacent house.

Janatone is alone. She sits down and can even lie down. As she does, she contemplates the high wall of green leaves and red roses peopled with golden bees. She knows this wall: it's not just any wall.

She knows how its friendly, crumbling stone melts open when one wants to get through, and she knows the other side as well. In her mind's eye, she sees this beautiful she-cyborg getting through right now, inside out and upside down. Why would she rush to catch up with her, since she already knows she's none other than herself? Why would she care since this scene starts again forever? She had better rest now that the time is right.

And yet everything depends on her, sleeping or waking, whoever she is. She is a she-cyborg if she wants to be, and she is her lovers at the same time: Jenny-Astralix and Joe, who will eventually emerge from the wall to keep the story going.

And she is her foes at the same time, and all the generations of the earth according to their species, all at the same time. She is here and there at the same time, weak and strong, dead and alive at the same time. This will endure as long as she or some other mother wants to stand before the WALL OF PARADISE where all opposites meet and where all mixed opposites spring out into the worlds.

Then she re-enters the long, long meditation she has never really abandoned.

Little rabbits, unicorns and all under the sun who will leave this world with only half of what you have desired, the dream shall sooner or later guide you into this garden. If you don't find the Mother in there, take care of everything on her behalf and pardon her for taking her leave from the world. Take her place, for there is none other for you.



At best can you forget again someday, some eon, when your own sorcery enables you to run wild in the realm of necessity, the only stage where you can become the most beautiful and the most joyous of all just for one day. And once you're there, remember Wyatt Earp's advice: "It's not the first shot that counts, it's the first shot that hits." And what else can you experience with a little help, not to mention LOVE? Yeah, who can truly know or dare tell what is in store in the land of liberty that the Goddess has created for herself?

The bees are singing, but no one can hear them.

### Bench Song in the Small Garden

It's a gnosis counter-gnosis  
And a birth and death, as well.  
She goes to the garden of roses  
To Being, where Nothing don't dwell.

Lovely at last as a daughter of Zeus,  
Lithe, free of ties, and moving on,  
She passes from time to the truce  
Where her fathers and sons have gone.

She hears the gentle buzzing of bees  
Around the bench of her repose.  
She becomes akin to the trees,  
Gems, stars, and the garden's rose.

Oblivion means naught to a goddess.  
And nothingness? An ephemeral toy;  
The past contains all in its vastness.  
Eternal summer is her joy.

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