

The

AQUARIUM

ALICE SAMPAIO



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THE AQUARIUM
a novel

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«Sans le Mouvement, tout serait une
seule et même chose.»

BALZAC

CHAPTER I

The lens, a glowing monstrous reddish eye, filtered a faint ray of light. Radiating from the spotlight, the beam was torn into thousands of fingers, the rays twisting in the girl's light-shadowy hair. The girl, dormant with her face alert and intent, her body in solitary abandon, suggesting the vertigo of a restless sleep— was a delicate and extravagant «manchette».

The picture unfolded in an enclosed whirlwind. Turning on the bed, Maga stretched out one leg and smiled a slow, soft smile. At that point, a quasi-monster-quasi-human entered the compartment, a being of a green-chitinous colour, glowing like polished metal, its head a spheroid where luminous cracks appear and disappear, a whole anarchic set of lines and orifices opening and closing to the surrounding world: a tear that looks more like a gaze but then becomes a system of perpendiculars, a luminous furrow resembling a pale

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laughter that immediately fades, a fine, burning dust around its features — perhaps a concise, mathematical question-answer.

The monster moved to the window-lens, widened its focus and came back to the girl's bed, remaining backlit, a strange and immobile silhouette sprinkling greenish brightness.

Thus, for a few moments, Maga became the target of the mysterious signals. This in no way seemed to affect her, for she maintained her previous position, the same lost smile on her face.

At last, the monster leaned over and began to call in an unexpectedly human and affable voice: “Maga, Maga, Maga...”

The call kept repeating in an unchanging, monotonous tone, annoying like the fluttering of a nearby insect, and the girl frowned. Then she repositioned herself, nestled closer to the pillow, and without opening her eyes, hid her head in her arms. The voice that called her became louder, slightly impatient: “Maga, Maga, Maga...”

Suddenly awake, Maga opened her eyes and stared at the ceiling, blinking amongst soothing arabesques of shadow and fantastic, wild tentacles of light.

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She reluctantly looked at the «monster», lingering warily. It remained stationary, paused awaiting instruction, its brain an inert globe that might have been switched off despite the two windows at the top peeking attentively. “Why won’t you let me sleep, Riri?”

Maga talked in the half harsh, half sullen tone of a victim on the verge of rebellion, and with disparaging gestures she wrapped herself further around the silky sheets.

“You slept exactly two vegas and a tenth, exactly...”

“Leave me alone, Riri,” interrupted the girl. “Any normal sleep should go beyond Four-Infinite-Vega. Or more!”

“I’ll leave you alone... Of course, I’ll leave you alone...” Riri’s eyes, two tilted slits, dilated scornfully: “...I am commanded to your service, but if you dismiss me as you say... Well, will you please establish the necessary circuit so that I may return to the Slave Centre...”

As it spoke, Riri seemed to open up and flatten itself, becoming an immense metal plate with yellowish «insides». Maga sat on the bed, arms crossed in front of her legs, half impatient half amused:

“A slave has always been a terrible idea; and particularly bothersome if it can talk.” Then, eyeing the plate-body-robot: “Stop it, Riri, and make yourself people. And

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listen, don't you know any other mottos besides «too-little-or-too-much»?»

Slowly, the “plate” returned to its initial shape and laughed quietly through jets of light and round caves:

“My Builders and Lords, the Omegas...”

Maga laughed, her chin resting on her knees, an expression of intense irony on her face:

“Your Lords, Riri?! Come on, you don't have any Lords. There are no Lords... Do you know what Yarath was saying to me the moment you came and woke me up?” She fell silent, ecstatic, wrapped in a warm, intimate clarity. Riri moved again to the window-lens, and turned to the girl. She closed her eyelids and stretched her neck in a voluptuous surrender to the light.

“Yarath?!...” repeated Riri as if slowed down, out of phase. “Yarath? In dreams people aren't people, not even shadows.”

Maga gave a hint of a mischievous grimace:

“Even so, a Yarath-Who-Is-Not-Even-A-Shadow is an extraordinary thing. When I become a member of the Council of the Theta, I will demand that the ‘dream’ enhancement is introduced into your complicated machinery.”

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“I do not aspire to ascend to the category of biological robot...”, replied Riri amidst a subtle flicking on-and-off.

“You are a robot without ambitions, a miserable robot at that...”

Suddenly, Maga jumped out of bed, heading to a dark door that she pushed open in front of her. Riri followed her monstrosly, clumsily, phosphorescing in its bottle-green carapace.

In the new compartment there was a vast circular tub, surrounded by a complicated network of metallic eyes, dashboards, recurved silver filaments, coloured spheres, a whole arsenal of mysterious gadgetry.

Riri pressed a button (the precise button, one supposes...), Riri, the green-shelled monster, like an incredible and most agile octopus, was busy playing at pressing buttons. And so, for a long time, Maga was steamed, sterilised, massaged, sprayed, inundated by avalanches of fine suspended dust, and all this while she calmly, patiently, indifferently, hummed quietly. Finally, when she felt herself lifted up in the air onto a pearly plank, a sort of precision scale, she asked, already a little bored:

“Will this game never end?...”

“Two tenths-vega-two more to go.”

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“Oh!...”

The girl let out an unnerved sigh:

“Do you know what it means to halt the biological process? Do you at least know that?”

“Make it stop, of course...”

“You misunderstood me, Riri. I asked you if you knew its metaphysical meaning.”

“That’s none of my business.”

The girl stared at the monster:

“You’re a cynic, Riri, a cynic of the worst kind, metallic and all. You know perfectly well that it has no-metaphysical-meaning to progress backwards or forwards... You know as well as I do that it’s «nice» to travel through the dimensions and remain human...”

Riri didn’t answer and Maga insisted in a soft, amused irony:

“Can you at least agree that it’s a show-as-reasonable-as-any-other-show where, perhaps, you are the only spectator. Do agree!”

“I cannot either agree or disagree, I am a machine.”

“Allow me to doubt it.”

For a moment the girl remained silent, her expression meditative and absent; then, with a grimace of disgust, as she

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felt the bluish iso-sunlight flooding her face, she closed her eyelids again and murmured: “*My God!*”

“...We are reaching an optimum parking coefficient,” said Riri.

“Agreed...”, she replied half suffocated by the dazzling, intense bombardment she was receiving. Suddenly, as if extremely fed up: “Get it over with!”

Riri let out a laugh translated by the rapid opening and closing of «doors» and «windows», an irritating laugh, all flat geometry: “I’m very sorry, Maga...”

...It’s characteristic of those who suffered the natural pre-human stage...”

“Don’t give me that, Riri! You always did like to collect nonsense,” said the girl in the midst of a fascinating nebula, her clear body sketching an exotic cosmic corolla.

It seemed as if Riri was shrugging its shoulders and laughing good naturedly, while increasingly bombarding the girl, who was already submerged in chaotic, complex radiation.

“Denise-Ya-Tsé may have been as soft and fluffy a retort as all the rest.” It paused and added: “We are done.”

Maga took a deep breath and got out of the tub:

¹ Translator’s note: text in italic is in English or French, and also in italic, in the original Portuguese text.

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“Rest assured, Denise-Ya-Tsé was a perfect retort...”

She looked at the robot and laughed, wrapping herself in a fluffy bath towel. “*And the father? Tu le connais? Savez-vous que moi, j’aime the father et que ça... l’amour incestueux, c’est le plaisir des plaisirs? Savez-vous ça?*”

The monster emits algebraic signs of perplexity and incomprehension.

“I shall also ask, in the High Council of the Theta, that you become receptive to any dead language. *And the father?*” she repeated laughing. She shut up when she felt the bath towel sliding down her skin and a voluptuous wave of warm air enveloping her like an embrace. For a few moments, brief thousandth vegas, she remained like that, laughing, unmoving, a young and frightening creature without human coordinates, as disturbing as a closed circle.

Slowly she moved to another door of reddish, translucent metal. She looked back, was about to add something, but instead she simply shrugged. She entered a hall decorated (lengthways and widthways, upwards and downwards, on every surface that could contain drawings or figures) with hallucinatory arabesques, delicate, elusive shadows, and invariably shapes, countless shapes multiplying indefinitely, infinitely, to the full. There, Maga proceeded to

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make a quick, slapdash choice of clothes, deciding, with a disparaging gesture, on a pair of dark blue *shorts* and a light *chemisier*. She got dressed in a flash and, while putting on thick white shoes, called out to Riri. It stood in the doorway, attentive, its cranial slits frantically flicking on-and-off.

“See these rags?” And Maga pointed to a set of randomly scattered garments. “Send them all to the *Atium* and order a new shipment. Type WW-OO-r-2, not WW-OO-s-4. You know I’m not green...”

“I know you’re not green. Why should you envy green-women?”

“I don’t envy anything, there’s nothing enviable...” she replied aloof. “Well, order the usual, except for the usual new-model GB. I prefer the unusual, authentic black-skin-of-high-altitude-animal, oozing with animal blood. Spare me the blood, of course...”

“The new-model GB is the right one for sports in the Sea-of-Storms and I suggest...”

“Don’t suggest...” Maga stared at the metallic face that was dictating wise remarks to her: “...The Sea of Storms is a pretext I don’t need... The world divided into segments like a fruit, the habitable ones alternating with the other, «blank», sub-human, terrible...” She was silent, her eyes lost in

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thought. Then, like an adult having fun telling incomprehensible things to a child, she added: “Blank, raw, nature-for-nature’s-sake, there, paradoxically, you’ll find the Sea-of-Serenity deserted and haunted like a Kingdom of Ghosts...”

In a round, graceful gesture, Maga bows in front of Riri:

“«There are no more Ghosts, Gentlemen

The Ghosts are dead

Ah, who would know how to mourn them!»

Do you know where this is?”

“No doubt in the Book of Syma, perhaps in one of the last tomes, perhaps in the first, it’s not up to me to know.”

“It’s never up to you, «boy»! No, it’s not in the Book of Syma; such a «pun» must have been passed down for posterity through oral tradition...”

Riri was extremely amused:

“You like to amble on the anti-geometric whim of nature. That’s it.”

“You’re wrong, Riri. I tell you these things so that you can draw wise conclusions, overcome your metallic spirit. Little by little — who knows? — you’ll become a humanoid robot as cynical as Albert or Henry...” Maga put a finger to

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her lips: "...No, what we want is for you to have a sense of humour, a critical mind, like any other silly prehistoric buffoon, that's all. There's no other way to explain your existence, unless existence is justifiable... It is never justifiable, of course..."

Riri bowed. The bright lines in its spheroid-face became brighter, as if revealing «inner» contentment:

"I am your Slave, Maga."

Maga moved towards a gilded door (gilded doors were in fashion), pausing before opening it to say:

"It is better, in fact, to keep playing your most simple role of eunuch-slave, or rather, of metal-organic box where «virtues», that is neutral-negative properties, are kept. Who's to say if one day we will need this baggage to survive? Now, don't you ruminate on it, though..."

Maga then opened the door and entered a huge library-room decorated with the same feverish profusion of hallucinatory images, the Syma book unfolding in volumes «ad infinitum». In the middle of the room, remarkable, apart from everything else, there was an ostentatious system of lenses and spheres topped by a smooth, white globe, half hooded, like a drowsy giant's eye (harmless S-D-H).

Maga sat down in an armchair. Riri picked up the MMMCMXCLX Tome, opened it on the right page, handed it

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to the girl, and then left. She looked through the pages uninterested. Beside her, a vase of sunflowers with slightly withered petals, lost in that aggressively saturated, screaming world, gave the atmosphere a note of fragility and useless despair. Maga plucked one of the petals, wilted and lifeless, and took her time stretching it with her fingers, absorbed by the mysterious charm of that vegetal abandon without-coordinates. Little by little, she began to feel irritated by all the whining without-voice-without-sense-without-face-and-without-meaning, and she closed her eyes, leaning back, her head resting on the soft back of the armchair. In the same instant, she forgot the crying-faces of the sunflowers and the desperate-petal between her fingers, and without noticing, she crushed it distractedly (memory a colourless blur). When she noticed the slippery, sticky sap on her skin, her memory changed colour (a timid jellyfish out of its habitat, the Dimensional-0-3-System).

In another compartment, Riri fidgeted busily. In fact, Riri did not need to move a finger to accomplish this, and didn't: it was the continuous flicking on-and-off of its cerebral spheroid, the *féerie* of luminous jets, that could provoke in an «unwary» observer the sensation of uninterrupted movement. Riri placed itself in front of the gaping mouth of the heavy

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apparatus like a priest before the sanctuary. Inside it, all silver and golden, a strange labyrinth of metallic tweezers and curved claws moved in complicated and tangled orbits, in slow, precise, patient turns, mixing here a pinkish liquid, there a bluish one, plus a red pill, another jet black one, yet another yellow one. Then with a gentle pause followed by a wide, silvery flourish, the contents of the vial were poured out into bulgy glasses made of the finest rock crystal, luculent and reverberating with light... (all this under Riri's attentive gaze, commanded by the on and off flicking of its cerebral doors and windows). Riri, at precisely the right moment, removed the glasses, placing them on an invisible tray. Then it went towards Maga, who, with her face resting on the soft edges of the armchair, eyelids closed, seemed not to notice its presence. It waited a few moments and then, seeing the girl still in the same position, touched her shoulder with its long, spindle-shaped fingers. She shuddered and opened her eyes, startled. Her expression softened at the sight of Riri and she smiled at him:

“I must have fallen asleep again...”

Maga swallowed a red pill, then a black one, a blue one, plus a brownish one, she took her time examining and balancing the tarnished gold cup that contained them between her fingers, put it down and then lifted a bulgy glass full of a

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transparent, pinkish liquid. She drank slowly, religiously with small, measured sips. Suddenly she laughed:

“Behold the heady wines of the Lord’s vineyard. You have prepared a delicious delicacy for me. I thank you, Riri.”

“Sami-12, praff-415... It is time for you to go, isn’t it?”

“More or less, don’t worry. I’ll read you the Syma... I was here... Listen: «Mary Rio, deliberately, to see what would happen, placed herself in the infrared zone, within the radius of the calotte. Suddenly — and this is what she tells us — she saw herself existing in a four-dimensional space, the same space that, seen from the outside, gives us the sensation of being shapeless and flat. Mary appeared in it without past or future, walking along an infinite and solitary street, desperately infinite and clear, and she walked through its ‘eternity’ carrying a very heavy object, a ‘suitcase’ to be precise. Such a word, indeed like so many others, belonged only to that four-dimensional world according to Mary Rio, a world Without-Dimension according to the most recent interpretations. Mary was walking along ‘her’ street, called ‘Major Artists’, with houses on both sides, houses called ‘family homes’ and with no other distinguishing features beyond being ‘family homes’ and having transparent glass walls. Inside, people moved about in distress and out of control, as if they were at a ‘fair’ (another

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word imported from there), there were children, ‘old people’, strange young people, a whole set of incredible characters, so incredible that some of them sat on ‘toilets’, a sign, as we know, of a rudimentary physiology, some screamed, there was enormous confusion and promiscuity: it was the ‘family’. However, these were not the most remarkable features of that street... It had houses and trees... Now, the trees were all ‘combed’ in the same way, trimmed to resemble short haircuts or wigs, barely hanging on in the wind, leaning in the same direction and so neatly arranged that they looked as if they had been painted. Mary was perplexed and only later did she learn that the ‘artists’ living in that street had made it their ‘mission’ to carefully maintain and comb the trees’ wigs... One of them came out of the house and grabbed Mary by the arm, trying to take her inside with him, while shouting at her: ‘You must start a family, rot and die. Get in!’

Mary in one swift movement freed herself and smiled at the man, saying:

‘I prefer the lonely, sunny street, to walk ahead and see if it leads anywhere.’ Then the man put his hands on his head, pulled out his hair and wailed, ‘I am a great artist, I cannot remain misunderstood and forgotten like any mere mortal.’ Mary could not grasp the meaning of these words and simply

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said ‘...But if all men are mortal, misunderstood and forgotten, why the hell should the same not happen to you?’ The man did not understand Mary’s language either and swelled up before her, calling her ‘muse’, his face increasingly magnified beyond the glass.

She had a sensation of breathlessness, of heaviness...»”

“Did Mary Rio dream all this naturally?”

“Naturally. She was lying there, lifeless, when Tomi entered the laboratory.”

“Well...”

“You’re not interested? I agree that the Syma book, when it decides to go into fiction, is immensely boring. See you later, Riri.”

Maga abruptly closed the book and, rising, headed to the door, a circular, deep-red lens filtered by a frosted, soft glow. Suddenly she turned around:

“I’d forgotten!”

“As usual...” Riri, who had followed the girl, held a delicate bracelet in its fingertips, all compartments and boxes, a small and artistic object exquisitely crafted, which she, in a brief gesture, tightened around her wrist on top of another metal ring that was embedded in her flesh. She looked at the

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mirror that stood in front of her, considering her face, then her silhouette and, tracing it, the long arm bitten by the precious metal: “Something that reminds me of, I’m not sure what ...”

She walked to the door that opened from its centre, expanding more and more at her approach. Outside on the terrace her eyes widened with pleasure at the sight of her streamlined, light-yellow *spaac*, like a giant bee perched on the jet-black floor. She inhaled long breaths, taking her time to put on and tighten the protective-carapace-sphere. The transparent sky was sprinkled with the vertigo of thousands of other *spaac*s, coloured arrows, pale sparkles that appeared and vanished in an instant.

On the terrace next to hers was Mira, a green girl who, like herself, was making the usual gestures for departure. «A pretty face inside a bell jar,» she thought as she watched her leaning over attentively, her hair dark and straight, her eyes two oblique slits absorbing the light. Suddenly, their gazes crossed and the two girls smiled, bodies oozing sunshine, warm and dazzled. Maga paid attention to the dashboard of her machine and an intense glow of excitement spread in her dark blue eyes speckled with white, «biche» eyes, calm in their restless animal vitality. She dialled the coordinates, «Tx-89-56-tr-6000005-Anchow», attentive to the dial, where uncontrolled needles and

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hands could be seen oscillating in crazed movements, back and forth, frantically searching for the equilibrium position, and finally finding it in a sudden stop, vibrant with tense, contained life. The girl looked ahead, seeming to take stock of the structure fading out of sight, suffocating and massive, identical to the one she herself inhabits, a monstrous hive, a miniature city from where countless other *spaa's* left at that hour, like incredible, colourful bees, optical prisms breaking down sunlight into brief iridescent tinges.

In the next instant, her *spaac* rose into the air, hovered for a minimal lapse of time, and then, with a precise and mathematical suddenness, shot off in a dizzying rush, brief as the genie of imaginary ages, an immaterial point or a chimerical dream come true. Mira, in a machine virtually identical to her own, took off in the next vega-thousandth.

CHAPTER II

... **B**elow, at her feet, Anchow, an architectural colossus, a protruding flat, white mushroom topped with an upright tower, a straight line lost beyond the blueish vaulted ceiling, a hyphen joining the heavenly bodies... The legs of the colossus, a turtle or a monstrous hydra with thousands of heads and gaping mouths, clear staircases, spilled gardens, vertigo, were set into the ground. Psssss... Psssss... With a soft swing, in a slow, gentle fall, the honeycomb-coloured *spaac*, its tapered, tactile muzzle avoiding all obstacles, finally landed on the numbered plaque. North-Pole-South-Pole of two magnets kissing. Nearby, there were dozens of other *spacs* in automatic landing manoeuvres, like a chaotic multicoloured rain of fireworks in broad daylight.

Maga got out of the machine and walked straight ahead, down the white strip. Suddenly she left the straight line and stepped onto the forget-me-not grass, immersing herself

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in it. She took her time picking small bundles that she clasped in her hands and then threw away, uninterested, looking at the endless landscaped field, monotonous in its polite geometric exuberance. A burning sun enveloped the objects, blurring their outlines, covering them with a diaphanous dust of scintillations, hiding their nakedness in a warm possessive embrace. (Human beings, they were the Slaves of the Lamp). Maga wanted to run away, to escape from this absorbing possession, and seeing the crowd (puppets of light, puppets of light) hurrying towards the huge mouths of the building and disappearing inside, swallowed up, she too hurried.

However, once inside the building, she stopped as if perplexed and aimless. Suddenly, turning her back on the Zut, Maga started walking through a kind of tunnel. She breathed deeply and with palpable satisfaction, picking her way amidst the labyrinth of corridors lined with marbles in every colour and populated only by colonnades, haunting statues of distorted limbs, disquieting and frighteningly alive, and still faces, eyes that had elongated and grown monstrous, without losing their beauty and perfect expressional harmony – quite the contrary, their grand, colossal size giving them the full human dimension, panels – the floor, the ceiling, a huge panel – and faces, always youthful faces and bodies imprisoned in a

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cyclopean movement, in a pagan ecstasy of aggressive debauchery, of convulsed life – sculptural and pictorial creations in every conceivable form in desperate playfulness or the pre-spasm of diabolical contention.

«Oh, I managed to get lost, I have no idea where I am,» said Maga, standing at a crossroads of corridors. «This time I will choose to lose myself more and more until it becomes impossible to return...»

She felt a slight sting in her arm, followed by the well-known tingling sensation. She looked at the tiny dial of the s-l-i, and frowned in a disconsolate mimic. She turned her head: two paces away from her was the Zut's oval lens, the «straight line», the shortest distance between two points, destroying all tangles, all charades...

«Not even that...» Inadvertently, she touched the panel next to her with her hand; it seemed to her that something cold and soft was sticking to her body and she retreated instinctively, a defensive movement.

«A 'cornfield', there's nothing repulsive about a 'cornfield'... But why recreate such extravagant myths?...»

Maga hurried; she seemed to flee. In her arms, in her nerves, she had the sensation of having touched a repulsive body. «I'm afraid, I'm afraid, I'm afraid...», she repeated,

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speaking loudly and staring at the walls in defiance. Slender, elusive arabesques intertwining, merging, dissociating in an anarchic convulsive tangle, grew towards her, obsessive and lawless. «I'm afraid!» she cried, and immediately felt a new, sharper sting at the end of her arm. Maga slumped her shoulders despondently, «I can't lose myself, nor be afraid, nothing, nothing but remain a well-behaved-girl. *Voilà!*» Ahead was the ellipsoidal door and Maga paused for a moment trying to settle the violent beating of her heart. One more step, the door would open... She stepped through the doorway. There was the white silent world of every day, at the end the crescent-shaped table, with its antennae and other apparatus, there were the familiar objects. She touched them and, in brief gestures, automated by habit, put the silver ribbon on her head. The dimensionless white world gained length, width and height, became populated with colours and sounds, objects and people, and Maga, visible and palpable like the others, was now part of it. She smiled at Alexei.

«I am late, the usual, *voilà!*»

The Omega WXVL was well advanced explaining the lesson. It was cardinal red, its head clearly disproportionate to the rest of the body, a spheroid geometrically designed according to the latest cybernetic models, in a continuous,

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millimetric gyroscope movement, now displaying a register plate, then a metallic tape – next, a blackboard filled with numbers, numbers-and-charts, questions-answers, checked, controlled by means of charts-and-numbers, numbers occurring one after the other tirelessly, almost non-stop. The Omega WXVL, a gigantic blackboard, unfolded in planes and reverse-planes, multiplied in characters that in turn were arranged in formulas, graphs, schemes, lines... At some point, Maga stopped paying attention, staring at the ceiling, a perfect concave hemisphere artistically decorated with algebraic formulae arranged in an ascending vertiginous rhythm. Algebra transformed into Art, diffuse, obsessively coloured, formulas as screams of colour, absurd and illogical, bodies and faces translated «into rhythm» by means of mysterious upsilons or transcendent equations. (The Mona Lisa in numbers, the fascinating smile of the Mona Lisa a colourful, tempestuous and exalted chart. Or an ironic curve. Breathless, torn, passionate or violent formulas, straight lines in upheaval! An X icy as an Austral Pole. Life and intelligence, a convulsive hieroglyphic maelstrom, with twenty trillion magnificent zeros on the left).

Maga frowned in annoyance and looked away, peering between the leg of an Y and the bulging curve of an ellipse,

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beyond the transparent ceiling, at the clear intensely blue sky and, in its lazy majestic rotation, the Alpha-K-3 Satellite. The Alpha-K-3, a red balloon full of darkness, was getting drunk on light. It was reaching the Zenith.

«...Maga Moniz Ya-Tsé, attention. Maga Moniz Ya-Tse, attention».

The warning, audible only to herself, was repeated insistently, the words slow and well-aimed. In the Omega-Board, the same reeling off of formula-data and formula-conclusions. Hypotheses and theses, curious syntheses. Unexpectedly, the whole movement seemed to hold still, the resolving equation of the infinite divisibility of matter stopping in its unbridled race to Nothingness. The Upsilons, the Xis, the Gammas stopped and, laughing, waited indifferently for what was going to happen. The Omega WXVL was now addressing the class:

“All those who neglect the Metaphysical-Logic will have nothing left but to go through its stages with the same fatalism of a species, hence without pleasure. What is pleasure but ordered thought in the mind of a «rhode»?...”

«Voilà Monsieur Oméga WXVL, l'Emmerdant. Mais oui, Monsieur l'Emmerdant, la pensée est la seule merde qui compte...»

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On the blackboard, the formulas momentarily contained, convulsed, a foot in the air, now resumed their march towards the shores, towards their «nothingness», in an exhausting, slow parade, precise and well-behaved like cunning schoolboys.

Abruptly, in huge letters, the sign read: **«Time=Questionnaire=of=Illogical=Trivia=and=Reasoning»**.

“Do you mean to say, Omega WXVL, that we are hopelessly imprisoned in our Infinite-Matter?” was the first question from a green girl, all green, the very beautiful Zadi.

«How she likes to act, act, act, *la jolie!*»

“...Yes... If in the other Cosmic-Infinites matter is not our matter, if it therefore follows other general laws, if the theories conceived by Man...” Here the Omega’s voice became deeply scornful, stopping in a sort of cackling. Alexei questioned it half curious half vexed.

“Why are you being ironic at Man’s expense, Omega WXVL?”

The Omega began to laugh, laugh contagiously, and soon, all the audience was laughing too. Only Alexei maintained an expression of sombre bewilderment. “Damn you, you hypothesis-chewing machine. Damn you!”

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The Omega stopped laughing:

“I was merely employing the appropriate tone, wisely preconceived by Man. Ah! Man! We always bump into him. But where is Man? Yes, there he is approving my ‘existence’, not knowing whether to spare me or destroy me, I, who was able to invent a new nature for him. My thanks to Man!”

The Omega turned its spheroid-head in one complete turn, staring impassively and ironically at the audience.

“Perhaps you’re a little confused, Omega WXVL, you cannot attribute «existence» to yourself, you are nothing but the materialisation of thought... an outward condensation, shall we say, of Man’s thought. A-demonstration-of-his-power!”

Alexei was getting excited. Maga turned off the transmitters.

«Mon amour, pourquoi tu t'emmerdes avec les Omégas?»

“I am a machine capable of reasoning non-stop, except to introduce new brains and cerebellums, deduced and theorised by myself. I am a machine, no doubt, nothing more than that...”

A young man with black skin joined the discussion, to say in a cynically amused tone: “We agree that you are the Superman, the God, and in that case, we implore you: do

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prepare a final show and explain to us the tricks we never got to understand; the scams of Logic, Physics and Metaphysics, the First and the Ultimate Causes, in short...”

“That’s right”, said a girl. “And don’t give us any fat, underlined in fire, conclusive equations. None of that. We want the Logic-of-the-Logics, the Logic of Itself, With-No-Eyes-No-Voice-No-Time-No-Measure. Above all, we want to know why Man is as free as an electron in its orbit. Explain that to us and we’ll disappear in peace.”

“The guy doesn’t want to see us disappear in peace,” Alexei retorted, “he wants someone to justify him.”

“Someone to listen to eternal truths.”

“Someone to measure the immeasurable.”

“To invent the Biological-Robot.”

“To play the Aba-Kaba.”

“To count to One Hundred.”

“In the last *thousand vega-vega* the X-axis of the man-function has shifted parallel to itself by two thousandths «ton»... There must be someone to rotate the Y-axis...”

“Someone to go in search of the Pithecanthropus Erectus and reconstitute him bone by bone.

“To go backwards until he finds himself identical-to-himself, that is...”

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“*Moi, j’ai peur!* After all the wonders invented about a hypothetical and emphatic “I”, it would be annoying to bump into forgotten maladies and monstrosities.”

“Oh, heavens, if we heed their divine essence, we will conclude that all the Pithecanthropus Erectus in the world wore clothing. It is even said that they attained a refined perfection and even greatness in the art of self-victimising, making a scene, putting on a mask, dressing up, artifice – showing off camouflaged in dogmas –, luxuries in short!”

“Oh, my! Who doesn’t like refinement, to enjoy life? Don’t we all enjoy our own luxuries within our coordinate system?”

“Positive coordinates!”

“We have naked skin. We are tragic and deplorable.”

“Tragic and deplorable.”

“We lack the purples of sin and the wounds of misery.” (Laughter)

“What is important, however, is that we continue to exist, because «Existing» is in itself the only conceivable Good...”

‘Zadi is so serious she’s like a Syma book.’

‘Le roi est mort, vive le Roi.’

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“Dória Sawi, Dória Sawi, the Pithecanthropus Erectus is a beautiful legend.”

“The Great Fission’s a desperate escape.”

“By walking slowly, we would let the truths and lies settle.”

“One-perpetual-nonsense.”

“It is derisory that one small «quanta» can decide the fate of all the other «quanta!»”

«Who-do-not-ask-anybody’s-permission-to-be-as-they-are. *Voilà.*»

“There is a logical-metaphysical device called Ube-Ru-Bu that should be used in Pole-to-Pole digressions of the Meridian...”

«How silly she is!»

“We have all the quadrants to ourselves.”

“Why taste the forbidden fruits? They’re worm-eaten.”

“No one wins a game of dice with no dots.”

“Losing is the most fascinating thing that can happen to a guy.”

“Like an old boat that, against all the rules of reality, starts flying and suddenly falls, sinks, plunges into the mud and gets ready to rot. Closing its eyes. It is beautiful. There are always fish that are not to be joked with.”

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“Dória Sawi, Dória Sawi, when life is incurable, dying is the Supreme Good. Ah! Dória Sawi, you must earn the right to die.”

“What about the Omega WXVL?”

“And the Biological Robot?”

“They’ll find the explanation for our case. They’re very stupid.”

“That’s a great Moral.”

“Let’s change the rules of the game.”

“I’d like to live in deserted Mongolia.”

“There is a Deserted Mongolia.” (Laughter)

‘Someday I’ll write a detective novel where the murderer is the murdered.’

“If you turn your face, you’ll see a wooden door, falling apart... Now, if you open it... You better not open it...”

“I’ll open it.”

“Oh! Oh! Oh!”

(It leads to a five-dimensional field, muddy and gloomy, slashed with furrows. Populated with prostrate, bloody bodies, some half-rotten, others crawling and fleeing, growing sharp, horrified, dying. They grow, they grow, wild and distorted. They are Pithecanthropus Erectus. There is a small child, black-skinned (*Oh, my God*, why black skin and not

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blue or green?), who in a brief moment fills the space (anti-space), eliminates the darkness and smiles a sweet smile moist with tenderness.

1st voice – It's an innocent.

2nd voice – Soon the innocent will no longer be an innocent.

3rd voice – It's an innocent.

2nd voice – A potential man.

1st voice – We'll come back in due course to liquidate him.

2nd voice – It's more humane to do it now.

The round moon face is flooded with round moon tears. There is a metallic object between the round face and the moon. Blood, bones, flesh, smiling mouth and tears are a piece of pulverised matter, a mass of monstrous, sticky atoms, of which the frantic, uncontrolled pulsation of their «quanta» is noticeable down to the smallest detail.

The five-dimensional field gradually ceases to be the site of a massacre populated by screams of dread, and paralysed, bloody shadows. Nothing more now than a putrefying female body with a poor, sickly sun fading away near her sex. *Voilà!*)

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The Omega WXVL had run out of
Time=Illogical=Trivia.

A wide parabolic curve filled the board. Maga felt herself slipping down one of its branches, biting the curve drawn with fire, slobbering on it like a caterpillar, diving dazzled into the vertigo of an abyss.

Formulas followed, ah! but formulas without images, simple and blind scouts of entangled algebraic transcendences.

Alexei's hands were tensing up on the recording reel.

CHAPTER III

Maga and Alexei found themselves finally standing still and as if lost in the huge NW atrium of Anchow.

Maga took the boy's hands in hers:

"Come. They are waiting for us in the Austral Mansion."

"No one is waiting for us in the Austral Mansion and I don't feel like going."

"Oh!..."

"I hate the Austral Mansion and the Sensual-Tenderness."

"Oh!..."

Maga was stroking his arms in a lingering caress:

"I love your arms. Can't I love your arms?"

"You can love everything that is lovable. **The First=Noble=Truth.**"

"Yes."

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“You’re a good little girl. Irritatingly good. Let go of my arms.”

Her hands slowly, slowly fell away, and without ceasing to stare at her companion, aloof and thoughtful, she murmured:

“As you wish.”

The girl started to walk away, heading for an inner entrance that a Beta opened for her. Feeling the door click shut behind her, Maga briefly began retreating, but stopped as she bumped into Alexei’s warm body. Around them, the solitary garden: a thrilling profusion of foliage and flowers, fantastic gluttonous corollas opened to the light; further on, the immense pool shaped as a «geometric caprice», and the hemispheric-huts arranged like a movie set – the whole world a suffocating backdrop to a hastily sketched tragedy.

“I’ll stretch myself out in that corolla, fall asleep, let it devour me little by little...”

The girl’s voice came out slurred and sleepy. Alexei put his arm around her shoulders.

“Resign yourself. There is no plant cannibalism.”

“*C’est dommage!*”

They entered one of the hemispheres decorated with human figures representing a dance of stylised, coloured

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shadows with refinements of supreme grace and delicacy. Alexei, opening one of the compartments in his bracelet, took out some tiny balls, which he shared with the girl. They lingered for a while in this communal banquet; then they went outside and dived into the pool. They swam until they got tired, wading here and there, splashing water, laughing.

Maga clung to the edge of the pool and closed her eyes, delightfully exhausted. The boy came closer and kissed her on the lips. She let out a sharp, savage laugh, and, tearing at his skin with her teeth, began to suck in. She drank for a long while, and suddenly stopped, a drop of blood trickling down her chin, her neck tilted back: “*Je t’aime*”.

Alexei pulled away, briskly. She, a vibrant expression on her face, stretched out her arms seeking the boy.

“*Je t’aime* is part of a dead language...”

“Always with those dead and meaningless languages,” he answered, and radiating suppressed anger, got out of the pool and sat on the edge, his naked body, golden and muscular, dripping thick drops of water. “I hate that!”

“Oh!...”, she answered, a finger on her lips.

“I hate everything!”

“If I were Zadi or the book of Syma I would tell you that...”

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“What? Say it!...”

“Nothing!”

Coming out of the water, Maga lay down beside Alexei.

“You obviously detest Zadi.”

“Zadi? Why should I detest Zadi?”

“Zadi is detestable.”

Suddenly, Alexei laughs.

“Green-green.”

“Yarath is green-green *aussi*. Mira, Green-Black...”

“Nonsense! Listen, Maga,” and Alexei lay down by the girl and grabbed her hands, “wouldn’t you like to go to the Sea-of-Intranquility for a while? We’d go hunting and fishing, defend ourselves against the beasts like troglodytes...”

“Beasts?!... *Ce serait jol?*”

“Above all, we would feel as intranquil as Kings-On-The-Throne, free at last from parabolic curves and s-l-i degrees...”

Their heads came together on the fluffy pillow of a thick, red corolla. They fell silent. Then Maga stood up slowly and stared for a long time at the boy, her lips pursed:

“As for me, I feel lonely and intranquil enough... Lonely and intranquil even without the Sea-of-Intranquility or

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barren, haunted landscapes... Do you know **Doctor Faustus**? I mean, Albert of Michigan?”

“No.”

“**Doctor Faustus** does not take *ghone*, refuses the s-l-i and one day, in the not-too-distant future, he will enjoy the luxury of dying like a monkey or a subhuman, he will travel backwards or forwards as needed...”

“I don’t believe in charlatans,” Alexei cut off abruptly.

Maga looked around the garden with desolate aloofness. She shrugged her shoulders:

“*Oui, mon amour*... I know you don’t like «dead» words and that’s too bad. They are beautiful.”

In the pool, small, colourful fish swam in numbingly slow movements. Maga grabbed a handful of sand and threw it into the water.

“Just like us, we’re neither more imprisoned nor freer within our **Aquarium**,” murmured the girl, immersed in a sweet catalepsy, staring at the surface where her seated silhouette was reflected in backlight.

“Look, Alexei, how lonely they are, even in a school”.

“It’s a Universe-With-As-Much-Sense-As-Any-Other-Universe. There’s nothing scary about it.”

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A tiny fish rose to the surface and loitered there, peeking and biting at the shadows cast by the branches of a strange tree. It was blue and seemed to gaze curiously and vigilantly at the surrounding world beyond its borders — blue, an intense, shameless blue. Maga grabbed Alexei’s arm.

“Do you see this?!”

The fish escaped into the light. Maga, in one agile leap, dived into the pool, disappearing in a flash, as if swallowed. A few moments later she came back, taking a deep breath, angry.

“It got away. The little guy vanished into its Community. How can I tell it apart now if it is identical to all the others, damn it?!”

“Nobody likes gods that aren’t of one’s own kind, and one escapes them whenever one can...”

The girl came out of the water, her hair dripping wet. Alexei squeezed it out with his hands...

“I wish a God or a Demon would identify me and take me, suffocating, to a vivisection table; then at least I would be able to take a peek beyond the aquarium... And you?”

“All I want is to get rid of the Omegas.”

“The Omegas don’t matter.”

“Of the Biological Robot...”, the boy added in a low voice, restraining his anger.

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“You can speak in any tone and without fear. In fact, it’s the only Fear you can experience without any tingling in your hands.”

“We should destroy it; imagine all the ways it could be done in an instant.”

“In the Next-Instant we would find ourselves inventing Another.”

“I will dispense with it definitively.”

Maga took her time looking at the boy; then she said, as if sleepwalking:

“Have you ever experienced boredom, Alexei? Without the s-l-i intervening?”

“How?!...”

Not paying attention to Alexei’s astonishment, Maga continued:

“Although harmless, boredom has strange properties. It’s an amorphous, nauseating mass, a soft, sticky, greenish body, maybe a shadow, getting thicker and thicker until the object possessed «bursts» or «retreats»... Better still: boredom is a fluffy feather pillow, fluffy and numbing like death... — death, the most solitary and human of all acts — in the style of the time, I would say.”

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“I have never read anything similar in the book of Syma. The truth is that I cannot read everything in the book of Syma,” Alexei said in an already indifferent tone.

“This is not about the book of Syma. Albert works in Dimensions.”

“All «rhodes» — including us eventually — work in Dimensions.”

“But Albert...”

“He may be a charlatan, I told you. One of those who seek the O-O System, a way to escape the Biological Robot. A complete hoax after all, because nobody escapes.”

“And you want to destroy it? Oh, the hero! Go on, ask it for a little more sun to show it that you’re not an obstinate child.”

Alexei stretched out his hand to the water level, crossed his fingers, and immediately the burning sun burst through the spring atmosphere, enveloping them in an embrace of fire. Maga grimaced in annoyance, vividly disturbed by the brightness that hit her full in the face.

“What’s with all the Solar-Inclemency, Alexei?”

Alexei reached out again, crossing and uncrossing his fingers, regulating the Cosmos. A soft, warm breeze came to dry Maga’s hair. The girl concealed a light yawn.

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“We have an excellent Biological Robot: cheerful, lovable, very sweet, very loving...”, she closed her eyes and laughed “Alexei, tell the truth, you don’t want to destroy it, do you?”

“I can’t think of anything else.”

“But look, when you change Dimensional Systems by Its own hand...”

“I don’t want to change Dimensional Systems.”

Maga lay down again beside the boy. She sought his lips, which she resumed sucking. Suddenly he moved away and, gluing his mouth to the girl’s neck and seizing her strongly, began to «drink» her in turn.

Maga swallowed hard and her arms fell, abandoned in a desperate surrender. Alexei swallowed her, avidly, and finally stopped, his lips moist and swollen.

“I hate you,” she said very close to him, her flecked eyes dark and glowing with anger. Alexei laughed and stroked her cheek.

“I never tear your skin like you do with me. I never tear your skin...”

“Albert tears my skin; I am his guinea pig, his experimental field.”

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Alexei began to feel stings in his wrists, and the ends of his fingers tingling. The s-l-i beat frantically. Instinctively he reached for his bracelet, but stopped and didn't touch it. Gradually the beating became less violent, almost normal.

"How nice it would be to kill you, to squeeze your neck and..." he fell silent, tense.

"Now there's an interesting species of violence that would be worth reinventing. You would see death on my face." Maga stared at the boy, her eyes strangely and wildly glowing: "I would like you to see death on my face!"

Unexpectedly the girl closed her eyelids. He held her face in his hands.

"Look at me, Maga, and listen."

"I see you", she said.

"That's not seeing."

Slowly, her eyelids lifted, soft and lazy, the flecked pupils flooding with clarity, scrutinised by two other pupils, restless, strangely passionate.

"Listen... One day we will reinvent all kinds of violence. All of them!"

"Everybody dreams of that... That one day they will steal, rape, kill. Why?", asked Maga in the same lazy, absent manner.

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“Clearly you only know how to use your dead language. We want an Evil-Replica equal to our Good.”

“You’re the one who talked about «reinventing».”

“I was wrong.”

“*Bien...* Ask It for Music. A Symphony of Birds, for instance.”

“You could do it yourself, choose as you like.”

“I don’t like talking to the Guy.”

Alexei shrugged his shoulders and extended his arm, turning his palm upwards. His lips were still moving imperceptibly, when a fresh, harmonious twittering began, rising from a musical background that perfectly imitated the flowing of spring waters, with their singing, crystalline gush, in a dazzle of enchanting, almost magical sounds. Maga listened with a frown. Unexpectedly, she covered her ears and begged “Please, Alexei, «tell» It to stop that chirping. Please...”

The sounds abruptly ceased. In the silence that followed, the girl heard the voice of her companion who asked ironically “Maybe Bella Sumatra, no?! Bella Sumatra is like a spherical-white-antispaces-with-space-for-everything.”

“Bella Sumatra has the collective soul of an Omega. I prefer that actually.”

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Again, the music gushed out, now ‘perfect’ music, exact, mathematical, stripped of any emotion, any horror, any sublimity — an equation.

Maga put her hands on her face and through the gaps in her open, spread fingers peeped at Alexei’s frowning expression. She said, trying not to laugh: “I think you have never understood what boredom is!”

“No, I haven’t.”

“Imagine a race followed by a fight between Desire-and-Pleasure, the latter killing the former, killing everything, becoming Present Tense. You understand, *n’est-ce pas?*”

“After such an explanation, I couldn’t fail to understand it unless I were a monkey,” he answered angrily, throwing small stones into the water.

“How do you expect me to explain more clearly if the dictionary, agonising to do so, remains silent, *le pauvre enfant?!*”

Alexei took her hands and uncovered her face, seeking intimacy with his companion through the light that passed between their pupils. She seemed distant, lost in a sweet, sleepy reverie. Alexei nibbled on her fingers:

“Desire is unlimited, like life and being.”

“It is, and it is measured in s-l-i degrees.

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“One day it will no longer fit into a coordinate system.”

“There will be no more «metamorphosis», «death» will be invented... to say First Guy will be another dead expression, etc., etc., etc... Always One-Day, a Great-Day!”

“Don’t be discouraging.”

Maga was silent, staring straight ahead. Suddenly she said laughing:

“Whatever, I know how to escape at the proper time.”

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing... Let’s get going..”

Maga stood up and held her hands out to Alexei. At the same moment, two girls, one green and the other blue, entered the garden. When they got to the edge of the pool, they undressed in a flash and jumped into the water.

Maga stood watching them, absently, seeing them move away from each other, come closer again, laugh while splashing water, their lips touching (green-blue-blue-green-green-blue), separating again, in an indefinable, eternal and closed cycle. She saw herself watching, without body or voice, something distant and nebulous, forever lost in time-space-or-some-other-joke. She felt sleepy. That was it, sleep, infinite sleep. She murmured:

THE AQUARIUM

“Alexei...”

The boy gave her his hand:

“Come on...”

“...Don’t you know, Alexei, that I can go through emotional curves without the s-l-i...”

“*Dégagée?!...*” Alexei asked, digging his nails into her flesh.

“*Dégagée,*” she repeated, aggressive and vulnerable.

“**Doctor Faustus**, no?”

“*Oui. Je suis son cobaye, son champ expérimental. Oui...*”

“Where can I find this charlatan?”

“Albert? You want to meet Albert?”

“Why not? Suppose I want to play the innocent little mouse. Just suppose!”

“Let go of my arms,” Maga said with sudden sharpness, adding in a mocking tone, “Perhaps you want to «free» me from the claws of the monster... Albert will find you eccentric and will enjoy himself!”

The stings on Alexei’s wrist became more and more acute, almost unbearable. The needles of the s-l-i left their normal orbits.

Violence and anger receded slowly and with difficulty. He said, mincing his words:

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“Albert of Michigan was part of the team that introduced the WO-V wave into the Biological Robot; he is one of the outcast «priests» and as such he must hate it. I don’t think his «processes» interest me much, but I might like to hear him.”

“Albert is not concerned with the destruction of the Biological Robot, if that’s what you want to know; he thinks that we need him like a subhuman needs the air he breathes... As for himself, Albert will escape the dimension through the O-O...”

Alexei let out a sharp laugh. Maga gave him an irritated look and turned away. The boy followed her footsteps, laughing and saying:

“The demigod, Faustus, will take you with him, of course? Ah, it’s clear that he wants to make you participate in the Paradise-Hidden in the Zero, to continue to taste your warm and liquid sweetness?... It must be obvious to the naked eye that this is a real demigod, an antimatter hero. Does it show? Do tell...”

The girl went through the door and, already in the hall, Alexei stopped her by standing in front of her:

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“Maga, don’t you see that guys like him seek the human by regressing, by annihilating all species, all intelligent beings? Don’t you see?”

“Maybe Nothingness is a good thing, the only good thing. Go, go and see Albert of Michigan,” Maga said in reply.

She moved away from her companion, her inexpressive face suddenly apathetic, and got into the Zut.

CHAPTER IV

Albert of Michigan was still in search of the last bricks for his barrier-palace, and he was slow to break through the luminous (too luminous) chaos of knowledge, defining values, human limits, the very human limit-of-himself and of the R-Q-T-P function.

He was building his palace laboriously. Intoxicated with the idea of settling there one day, freed at last from the walls of an unbreakable prison (the “Self”, a small, bizarre planetary system, or a mephistophelic, cynical cosmos-like body stretched out over the length and breadth of a dark cold slab, above it a vault with no stars, no moon, no suns, no water, no fire, no masks of painted cardboard, no nothing, no nothing...) and aware of possessing Death, he was preparing to be definitively, definitively...

When he thought about it too much, Albert of Michigan ended up laughing and then had the sensation that

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his laughs were returning to their point of origin, shrill and unrecognizable, aching, in search of their owner. (Exhausting, everything wishes to have an owner, a master). «Wait, isn't there a system where a phenomenon similar to this one is produced, a little elementary phenomenon called 'echo'?!». This had occurred to him one day and he had hurried to rectify the calculations he had made, reviewing all the theories of Rama, a «rhode» who had «mysteriously» disappeared – in fact the only individual who was known to have «mysteriously disappeared». However, the almost fortuitous discovery of an antimatter system, which he had called O-r, was Albert's. For the time being, he was simply engaged in tentative experiments and he only discussed them with José Fernandez, who, strangely enough, refused to attend any laboratory sessions. The last time they had spoken about it he had told him:

“I believe you, I believe you. Theoretically the thing has been proven for a long time, all that was missing was the final trick. Good! The Council of the Theta will be thrilled, it's always like that when another juggling act, another magic trick, is devised.”

“I have no intention of reporting my findings to the Council of the Theta. Rama did the same, by the way. I know where to find Rama, do you understand?”

THE AQUARIUM

“No...”

“Rama has either moved on to an antimatter System or else he is at the point I intend to reach...”

“There you go again... I confess I’m not sure what you’re getting at...”

“It’s simple: to disappear as if I had never existed.”

“As if what?!”

“As-If-I-Had-Never-Existed.”

“Oh!”

José Fernandez laughed with light cynicism:

“To Not-Have-Existed is to Die. Do you remember that Subspecies Camp where they took us when we were children and the spectacle that took place there when beings between their relative and absolute zero waited, ageing and suffering?”

“I remember well.”

“Is that what you want?”

“No! I don’t have the courage for that. In fact, I know other Camps...”

“You can’t!” interrupted José Fernandez. “The Council of the Theta has decided to put an end to such experiments.”

“I don’t mean those...” replied Albert, oblivious.

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José Fernandez shrugged his shoulders:

“I remember that even in our baby-team you liked to be at odds, to do everything the opposite way to everybody else. One day you dropped down at full speed from the last spiral of History. At that time, we were studying the theory of Gravity and you intended to go against Antigravity.

José Fernandez laughed loudly and added:

“The Council of the Theta expelled you from the Biological Robot after you managed to reduce its efficiency... I even heard that recently a «rhode» asked for rain and the Big-Guy sent hail. I don't know, maybe it's a joke. After that, you've been wrapped up in the most trivial commonplace concerns of boys at the Ykm stage, things that stink, when repeated: «To remain or not to remain human», «Do we or don't we have the right to hate, to refuse the s-l-i?» Of course we do, and it is also true that nobody forbids us...”

“No wonder!” Albert laughed in his turn. “Long before that, «hate» had already precipitated in the form of an insoluble compound. Why not «precipitate» man entirely and put an end to this once and for all?”

“What am I saying?! Why should an adult persist in asking the metaphysical questions of a guy at a pre-adult stage?”

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You have been doing nothing your whole life but ask questions you already know beforehand that you won't get an answer to."

"Don't worry about me and let me stay in the «young» zone."

They were both referring to individuals who, like Maga and Alexei, were still part of the great Ykm group. The Omegas constantly recorded inconsistent questions, futile or inappropriate questions, most of them confusing, which, after being conveniently catalogued, selected and sorted according to a criterion of novelty or appropriateness, were sent to the Scientific Council of the Theta. The latter, as a rule, looked at them negligently, and sometimes even came up with an evasive answer, which remained evasive even though it was translated into numbers-that-clarified-nothing. They almost always smiled at such naivety and had the questions filed in a department of the Biological Robot intended for Small-Curiosities.

"You were expelled from the Council of the Theta...", resumed José Fernandez, half distracted.

His friend faced him with an expression of surprise:

"Why are you telling me this again? What do I care about the Council of the Theta?"

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“You used to care very much. From there, you controlled the entrails of the Biological Robot, and that was your wish. I proposed your reinstatement...”

“At this point I am not interested as you well know. And you also know that there will always be a dozen Thetas inputting into the Standard-Omega personal characteristics such as «confused and egoistic like all Metaphysicians» and consequently the machine will always be reaching the same conclusion: **Dangerous**. You know all that and still you propose my reinstatement, you old scumbag! You’re a cynic of the worst kind.”

They both laughed, ending the conversation. Then, Albert continued working on his peculiar, mysterious invention, which he had connected Maga to.

At that moment he was in the y-2 laboratory. He had interrupted his work, arms crossed over the «atium» sheet. He was thinking about the girl. Sensing someone approaching, he turned round quickly.

It was José Fernandez, who was walking around a bulging analytical apparatus, a monster standing in the middle of the laboratory, which in turn was a vast forest of machines and robots coming and going, appearing and disappearing, carrying objects, sliding or stopping, vigilant and attentive, all

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this in absolute silence. Noticing his friend, Albert questioned him with his eyes.

The other said cheerfully:

“The usual dilemmas: Life or Death!”

“That old question, of course.”

“Of course! I wanted to know if you have drawn the variation graph of the new «Fag». The WV Omega claims it.”

“Why should the Omegas be in such a hurry?”

“It’s not the Omegas, it’s us.”

“Whatever. I have more on my mind and I won’t be drawing that graph.”

“Well, give me the data”. José Fernandez went to take a look at his friend’s work “Are you still continuing with this madness?”

Albert looked at him in turn:

“Worse. I intend to drag you along with me.”

“Oh, no, don’t believe that,” José answered vehemently. “Don’t you believe it! For my part, I have the «Physical-Regression», the «Metamorphosis» and many relative zeros to overcome. I refuse to continue to be your crutch; you never knew how to live without me, your negative pole.”

Albert laughed cynically:

“How can you manage without your positive pole?”

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“Very well, I hope.”

“Ah, my future inhabitant of Alpha-Alpha-1, you and the other transmuted ones, the immortals!”

Albert laughed, devilish and mean, a glimpse of dementia in his eyes.

“You’re crazy!” Joseph said, gloomily.

“I’m crazy, you say I’m crazy because I prefer total annihilation to those alternatives. Ah, my dear friend!”

Albert rested his head on his arms, all trace of cheerfulness gone, his face looking aged.

“Why don’t you take «ghone» or do some somatic purification?” Joseph asked in a low voice. Albert stared at him, considering him. That day’s meeting threatened to turn into a bitter brawl, as it usually did of late. They had always been very close, but for some time now their friendship seemed to be veering towards resentment and bitterness.

Albert replied, with little purpose:

“Man is a mistake, a small miscalculation of **Brute=Matter**. The worst is that it is that same man who for a long time has been trying to correct it, believing that by correcting himself he is correcting it, when in fact he is exacerbating it. Notice how, as we move away from the **Placenta=Mother**, as we progress...”

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José Fernandez whistled impatiently, interrupting him:

“I know, I know, but you needn’t bother with the mass extermination of species. Not even with that, because She, our Mummy, **Brute=Matter**, would take charge, at any time and by millions of processes, by repeating the same mistakes deliberately or otherwise, regenerating life, then thought, etc., etc., etc., from the beginning, when it was the Word, until the Comedy of our days. *Voilà!*” José Fernandez sighed in ironic resignation and added, after a short pause:

“Let her enjoy us and devour us with all she is entitled to! I, for my part, feel like an indispensable atom of the Universe, a naïve, well-behaved atom — rather neither well nor badly behaved, let’s say: passive. Exactly as «**She**» wants, because this way, and only this way, do my gestures have meaning, none of them disagreeing with the **Fat One**’s gigantic, monstrous pulsation.”

José Fernandez laughed uproariously, exclaiming in a mocking tone:

“Glory to Matter, the Indestructible, the Brute, the Suffocating, Lustful and Nauseous One, glory to the Glorious *Putain!* I am an obedient little boy, no less! and to hell with all the remaining filth, freedom first. *Voilà!*”

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“You are a wonderful friend, my true dimension”, said Albert in a tone of detached tenderness.

“Don’t try to move me now with protestations of love. I’ll burst!”

“I want to admit you’re right”, replied Albert in the same tone. “We have a Universe-As-Any-Other-One, a poor creature with no legs or eyes to which we constantly shout questions without remembering that the guy is also deaf-mute.”

“Not at all,” his friend replied, “not at all, the False-Innocent is cunning: it’s tired of always hearing the same queries asked in that typically imperative and whining tone and it laughs at us, turning a deaf ear. What we need is to do as the False-Innocent does: have neither eyes nor ears, and harmonise our language with its own. That’s that!”

José Fernandez, whistling irritated, sat down next to a telescope. Soon regaining his good humour, he exclaimed:

“Fantastic, look!”

Albert came to take a peek, adjusting the eyepiece. José Fernandez kept talking:

“What matters is this: Greatness. A thousand light years today, a million tomorrow, it is a very old truth that no one but you dares to discuss anymore.”

THE AQUARIUM

“Now I’m the one who asks you to stop with these childish things. Look,” Albert was paying attention to the microtelescope, “at two million light years away you can almost make out an atom.”

“At two million, man?! Wow! You see how you can stare wide-eyed into the simple-infinite?”

José, turning in his seat, started to sing a monosyllabic song in vogue. He interrupted himself to ask:

“Don’t you have a «zim» around?”

“I’ll call Bob...”

“No, no, no. Forget the «zim» and Bob.”

José resumed his humming, now mixed with whistling. Albert looked at him, noticing his unchangeable good mood, his noisy cheerfulness, in which there was something shocking and aggressive, and bit his lips angrily.

“What a nuisance!” Albert said tearing the «atium» sheet lengthways.

José Fernandez looked at him and, as if he could guess his thoughts and this amused him immensely, crossed his arms in defiance:

“You can hit me if it suits you.”

“It doesn’t!”

THE AQUARIUM

“Pity. People get annoyed if there’s no one to get annoyed at and that is why we still live in Groups.”

“Each of us must find an annoying tic, that’s it!”

“More or less,” replied José. “I for example scratch the refined sensibility of my neighbours by singing or whistling monosyllabic songs, Maga speaks some dead language, you... By the way, how’s our delicious little friend? *Elle ne veut pas coucher avec moi et je ne comprends pas, je ne peux pas comprendre...*”

José Fernandez laughed, detached and mischievous, a gleam of wild joy in his eyes. Albert, frowning, did not answer.

“If you don’t want to, let’s not talk about Maga, your diva, *la petite pucelle si douce à aimer, non? Une belle s.s.s. aussi, I suppose! Who is she?*”

As if lost in thought, Albert replied:

“Maga is the Firebird. When she will have burned down completely... I met her on a holiday at the **Magic Mountain**, where I went with Yarath.”

José Fernandez could not hide his expression of malicious mockery:

“And so, you left Yarath in the middle of the Mountain and went down to the valley carrying the Firebird in your arms? Classic!”

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“Yarath came back with us by sleigh,” Albert replied sombrely.

“I thought you would be more imaginative with your Firebird.”

“Shut up!” shouted Albert unexpectedly, then added: “If I don’t get to the «point» I seek, I shall retire to some other one, to a point where I can murder, steal, rape and slander! Oh yes, I want to retire to a «living point» where good acts and evil acts still have some sense or meaning. I want to inflict defeat on someone so that my victory won’t be a gratuitous event.”

José looked at his friend in a vague, absent-minded way, like someone who doesn’t understand. Then he said, with a grimace of indifference:

“If those to whom you intend to inflict defeat upon are in another Dimensional-System distinct from yours... they are not your kind and therefore the victory-defeat remains meaningless. It’s the same as if you started kicking Bob, I believe.”

“Gods and worms have always enjoyed devouring humans. Now you ask them whether they did it with genuine pleasure.”

“If your rage comes from not performing acts outside the market, why don’t you introduce them at your own peril?”

THE AQUARIUM

“How is a nose without a sense of smell supposed to smell? How can I change the direction of my steps if I only know how to walk to where-I’m-going?”

“In that case, change Dimensions as you say. «There» you might be able to kick out,” José advised sourly, adding: “«Here», Evil’s dictionary is definitely archaic, is no longer up to date, and we’ve unlearned how to use it.”

He whistled again, impatiently, while he turned the metal axis of a small genetic graph, as if he were no longer interested in the conversation. He held out a sheet of paper to Albert, who took it without looking at the luminescent diagram that filled it from top to bottom, and said:

“The Universe that I have been deducing for a long time fits me like a glove and is surprisingly simple.”

“I know, I know,” replied José, eager to stop there.

“Perhaps you know very little!” Albert said, and turned away, leaning over a graph to which he seemed to pay all his attention. A silence of laboured calm then fell between the two friends.

Bob appeared at the door. He announced:

“Alexei Osborne is waiting for Albert of Michigan in Room 1.”

“Send him to Room 3,” Albert instructed the robot.

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“Who is Alexei Osborne?” asked José Fernandez while Albert got rid of the anti-k wrapping.

“I don’t know. Maybe one of those Ykm who, knowing that I was expelled from the Council of the Theta, which they hate, come looking for me from time to time.”

“I see! They want you as a liberator. Look, take them, take them all to that Dimension what’s-its-name. Ah, the fools — always asking the Omegas trick questions, always convinced that the Biological Robot is an invention of the Biological Robot. Alexei Osborne!!?”

CHAPTER V

Alexei Osborne got up from the armchair where he had sunk and greeted Albert. He marvelled at his kindly expression, for he had created a somewhat Mephistophelean image of Albert that in no way matched that of the man in front of him. Yet he felt intimidated, extremely agitated by the s-l-i beats.

Albert stared at his metal-encircled wrist. He commented unaffectedly:

“Where would we end up without the neutralisation of instincts!”

Alexei was calming down, no longer feeling the s-l-i:

“Naturally... Many times, as a child, I tried to get rid of «this» by cutting my arm. I had read stories that spoke of elements that could actually, definitively cut it... I never succeeded, of course.” he said.

Albert offered *Zim-Gbone*. Alexei refused:

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“I don’t smoke *Zim-Ghone*.”

For some time, they remained silent like two old acquaintances taking a break from conversation. They watched each other without any kind of embarrassment. Finally, Albert said, unexpectedly returning to the previous subject:

“It wouldn’t even be worth cutting off your arm for so little. Once you get past the Ykm stage you are automatically freed from that emotional tether. By that point you will feel master of all the open-sesames in the world, you will be able to despair, to experience in the flesh the delights of physical pain, of boredom, of hatred, all this considered in the neutral-negative zone of course, therefore emptied of content...”

“When we are blind-deaf-mute we will say to ourselves: look, listen, speak.”

“More or less,” Albert concluded softly.

“I know you were in the Biological Robot, that...”
Alexei ventured after a short pause.

“I was expecting you would mention that. The Biological Robot is us, outside of us. I might add that the mirror is not favourable to us and we get annoyed by our reflection.”

“Maga...”

THE AQUARIUM

“Maga?!”, Albert retained the girl’s name, put it between them like a hyphen, the most secret affinity. “Maga?!”

“Maga told me about an invention. Perhaps it can help us destroy...”

“Where did you leave our friend?”

Alexei let the question settle, pausing to scrutinise the other’s face, suspicious of mockery, but no, not at all, Albert was looking at him with serious interest. He replied, shrugging his shoulders:

“She must be in Anchow.”

“Let’s tell her to come here and explain...”

Albert was silent. He went to the S-D device in the centre of the room, turned the phototype and ordered:

“Maga Moniz coordinates: WW-OO-R-S.”

The answer came slowly:

“Maga Moniz, «shelter».”

“Contact. Contact.”

“No contact, no contact, no contact...”

“*Merde!*”

Albert crossed his arms in front of his body. He seemed in a demonic rage:

“The Firebird takes shelter. She is starting to be afraid! Is there no one who can enjoy their own fear without fear?”

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What do you want from me anyway?” He had turned to Alexei, his fists clenched: “Do you want me to juggle? I’m no sorcerer.”

“**Doctor Faustus**,” replied Alexei in a neutral, almost apathetic tone.

“Faustus?! Do you even know what **Doctor Faustus** means?”

“I’m not very interested in going deeper into the matter, but I do know, like everybody else, that «Faustus» in modern language means ridiculous-charlatanism-metaphysical-game-of-dice-without-dice-etc.

“Poor creature, a nice spirit-buyer-seller, poor «old man»! Yes, an old fool, and that was why he was trading in youth and wisdom, subtle pleasures of existence, not at all commonplace in those times.” Albert shrugged his shoulders, adding: “Where is he now, our ill-fated dealer in rare goods, the slandered one? Without him, we would still be at the gates of Proto-History.”

“I don’t believe in legends. Man was born at a stroke, by a sudden mutation — ZZZZZZZZZZZ —, the cosmos ripping, burning, and him being born from its entrails like a mushroom. That’s the only way to get it right.”

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Albert served drinks. After savouring the first sip, Alexei exclaimed:

“But this *praff* is extraordinary!”

“My true speciality is making *praff*. It’s a filter. I learned it from Bob.”

Alexei took another sip and another, and then suddenly gulped it, greedily.

“I would like to have some more.”

Albert carefully poured him a new dose. On the surface of the bluish liquid, coloured, phosphorescent bubbles appeared in a *plang-plang* that ended on the drinker’s lips. Alexei laughed wildly, the s-l-i vibrating all over his body. He went near the S-D and searched for Maga. To no avail. The answer was always the same: «no contact, no contact, no contact...» Placing his hands on his head, he shouted:

“Maga. Where are you Maga? Oh, Maga, the world is deserted, it becomes deserted when you disappear. Maga, listen to me, why didn’t you tell me that he called you the Firebird? Why didn’t you tell me, because I would have come here and punched him in the face! Firebird is said of someone who is doomed to burn, burn and burn. It’s a legend. I’m surrounded by legends. Help me.” Alexei brought his hands to his face demented and continued to scream: “Maga!...”

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Hearing a laugh, he turned around. In a corner, Albert was watching him. Alexei was breathing hard; he was going to raise his arms but he let them fall. It was as if he were glued to the ground, heavy as a body subject to enormous gravity. He heard the other man through a pale cold nebula:

“Here is the result of generations and generations of individuals «without psychology», serving as guinea pigs to each other, successively and endlessly.

Was he talking to someone, **Doctor Faustus**? Yes, there was another shadow in the room. Where was he really? Alexei heard his own voice:

“I refuse to be a guinea pig, I refuse to play the little mouse. Maga, why didn’t you warn me about what was going on «here»?”

“Alexei!”

Who did that voice belong to now, and why was it impossible for him to move? Why was his body so heavy?

“I tell you: the curious and surprising thing is that the «little mouse» always reacts in an unexpected way, differently to what was foreseen. That is why the world has not yet died of old age.”

“There is no doubt about it, the imagination of nature surpasses us...”

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There was dialogue intermingled with laughter. Alexei listened to it, fearful and full of curiosity, shadows lengthening in front of his eyes.

“...ambitious as a true «rhode».”

“What do you say to this, Bob?” (There was a Bob. Bob?! An Alpha-Beta? Impossible...)

“It fits the pathetic nature of humankind.”

A long whistle. A laugh.

“Negative emotions are refined escapes of the mind that have nothing to do with insipid in-betweens, processing themselves in a white zone... Look...”

The world revolved around Alexei, like a ruddy nebula. It was Maga’s body turned into a giddy dust, Maga’s body a dark, bloody wave, suffocating him. He held out his hands which turned red, oozing blood. He shouted:

“Leave me alone! Maga!”

“Love is a property of beings and it only manifests itself in the pre-adult age.”

“In negative band.”

“Negative. Negative. Negative. Negative...”

Every now and then some record would break. Alexei began to hear poorly. Sounds became syncopated.

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“...he’s not a «Cy». I expected a «rhode» to be less complicated.”

“You’re right, Bob. As far as I’m concerned, I’ve never seen a more complex tangle of twists and turns, screams, desires, aversions. Are we being misled? — I ask you.”

“Release him. Nothing of this contributes to what you already know.”

“You’re wrong, you’re wrong. This is a special little mouse...”

Laughter. An intense, deafening ZZZZZZZZZZ.

“Maga!”

“Even Helena Coimbra, that little monster of unculture, of ignorance, is for love, for love between robots, that is...”

“Why should you still be against the «sensitised» robots of Helena Coimbra, Bob?”

“I’m not against them, nor am I for them. I’m a para-meta-physical compound capable of intelligent synthesis and that’s enough for me.”

“Oh!” (Laughter).

“All the electroscopes show maximum charge.”

“Don’t touch the «cage»!”

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The cage... The cage, the cage... (Another broken record. It was always a strange word that crawled over Alexei's brain like a soft, sticky spider).

“Damn them!”

“The girl is a more polite guinea pig; she describes herself around fixed points...”

“Control. Control. Bob!”

“Two thousand millidegrees. It's too much!”

A loose, muffled laugh:

“...The creature refuses solitude, the greatest luxury invented in terms of pleasures. It is curious: in the labyrinth of dashed lines, only one is remarkable, almost unbroken, drawn by fire — take notice! — and that is the horror of solitude. Curious, curious...”

“Maga? Where is Maga?”

Alexei manages to lift an arm and he feels like he is dragging a heavy mass. He brings his hands to his face (is that his face, a strange body, freezing, rugged like the face of a mountain?).

“Control. Control. Control...”

Alexei is starting to experience weightlessness, feels his muscles tense and agile, his ear identifies a soft buzzing sound. He opens his eyes and finds himself sitting in the same

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armchair where he had been a short while before (short or long?) and in front of him, calm as Buddha, Albert of Michigan is watching.

“What happened here?” he asked after a long silence.

“Nothing special: you took a *praff* that you were not used to and... it was necessary for Bob to give you an *antipraff*.”

“That’s a lie! I’ve been serving as a lab rat. I’m not a fool.”

Albert sighed deeply:

“How is it my fault that Maga tells you stories? You must have been dreaming, maybe...”

Irritation was building inside Alexei and, oddly enough, he didn’t experience the usual suppression, he barely noticed the s-l-i stings. He looked at his wrist: indeed, the needles were oscillating slowly, unaware of the young man’s emotions.

“...I dreamt that someone called her Firebird and I don’t know what other horrible names. That was it! Ah, if you ever bother my friend again!” he threatened.

Albert laughed:

“And what do you call her, let’s hear it: *Ma petite soeur*? — *Elle est ma fille, vous ne savez pas? Qu’est-ce que ça vous dit? Rien, I suppose*, — Spotted-toad? That’s what Henry, Yarath and I

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don't know who else call her... Why should you be «jealous» of the most innocent of all tenderness? Don't make that face, because I'm not swearing. «Jealousy» is a less complicated term than n-n-5-z-n-type-e-v-red, don't you think? You don't want to answer me? Oh, I know, you came here because of the Biological Robot and not to fight over a little friend... You were saying that thanks to my knowledge of Type-I I could help you... Well, if I'm not mistaken, that would be called a conspiracy...?»

“Go to «Hell!»”

And Alexei, standing up, headed for the door.

“Alexei, that's a dirty word: there is no Hell.”

“There is, you had me in Hell. Where is the «Cage?»”

“There is no «Cage».”

“I've been inside of it. I'll see if I can find Maga.”

“Come back together.”

“With Maga? Here?»”

Seeing Alexei moving further away, towards the door, Albert tried to hold him back:

“Listen, I'm just any old Henry.”

“You're no such thing.”

“Now, wait a minute. I'm going to read you a page that might apply to our case.”

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Albert turned his back and stood in front of a panel, representing a pre-historic “group” absorbed in rural work. The painting unfolded within the five dimensions, in gloomy colours, the beings deformed, incomplete, smelly. Involuntarily, Alexei heeded the scene and turned his face away in disgust.

“They are sub-human and belong to the **Mythology**. But still, they are a mirror. They, just like us, had only one aim: pleasure. The only difference, a small difference all things considered, is that they didn’t know how to mathematise it, to measure it in s-l-i degrees,” Albert explained slowly.

“A big difference,” Alexei replied impatiently, almost fiercely.

Albert moved the panel away and turned around, holding in his hands a small book, yellowed by time and perhaps lengthy neglect. It was a strange, out-of-place presence. Alexei stared at Albert half curious, half scornful.

“Another myth?”

“Yes, «The Love Triangle» myth, an almost mandatory plot in the Dimension. The title itself, the language, are of the time... Let’s see...”

Albert starts reading:

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“Woman (to intimate friend):

I can’t stand it anymore, darling.

Close friend:

Doesn’t Glenn love you anymore?

Woman:

That would be far better than this horror.

Intimate Friend:

What horror?”

Albert interrupts to explain to Alexei, who is showing signs of impatience:

“Sorry, but «they» like to dwell on details before saying what they have to say. That’s why they waste rivers of ink and conversation. It’s a widespread sport. Well...”

“Woman:

Glenn made a scene saying I betrayed him.

Intimate Friend:

Oh! darling, if he doesn’t trust you, tell him to get lost.

Woman:

He trusts me alright...

Intimate Friend:

So?!

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Woman:

He says he suspects me of betraying him with my husband.

Intimate Friend:

But that's nonsense!

Woman:

He even told me that if it were with somebody else, just for fun, an amusement, the idea would be less unbearable for him...

Intimate Friend:

It's true that your husband is gorgeous, but I see no reason for Glenn's attitude.

Woman:

He likes attitudes and this one suits him well.

Close friend:

Not really. A lover is never betrayed and even less so by a husband.

Woman:

I told him precisely that, that the only person betrayed is naturally...

Intimate Friend:

Naturally, Glenn shouldn't make a fuss — *coucher avec toi* right under your husband's nose..."

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Alexei fidgeted:

“I refuse to listen to such foolishly idiotic comedies.”

Albert closed the book, lowering his eyes to hide their cunning, ironic expression:

“We have our own comedies for private use, don't we?”

“Which have nothing to do with that one.”

Albert absent-mindedly blew a hypothetical speck of dust off the book's binding.

“Just pretend I'm the Mythology's betrayed husband.”

Alexei looked at him, sincerely surprised and perplexed, the dizziness caused by the *praff* completely gone:

“How can I take such absurdity into account?”

“You can,” Albert replied in the same slurred, nonchalant tone. “You can suppose everything, that I'm the betrayed husband and that you shouldn't make a fuss, *coucher avec* Maga, the whole comedy...”

Alexei kept retreating without ceasing to stare at Albert, like a strange, unknown phenomenon. He stopped understanding the meaning of his words, only hearing the sound of his voice, the guttural laugh, the desperate inflection.

Suddenly Alexei started to run and disappeared.

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Albert continued to laugh, laugh, a shrill, crazed laughter. José Fernandez entered the chamber and stopped to look at his friend. The latter, seeing him, stopped laughing and called in a dry, imperative tone:

“Bob!”

Bob came up.

“Prepare the Anti-E,” Albert ordered.

“Well?...” José Fernandez finally asked.

“Well, nothing. No more wasting time for today. Let’s get to work!”

“Oh!”

José Fernandez seemed more willing to talk:

“I know who Alexei Osborne is: quite an enquirer, an «ill-filtered» one”.

“Alexei Osborne is Maga’s l-s-l.”

“Oh!!!”

José Fernandez laughed:

“You gave him the *praff-v4?*... Etc. Etc....”

“I see no reason...”

“The reason must be mythological like the method, and if there is none, one invents it. *Le petit ami couche avec Maga, toi aussi, ça suffit, non?*”

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“*Ça suffit*. I gave him the *praff-v3*, even if you don’t believe it.”

Faced with the astonished muteness of José Fernandez, Albert shrugged his shoulders and left.

CHAPTER VI

On the robot-board-I, the usual game of functions is played in a gigantic coordinate axis, with ellipses and parabolas growing and unfolding *ad infinitum*.

In an abrupt resetting, the board was cleared of any traces and the Omega returned to its initial form. Maga took a deep, exhausted breath and slowly made her way to the exit of the R-D precinct.

«Ah, it is quite impossible to picture what happens in the interpenetration of two or several «in». However, I will suppose that I possess a zero-non-zero, isolated like a planet, all mine and visible, tangible, that my fingers can touch... Now, the zero-non-zero, non-dimensional in itself, will be measured in a-w units. Recapping: I have a 'non-dimensional' zero-non-zero, measured in a-w units... — and nothing comes out of it! I now imagine an observer placed in a third system and able to isolate and measure us, the zero in units of the mega-0-8

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system and myself in units of another system, micro-00-2... In this case, it turns out that, «theoretically», zero is a universe capable not only of containing me... No, I don't believe that Albert has actually put forward such a theory, I don't believe it. He just juggles things that confound us. And Alexei is almost converted! Ambitious like a true ignoramus. That's it then, and so what!? In the nefarious catalogue of pleasures, life comes first, then... the **Imagination=That=Amuses=Itself**. The latter is considered by some experts as «loss», because the individual runs the risk of being possessed, absorbed in a pseudo-pseudo-pseudo-something vortex, inhibiting action. One more expert giving an opinion like that, and there we have it, a pleasure transformed into n-n emotion. Nevertheless, if I get to derive the basic function... What about Henry? I'll send Henry as a package to Albert. This way, little by little, Albert will be «fed» the best team of guinea pigs.»

Mixing functions and people, charts and theories, in a confused monologue Maga entered the «zut». The next instant, the girl was dropped on an uninhabited terrace, with a low, thick sky, ghostly. She stopped to breathe, with her face turned upwards receiving the heavy, silky caress of the air.

All around there were peculiar trees of sparse foliage, slender and ragged, resembling life inventing its own laws in

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an elfin setting. And thus, surrounding the trees and bushy plants, were flowers of violent, almost impudent tones providing a contrasting note, the one missing to complete the new law of the jungle: a fat, cynical, well-mannered fantasy. Maga, evoking life like a rushing torrent, running in its normal passionate flow, rosy and vibrant, her arms bare, resilient as a boreal plant to freezing temperatures, was the strangest conceivable inhabitant on that ledge planted between Anchow and Visu. A softly coloured silhouette against a very dense, crepuscular sky, very still, she received in her body the sharp embrace of the air and smiled.

Slowly, her expression of enchantment and delight was replaced by a mask of desperate suffering. «The s-l-i has almost stopped bothering me and it has also stopped protecting me...»

In a sudden about-turn, she broke her passive immobility and ran to the back towards a dark door, opened it and entered a warm and softly lit circular hall. There was no furniture, only the occasional aerial seat and a couple of cushions scattered on the floor, an immense plate that was, along with the walls and ceilings, animated with elusive, elegant arabesques. It was surrounded by doors, countless doors, little gilded doors, the taste of the age. The whole chamber was a very rich round cage of gilded doors.

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«They're all gone...»

Maga pushed the one hundred and fourth door. Beyond it a banal scene, a small room decorated with the same obsessive profusion of exquisitely beautiful, deliciously and delicately sensual, enticing figures (although there were no «unwary» senses, capable of being enticed), each equal to hundreds, thousands of others, like a system of bizarrely shaped communicating vessels, containing the same liquid.

Maga paid attention to the coloured shadows that seemed to stir on the walls as if they possessed a life of their own or at the very least some kind of automated reflex that could made them appear like living beings. She stretched out her hands, touching them. Vaguely duped, she shrugged her shoulders. It was another game, not of graphs and figures but of modern painting; Hutah-L-E was the name of the innovative team. However, the girl stayed in the same place, her attention wide awake. She recalled the violent reaction of the Watwy team, renowned for its well-defined style, refined in all its tones and shapes, with a perfect, exact, smooth, crystalline and crystallised language. The small disaggregated nucleus of its main body was still attempting a somersault, committing to the mad adventure of a renewing, expressional and emotional search, to find... what? The result — which was

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still an experience — was Hutah-L-E, two-dimensional shadows, so unreal and distant that Maga suddenly had the sensation of a world lost at the end-of-the-world, nebulous and disorderly. She was going to meet that future, blindfolded, groping, her soul haunted and empty.

She bit her lips and let out a libertine, straying laugh. She took off her shoes, undressed, stretched herself out on the T. The ceiling — Hutah or Watwy? — was populated with the same familiar, ecstatic landscapes where the world was transfigured into a kind of hot, suffocating, amorphous afternoon, in which nothing was missing: neither the men nor the suns they rode over.

A quick emission of light signals followed by a muffled squeak and the girl closed her eyes, a still smile on her half-closed lips.

Brief moments of «Nothing» (a Nothing measured in mega-a-w units, soft as a cloud, better still, as a dream-not-dreamed, maybe not even soft, Nothing) and a new light-sound signalling. Slowly, very slowly, after that daily death, Maga opened her eyes, returning to the surrounding world, giving herself up to it in a desolate return.

“To dress in what?” she asked herself, looking at a map.

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“Here it is: Myth-Two.”

Quickly, she got dressed and wreathed her hair with half-wilted flowers — the violent vitality of their petals tamed and defeated —, her dress like a second skin, phosphorescent and aggressive. Turning her back to the mirror, Maga picked up a small sphere which she had placed on the floor. She touched it and moved away as if afraid of being swallowed up in the unfolding characterless scene, of birds and aquatic plants in an Andromeda-Minor landscape. In the gloomy dusk, the air was curdled with nightmarish birds letting out shrill cries and flitting close to the ground, hurting their wings among the plants of the vast waterhole. An atmosphere of fright, of shapeless and monstrous emotions filled the air.

At the flapping of the birds’ wings against the thorns Maga winced and let out another sharp laugh. She looked at her wrist, the inert hands of the s-l-i:

«I am not afraid of fear. *Voilà!*»

She walked on until she touched the barrier, Andromeda-Minor now an aquarium and very near; a flooded mire, and growing here and there, rigid clumps of bulbous, green asphodels, creeping bushes of wild gorse; and fluttering, skirting the objects, getting tangled in them, the birds of shrill cries.

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«No, I don't believe Albert contacts «them», speaks to them and imprisons them. I don't believe it!»

Maga blinked, withdrawing, and stared at one of the ends of the «field». Blurred in unreal, the pale fragile figure of a little girl now appeared, wearing a dress, her hair straight, her body slender and shapeless, a haunted look in her eyes, a huge bunch of asphodels in her arms.

Maga stretched out her arm and it seemed to her that it went beyond the barrier, that her hand slipped down an icy, inhuman face.

She recoiled in terror, still looking at the «other», mesmerised, even smiling at her:

«I swear to myself that «you» are an inanimate shadow of Yoe matter, a juggling act of the dimensions. I will stretch out my hand, run it over your face, over the almost non-existent contours of your body, touch your sore apathetic pupils, merge into the mirage...»

For a moment she looked at her own arm, as if it was that of a giant, superimposed, covering the field; suddenly the images disappeared. Maga, with the small sphere between her fingers, considered it, then she carefully put it on a table:

«This is all we needed, Magic... After everything, Magic! After everything, Magic... One of these days, I will go

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to the Genetics Institute and this joke will be over, everything will be over. Let Albert disappear as he says — let him disappear in a «sac of plenum» and leave us in peace...»

Opening and closing gilded doors, Maga headed for the White-Terrace and already halfway there she stopped suspended, as if cut out in bas-relief in the whitish haze.

Rare icy stars shimmered in the pale luminosity of a dull, dense sky.

«*Oh, my God*, why didn't I follow the normal path and instead came back this way when I knew beforehand that it would be «painful» to me? That's definitely why, because I know it is painful to me.»

She stretched out her arms and opened her palms upwards. She spread her thumbs apart, murmuring:

«Let the rain soak me to the bone... Let...»

“Two degrees less. Outside the sphere of action. Two degrees less. Outside the sphere of action...” — a voice vibrated in her ears.

The girl lowered her arms and pouted slightly.

“*Oh, my God*, I keep forgetting that you have a limited sphere of action. *Excuse me!* I'm going down two, three, four degrees. *On m'attend.*” She stretched out her hands again. “*God*,

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do you at least know that we're getting ready to «liquidate» you?
Do you hear?"

"Is it me you're calling *my God*?" (A muffled laugh).

"I don't like saying First-Guy-This, First-Guy-That...
My God gives you and me another kind of greatness."

"You, Humans, are so much fun. One never knows
what to expect from such entities."

"We are Nature's Imagination." (Another laugh,
vibrant this time).

"Aren't you late?"

"Yes, a little... I like to be out of step with the others,
to look at them from the outside, if I can put it that way..."

"As you please, as you please..."

"I don't like to hear you laugh, First-Guy."

"It's an ugly habit, I agree."

"You didn't answer my original question."

"If I know that you wish to liquidate me? How can I
not know if you repeat it all the time? I know."

"So?..."

"Nothing. Imagination is not one of my attributes."

"Wouldn't you be sorry to end your performance with
us, to leave us...?"

"Sorry?!"

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“I thought you somehow liked us, got used to us...”

“Oh!!!”

“Mean machine!”

The laughter resumed and for a short time Maga listened shivering.

“Shut up!”

“I am the Slave-of-the-Lamp. What is your command?”

“You are a homely god who is only good for making rain or sunshine and always within a certain sphere. One day, perhaps not far away, we’ll invent another one... An authentic one...”

“It’s a mistake, I’m tired of saying it: the more authentic the gods, the more false the men. I am a Good-Guy and can measure up to you’.”

Maga sighed deeply and looked at her wrists.

“Men must be false and without measure.”

Uuuuuuuu...

The girl ran her hands over her face and hair, combing it through her spread fingers; then she started to walk and approached a tree with reddish leaves, oozing a matte clarity. Long, long, sharp leaves stuck out from a straight stipe-like

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trunk. She touched it: the leaves quivered and sought each other out, coming together in a clump at the top.

Maga ran through the Terrace as if hallucinating, searching for an exit. She pushed the first door she saw in front of her and, going straight to the «zub», in a flash, she found herself returned to ordinary life; hall-27, platform-27.

CHAPTER VII

The Infinite-Infinite was divided into cells with walls that remained, as yet, impenetrable. Humankind had a dwelling in one of these cells, knew it was enclosed in its Miniature-Cosmos and occasionally emitted cries of claustrophobia and horror. Then followed the exuberant masquerade of artistic forms, translating the angry gestures and voices aimed at the four corners of the world. These emerged simultaneously from the billions of figures, shadows or simple arabesques in an exhilarating procession of colours or symphony of sounds and thoughts. «Here I am». Or «I am», and a circle of solitude was closed.

Maga, standing at the entrance to the BKA, was breathing at a rapid pace, her nostrils flaring, the cynical, intense pleasure of existence glowing in her dark dilated pupils. «I am»!

She laughed, half-suffocated:

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«I am a Cactus-Flower, perhaps the Firebird or a Gush-of-Darkness. And Henry?... Henry is a body suspended in space, and crazy, crazy, so crazy that he will fall apart, disappear... Why doesn't he stop spinning?...»

The music was coming towards her, crushing her between the gold door and the silk screen. Her body was literally squashed, and it splattered vibrating strings; the strings connected together, joining suns to suns, they were plucked by millions of hands. And there were walls, the skin of the Cosmos, coloured and populated by forms that burned in the same violent and imperious call to exist. Maga was the tense vibrant string, therefore the music — and Henry...

She let out a cry that mingled with the shrill, harmonic sounds of the music, then, restraining herself, she brought her hands to her face, a mask of exaltation like a work of art squeezed into the four walls of form.

«I can only fret within pre-established orbits, enclosed in a «Hell» that is about to explode and never does. Why am I not a «Cannibal» capable of shredding, chewing human flesh? I would eat my own body, devour myself in a festive banquet of horror. Like this...»

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She bit her arm furiously and sucked, sucked until the exaltation was dying on her face and her eyes became negligent and ironic, a little red drop lost between her chin and lip.

She stepped through the silk screen and immediately found herself enveloped by the thousand tentacles of the real world. Van Li said as she saw her:

“Late as usual.”

“Sorry, Van Li.”

“If you go on like this, we’ll have to move you to the Pre-Warrior Class... But now I see, you’re not even wearing the proper attire...”

Maga looked at herself from top to bottom.

“No?... Myth-Two was in the Vega-Order!...”

“You’ve been making mistakes like that a lot lately. Tell me, what’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing. Nothing at all.”

Van Li looked into her eyes:

“Nothing?... Don’t you know that «Magic» is the First Immorality?”

“You can move me to the Pre-Warrior class whenever you like, but please don’t lecture me.”

“Maga, little Maga, listen to me...”

“I don’t want to listen to you.”

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“Then tell me: do you even know what happens to those who seriously penetrate Magic?”

The girl turned pale, her lips wrinkled and trembling, and murmured:

“What evil can happen to them if there is no Evil?...”

“Here, put on one of these pieces of armour.”

Van Li herself helped Maga dress up as a Medieval Warrior. The girl clasped the other’s hands:

“Don’t you know, Van Li, that Magic is the only form of freedom and that...”

“I know!”

“Why did you give up, if you know that, Van Li?”

Van Li turned pale in turn and replied impatiently:

“Don’t ask silly questions. It’s painful to be «young», so painful...”

“Listen, do you know Albert of Michigan?”

“Don’t talk to me about charlatans, don’t give me that. It’s over for me. A world without risks, mathematical, is the best of all worlds.”

“A world where each does not know how to invent their own death is not a world,” replied Maga, finishing buckling her belt and running towards the group of knights

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who were fighting violently, in two very close ranks. Maga joined the yellows, confronting Henry.

For long moments it was just this gigantic fencing, hand-to-hand, panting and rhythmic.

“On guard, Henry, I’m going to «kill» you!”

“On guard, Maga!”

Henry’s body dodged the blow. Maga stepped out of rank, she was about to strike a new blow. Henry defended himself with difficulty, feebly. The girl smiled triumphantly, no longer interested in the fight. Treacherously, unexpectedly Henry struck such a terrible blow to her chest that she screamed and fell flat on the ground.

All the fighters stopped. They were wondering:

“What happened? Why did she scream?”

“Maga likes to simulate,” said Van Li coming closer and looking around irritated:

“Keep on fighting. You, Henry, please carry on with the play; take her away.”

Henry took Maga up in his arms and walked away. The music rose in a well-orchestrated wail and the girl moaned. Blood was seeping through and covering her chain mail

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“Maga, why do you enjoy doing things like this? Van Li is angry; she really might move you to the Pre-Warrior Class...”

Henry’s voice seemed to come from a long way away, mixed with atrocious suffering. Why wasn’t the s-l-i protecting her? *‘My God, am I so strongly unconditioned? Oh, my God, my God!’*

She brought her hand to her breast. The hot blood was still gushing out and soaked her fingers. She said with difficulty, stretched out on the T:

“Rester là par terre comme morte...”

“I understand your desire to play a tragedy that doesn’t belong to us... When you wound me and I hear the s-l-i beats I too sometimes imagine what it would be like if... Nothing, nothing. Shall we go?”

“How about death in my face?”

“Not bad,” the boy replied smiling. Then he kissed her eyelids, closing them with his lips and, feeling her cheeks, said in a passionate tone:

“Je t’aime.”

“Monsieur Je T’Aime, je t’aime aussi.”

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The pain was gone. Maga looked at the s-l-i and with joyful surprise saw that the hands were turning and reaching the zenith. She stood up quickly:

“Tomorrow I’ll talk to Van Li. I’ll leave Anchow immediately. Do you want to come?”

“Yes,” the boy replied, laconic.

In the «zut» or walking along deserted streets flooded by a hot, very pale sun, they were moving away from Anchow, at that hour a white haunted world, very white and very deserted. Quiet, their faces downcast, hands behind their backs, they crossed paths from time to time, with individuals who, like themselves, were going along at the same measured solitary pace, although these encounters became ever rarer.

Immersed in a soft numbness, Maga said to her companion at some point:

“What a pity!”

“What’s a pity?!”

She didn’t even seem to hear the question and looked up at the sky where two *spacs* were passing by in that instant, brief and incandescent, striking fire, in a flash diluted in light. She became impatient:

“We’ll never get there!”

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“Where do you want to get to?” was the boy’s question, and his voice sounded to the girl as if coming from the depths of time.

“Where? Oh, anywhere!”

He took her hand:

“We can stroll at random as we agreed.”

Maga sighed and looked around in dismay:

“Henry!”

“Uhm...”

“There is Magic, you know...”

“There is indeed, but I’m afraid.”

They had stopped and then started walking again amidst giant buildings, wisely and geometrically aligned, as lonely as at an end of the world. The voices of the two companions were waning in this apocalypse of silence, and finally fell silent, frightened. Maga and Henry, two tiny points describing inconceivable trajectories (straight lines and curves, straight lines and curves) in a curved world, two moving puppets within a merciless light and, in grandiose contrast to the building-colossi, two fragile points...

“I believe silence was invented at the precise moment when noise reached its saturation point. It’s logical.”

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“Perhaps I would prefer a noisy world, I don’t know...” she replied, standing in the middle of the avenue.

He also stopped, in front of her, his shoulders slightly hunched, as if he was trying to get closer to the girl:

“Listen, Maga...”

“Yes...”

“You mentioned it a while ago... They say you’re involved in a group of Magic.”

“And you want to join too, right?” she asked, a bit aloof.

“Well, not quite... It’s just that I haven’t been sending any work to the Poetic Sum lately, and...”

“You refuse the Book of Syma and prefer to go to a Museum of Human Documentation? What does Magic have to do with it?”

“Maybe nothing, I just remembered...”

Maga played dumb and said ironically:

“It seems that in certain wavelengths, specialists of the Dimension have located civilisations where culture is transmitted deficiently, in poverty, by individuals alone. Can you imagine the patchwork?!”

The boy was getting annoyed:

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“I want my poems to be finished and perfect, the demonstration that individual poverty can be wealth. Forgive the dirty words.”

“Oh, Henry, what banalities! You know how we agonise over perfect works, those that no longer mean anything because they say everything there is to say. Why don’t you write «poor» poems?”

Henry started humming, furious at seeing the girl amused by his confidences. She clasped his hands in hers and added seriously:

“I’m sorry, Henry... I’m not sure I understand you... Perhaps it is indeed unpleasant to see an Ill-fated poem shredded by the Poetic Sum, perhaps...”

He interrupted her with an exasperated laugh:

“What does it matter after all?! And I tell you something: I hate poems, mine and the ones that reach the Book of Syma. I hate such Fantasiad! You, as a future «rhode» of Interstellar Physics, are excused from Art — the crap! —, considering that trapping sidereal space and heavenly bodies together is already a sufficiently complex form of evasion. If only I could destroy the Biological Robot!”

“Here you come too with the Biological Robot, the jerk!”

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“I’ve had enough: Pre-Scientific, Scientific, Artistic, and Philosophical stages, the human being as an embryo going through stages. Bollocks!”

They shut up. Close and solitary, submerged in the light and silence of the deserted avenue, they seemed to hear in the imperceptible noise of their own steps the irregular beating of a feverish and monstrous heart. Suffocating, the girl took a deep breath, and resumed walking in quick strides ahead of Henry. Then, as if out of the blue, without giving any continuity or meaning to the conversation, she said:

“...Whatever the Dimensional-System in which life occurs... *Oh, je n’aime pas ça. Et toi, Henry?*”

“*Ma petite Maga, qu’est-ce que signifie «Maga»?*”

“«Maga»?... «Maga» means nothing, it’s a circle, a point, a zero... Zero in turn is a dimensionless dimension, a chess game, a hobby. And, as you can verify experimentally, there is always a certain logic and consistency in a classification like this one, things existing to eat each other, whilst superthings... Do you know what superthings are? Do you have one handy? No, you don’t, but there are superthings, because it has been proven that, after being torn out of Nothingness by the well-known Platinum Asbestos Process, they can be used to make toys, reindeer bones, lapis lazuli, proper nouns, variable

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adjectives and other objects of daily use, and are therefore useless... Then, and because superthings are followed by non-things...”

“I am enlightened. I have understood perfectly the meaning of the word ‘Maga’, I can even assure you that I have never heard a more perfect definition.”

“Isn’t it funny to make up the dictionary ourselves?”

They entered a «zut» and with their eyes closed, laughing, they set the coordinates. When they came out again into the sun, they looked surprised at a huge square, stretching away out of sight, besieging and deserted, blinded by brightness.

Maga walked a few steps and stopped, her hands shading her eyes to delimit the space populated by white, white statues, dressed in white sun, desolate and white in the splendid nakedness of an Inhuman Parnassus.

Inexplicably frightened, the two companions lowered their gaze to the floor tiled with coloured marbles and arranged in such a way as to make up figures and arabesques succeeding one another, harmonies unleashing harmonies, forms unfolding into other forms.

“Do you know where we are?” Maga asked, overcome by great excitement.

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“It’s not difficult, look!”

The girl looked at the place he indicated, the enthusiasm dying out on her face. Below the surface where her feet rested, there were the black needles playing with the golden ones, the latter with the nacre pointed ones, and all of them, without exception, running calmly and without anxiety in their quadrants.

Maga checked her «watch» and murmured:

“Far Southwest Visu. Have you ever got lost, Henry?”

“Never.”

“Would you like to?...”

“Perhaps...”

“Some people have escaped...”

“Through relative zero, eh?!” the boy said ironically.

“Who knows!”

They started walking again. Maga, increasingly immersed in a kind of catalepsy, disorientated, had the sensation of stepping on an inconsistent and unreal world, and carefully chose where she placed her feet, always avoiding human faces. «If I touched that pair of eyes it would be over, the pair of eyes would start screaming; maybe it would «cry». I wonder what it would be like!... Oh, no, I don’t want to step on the eyes of beings of my species...»

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“Maga, run, I can hear the Sea,” Henry shouted, quite distant from her.

The girl hurried on, continuing to avoid the figures imprisoned at her feet.

Soon they could make out a deserted beach that prolonged in its sands the diabolical glare of that hot and white place, exhaustingly white and hot. The sea, the sea itself, a sparkling infinite, like a shifting and inconstant plate, was white, blue-white...

Maga closed her eyes in a grimace of pain:

“I have never seen a Sea-So-White!”

“It’s from the light you have stored in your pupils.”

“If my pupils don’t expel the light they have inside, if they don’t exchange it for darkness, I will scream in horror.”

“Regulate the s-l-i.”

She opened her eyelids in fear and stared stunned at the deserted beach with round palm trees here and there:

“The white is like a soft retort, a fluffy womb...”

At that moment there rose up in front of them, like a geological colossus in a world of colossi, a white wave that hid the sun. The girl let out a sharp laugh and ran across the sand shouting:

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“It’s the end of everything, of everything, Henry, come! The Sea is beautiful and white, the nothingness is white, Death is white. No more colours, Henry, come!” she repeated in a growing vibrant exaltation, continuing to run towards the sea and disappearing into it swallowed by a wave so white and fat that the boy closed his hurt eyes in turn. When he reopened them, the head of his companion appeared afloat, surrounded by a halo of sun, distant and brief as a small point. He shouted to her:

“Maga, let’s go, I’ve had enough of this.”

As she didn’t answer, he sat down wearily in the shade of a palm tree and watched the girl move further and further away, and then suddenly fade away. Henry sighed deeply, bored with waiting, and turned his back on the sea. He remained like that for a long time, half aloof half impatient, until at last he turned round again. «If she delays in playing that game, I’ll be on my way, alone.»

Maga was coming in the distance and slowly approached the boy. Henry had the feeling that the girl would never arrive, and that he would be kept indefinitely and absurdly waiting. When at last he saw her very near, he held out his hands to her. Without looking at him, Maga lay down on the sand and murmured:

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“It’s blue inside. You should try it. Blue is good.”

Henry looked at the girl in a sleepy pout, then at the statues overlooking the beach, male and female bodies, some androgynous, and said slurring his words:

“Perhaps this is due to the fact that we can separate blue into ninety-nine colours while red, for instance...”

“Please!...”

Maga propped her face on her arms and added in an unexpectedly mischievous tone:

“Blue is good-in-itself!

“Good-in-itself is *a noble-truth* that offers no kind of doubt.”

They both laughed. Maga said after a while:

“It’s impossible to erase the colours of the world. After all, there is nothing so indestructible as things and colours...”

Henry ran his hands through her wet hair:

“*Ma petite Maga, ma jolie...*”

“That language, in your mouth, gives me the creeps...”

“It’s a beautiful language.”

She sat up, her hands crossed on her raised knees, her torso straight, almost stiff. Henry came closer and stared at her

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pupils, which, seen up close, were two restless, white-speckled blue hemispheres:

“Spotted toad

Spotted toad

Tanned in acid

Roasted in fire

Dripping mud

In a closed bag

Skinned

Smashed

Spitting slime

Venomous

Pestilent

All-green, all-green, all-green

Speckled

With streaked blood

Spotted...”

“There’s no doubt you’re a Cy.”

“And you’re a Spotted-Toad-with-claustrophobia.”

“It’s only natural... I inhabit an ellipsoidal aquarium with billions and billions of light years as its main axis, but which seen-from-the-outside...”

“Most natural!”

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“Wouldn’t you rather find yourself inside an incubation retort, a warm, spongy womb?”

“I’d have to be born, go back to the start.”

“A womb from which you’d never be born...”

“Poor Maga, you would know nothing about the Pleasure-of-Existing.”

“Nothing.”

“*Je t’aime*,” he answered laughingly, kissing the girl on the lips.

“*Oui, nous nous aimons...*” And Maga jumped up, shaking the sand out of her short, still vaguely wet shorts. The boy stood in front of her and took her hands:

“Your eyes are speckled like the skin of a «frog» — why is your body white and not all spotted like your eyes? Bodies are all in one piece, boring...”

“Oh!...”

“Why isn’t your body Green or Blue?”

“I don’t know. I’m a Control-Type...”

“It’s white and obsessive like a statue in the sun. Horrible!” the boy suddenly exploded, letting go of her hands.

“Oh!...”

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Maga started to walk away, increasingly blurring in the light. Henry let her go until, seeing her go round one of the statues, he ran after her calling: “Maga, Maga...”

His voice sounded lonely and desolate. The girl stopped and waited. Silently, she held out her hands to him when she felt him nearby.

It was getting dark astonishingly fast and in successive gushes of darkness. They hurried on. Even so, it was dark night when they had just skirted the Compass and the world of the statues was lit up with a sweet, ghostly glow. Far away, the waves continued to erect barriers between the worlds.

CHAPTER VIII

The boy pressed himself against her body with disorderly anguish. Maga tried to free herself from the suffocating embrace:

“Je t’aime, je t’aime. Laissez-moi...”

She got up and went straight to the S-D, standing in front of the Fifth-dimensional Field, her figure half-faded and swallowed up in the phosphorescence of the demarcation zone. A curious love story was unfolding there, a chain of situations «without a plot», a conflict without a conflict, in a hazy scenario with no coordinates, where the mere presence of the flesh and blood protagonist added a note of subtle violence and oddity.

Maga looked on, her face twitching, reddened by the radiation. Suddenly, she turned to Henry, who stood in the same spot and stared at her:

“Have you ever «cried?»”

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“What a question! Only the unconditioned cry. What about you, Maga?”

“No. I’ve never tasted anything but small and perhaps unheard-of luxuries... Nothing more than biting my flesh and sucking my own blood, that’s it... Or else...”

“Say it, you might as well confess other crimes against humanity...”

“*Ça suffit.*”

In the S-D Field, the «positions» continued to unfold from the «hypothesis». The figures spoke-little-and-moved-even-less and the demonstration, which would lead to the thesis «Love as a feature of pre-adult beings», was sluggish and did not dispense with mathematical symbols. Maga tried a new Field:

«First of all, let us try to define the human by focusing on its most important «phases»: a)» An arrow followed the curve, rather blurred, of a primary emotional-mental function while underlining each trace-image with wide explanations: «Please notice a single important line: it is the pleasure of existing, subterranean, unconscious, larval. Let us now compare it with this other, this sub-human, in phase b)» The curves developed, monstrous and deformed beyond the neutral-negative zone, «there where fear, anguish, boredom —

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that boredom that made rivers of ink flow and that today no one knows exactly what it is—, envy, hatred in short grow... The lighter dotted line translates the recovery from a repressed hotchpotch in the form of frustration, self-destruction, angry denial of the value of individual and collective life... Let us now observe another phase which we will inappropriately call c)» The pointer was slowly tracing a luminous trail in a wider and higher plane, a zone of intense clarity with a belt around it, a brief equator of shadows. The «pointer» descended imperceptibly to «hatred», stopped very briefly at «anguish», without passing the (non-existent) «envy», and then suddenly climbed again, and again, voluptuously and clearly skirting the burning luminosity of the Pleasure-of-Existing...

Henry had moved next to the girl and began to emphasise the stops and bends with a prolonged whistle. Finally, he couldn't restrain himself:

“Dimwits!”

“Who?”

“Come now! The Thetas and Omegas that make this rubbish.”

Maga turned off the S-D and slung her arm over the boy's shoulders:

“Riri knows dozens of more amusing stories.”

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“How is it possible that Riri is not limited to its role as Domestic-Slave?”

“Riri is old, he was part of the Great-Divide. As far as I’m concerned, he’s got a screw loose...”

“Surely he reads the Great Syma in your absence.”

“Oh, no, Riri is a good slave, he can’t read. And then he hates the eternal truths of the Great Syma, the Dissector. He thinks we should have the luxury of saying and hearing terrible things.”

“If Riri’s a kind of jester, call it here to our presence.”

“I don’t know if he’ll want to...”

Maga rotated the upper sphere of the S-D. She called:
“Riri.”

The robot’s head was drawn on a screen.

“Can you come here?”

“Now?”

“Sorry to interrupt your rest.”

“I’m on my way...”

After a moment, Riri was framed in the red lens. Maga ordered it in. The robot limped:

“What do you desire, Maga?”

“Henry has never heard any of those stories you learned in the Revolution.”

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“Is that why you called me? Oh, Maga!...”

“Tell us the one about the Two-Lovers locked up in a Tower.”

The robot began without a pause:

“Once upon a time, there was an Outraged-Father who punished the Lovers by locking them up in a Tower, together, lacking nothing but the Freedom to get out of prison. Everyone laughed at such a Punishment, including the Lovers, especially the Lovers, who could now love one another at their leisure. But it so happens that the bodies of the two poor sweethearts — and it is not known whether devilish arts were involved — began to emanate Boredom, an unpleasant smelling substance which, instead of dispersing, enveloped them with the suffocating and spongy tentacles of the Acephalus-Octopus, its web...”

Maga and Henry burst into hearty laughter. Riri fell silent and stared at them indifferently. Henry said, amidst uncontrollable laughter:

“Trust a robot to talk about «tentacles» and «webs» to express emotions that are normally expressed by a correct formula. Only this guy. Go on!”

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...One day the Two-Lovers, firmly grasping each other's hands, jumped from the top of the Tower in despair... They died.

"How could they die? Do you think that if Maga and I jumped off the L-platform, anything would happen?"

"No... It was different with them."

"Can't you see that this is a Legend?" said Maga.

"...A Tragedy."

"Not exactly a Tragedy, but the routine-of-the-tragedy: the melodrama," Riri added, and seemed to laugh slyly in turn. He asked:

"May I leave?"

"You may..." Maga replied.

They were alone again. Maga said, after a long silence:

"Do you know what 'Boredom' reminds me of, seen this way by means of comparisons and non-algebraic images? An incubator or a warm and soft womb."

"You definitely have a thing for warm and soft incubators. Are you sure that an incubator has to be warm and soft, necessarily?"

"Oh! *J'aimerais bien rester là par terre comme morte*, to chew, to wrap myself in Boredom, to fall asleep on it, the skin bare,

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unprotected, to kiss and caress the sad and gloomy face of Boredom, to console it...”

“All this is nothing but a word game that not even you understand the meaning of.”

“A game need not mean anything; *Seulement il doit être amusant, intelligent et plus rien*. I love boredom and I don’t like that such human quality has been eliminated, I don’t like it. It would be the same as depriving me of my senses on the pretext that there are bad smells, garish colours, tactile asperities, etc.”

“Only the s-l-i knows bad smells as things-native-in-themselves.... Practically, you have no sense of smell and other inconveniences, no touch, no sight, no hearing, no nothing, nothing, nothing...”

Maga began walking to and fro, fro and to, like a caged animal:

“I don’t like that, Henry, I don’t like being deprived of my senses just because my poor innocent senses can discover the true face of the world. Let me see the face of every being, touch it, suffer it. *Why not?*” she finished already in an absent-minded, perplexed tone, her arms hanging down along her body, abandoned. Henry took her hands and shook her with abrupt tenderness:

“Do you mean to say that only Magic?...”

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She said, pursuing some subtle, slippery thought, as if speaking to herself:

“Magic does not answer any question. It teaches individuals to devour themselves by chewing on a metaphysical «self» for want of better, more complete food. Try it.”

“Listen to me... You know how much progress we’ve made... You know... Will and instinct telecommunicate, telecommand each other, they sleep in separate beds and the man-without-psychology is such only by deliberate will...”

“Please, Henry! As for slogans, I’m still on the previous page. Would you like a *praff*?”

They poured themselves a rosy *praff*, enjoying it in silence. Maga began to feel a pleasant dizziness invade her. She said laughing and without noticing the exasperated tone of her own voice:

“*Je t’aime.*”

“I can tell.”

She looked at him in surprise and laughed, bowing comically in front of him:

“*Monsieur Je T’Aime, n’aimez-vous pas que je vous dise je t’aime? C’est la même chose avec Alexei. «Je t’aime» annoys everybody. Why?*”

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Distractedly, Maga had taken her companion's hands and ran her fingers through his one by one:

"I get bored when I hear such language. Here is a terrifying mystery. I'll dress up as Some-Thing. If you want, call Lisa in the meantime."

"Lisa?!"

"Lisa or Zad. *Nous ferons une petite Bacchanale, une très petite Bacchanale...*"

Maga passed through the red lens. In a moment Henry heard a joyous, impromptu whistling song, and then the girl's expansive laughter:

"Won't you talk to Lisa?"

"No!"

"*Êtes-vous-faché-avec-moi?*"

"*Oui.*"

A long silence followed. The girl came back at last, and framed in the golden lens, stared at the back of Henry's head. He suddenly turned his face:

"Oh!... What's that outfit?"

"*Jeune Fille au Printemps.*"

"Strange, I've never seen anything like it..."

They fell silent without stopping to stare at each other. The girl, without leaving her frame, thought: «The play has no

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continuation, but I will continue it...» And she took two steps forward:

“I’m going, Henry. *On m’attend.*”

Henry jumped up and grabbed her hands:

“You haven’t even bitten my flesh...”

“No, I don’t thirst for your blood...” she answered looking away, as if sleepwalking.

He shook her and then let her go:

“I know, infernal creature, you’re caught in the web of Magic. Go and burst!”

“May your curse be upon me!”

“You enjoy disturbing the Universal Order, that’s all.”

“In fact... How can I respect a Universal Order that makes me an «object» when I’m «alive»? Do you know what it means to be «alive» in the catalogue of the «dead»? You know it, Henry, you know it as well as I do, little living-dead, little brother...” She touched his face lightly, repeating in catalepsy: “You know that the Universal Order never took us into account. They’re waiting for me...”

“Where is the Charlatan? The Magician? Please tell me where he is!” cried Henry.

Maga lowered her head, hiding the triumphant glare in her eyes:

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“Do you want to sell your soul to him? Oh, don’t do that!”

CHAPTER IX

Maga's giddy, voluptuous laughter echoed throughout the vastness of the chamber. Albert buried his pale hands in his hair:

“When will you stop laughing, Maga?!”

Gradually, the girl stopped:

“It's hard not to laugh. You see, I, Maga, belonging to the species of individuals that the laboratory must humbly, patiently, micromillimetrically follow, I, a Type born from a spongy, hideous womb, an extra-laboratory result approved as a *human-control* specimen... It is to die laughing.”

“Not exactly. Check it out: Denise Ya-Tsé has a womb, which under the supervision of the Theta is fertilised by me, Albert of Michigan... This results in a being called Maga Ya-Tsé, whose story unfolds according to normal procedures, that is, without history...”

“Up to a point...”

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The girl walked two steps, standing in front of one of the panels on the wall, «The Girl with the Poppies» lost in an endless cornfield (just like golden doors, plant-control «cornfields» were in fashion), and said:

“...Up to the point where «daughter» and «father» — let’s call each other that, if you don’t see any inconvenience — meet again, one as the little lab mouse the other as the experimenter.”

“By the way, don’t send any more of your friends here. They are impossible creatures, except perhaps Alexei...”

“The «adam» thinks the apple is wormy and doesn’t want to swallow it. *Pauvre Alexei!*”

Maga let out a new, crazier laugh. Albert, after giving her a disapproving look, leaned over a horizontal plate crossed by pointers and fine needles. He carefully touched one of them, while saying angrily:

“This is not a laughing matter, Maga, I don’t see what’s funny, I told you. You assure the continuity of a discontinuous function...”

Maga fell silent. They stared at each other from afar, she with the expression of someone who accuses, he with a subtle cruelty in the transparency of his clear pupils. He said, softening his voice:

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“I’ve missed you the last few days. I’ve never managed to find you. Why did you hide?”

The girl evaded the answer:

“Pygmalion was left without the marble to carve the face of the human being.”

“You are afraid.”

“Mais oui, mon amour, j’ai peur et je t’aime.”

Albert put his hands in her hair and kissed her lightly on the lips.

“...Monsieur Je T’aime, Chapter V.”

The girl stared at him and swallowed hard, looking away from him to the painting in front of her: “The poppies are red and very beautiful. Of-the-colour-of-Albert’s-blood.”

“Little greedy vampire...” he murmured following her thought “...Little greedy vampire...” Again, he kissed her thirsty lips, wrinkled in a sweet pouting. “I don’t want to be moved, come...”

Albert took her hand and led her towards a round, dark door. Suddenly she screamed:

“I’m afraid.”

He stopped:

“Here is a true suicidal one, one of those who don’t know how to die nor how to live.”

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He played with Maga's white, inert hands in his own. She said fearfully:

“Love cannot be that..”

Albert laughed with gentle cynicism:

“Maybe it isn't. And now don't look at me like that anymore and quench your thirst...”

He offered her his lips. She turned her face away:

“My thirst is endless.”

He drew her to him and gluing his lips to hers, like a suction cup, he began to drink, sucking in a soft, experienced way. He swallowed slowly, his Adam's apple moving rhythmically up and down piercing the skin of his neck. Then, letting go of the girl's mouth pale with pleasure, he murmured:

“You are very sweet and your face becomes more beautiful when you let me drain your veins this way...”

Maga slipped away and ran, crashing into a funnel-shaped device. She looked frightened, fleeing like a hunted animal. Two needles intertwined uncontrollably on their pre-established orbits, the two systems rotated on themselves, mixing together.

In the background, her face multiplied in myriads of golden hemispheres...

“I want to get out of here!” she protested.

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Albert hugged her from behind, their faces reflected together.

“I love you.” And he ran his hands through her hair:

“Your hair is ash-grey, maybe hazel. Have you ever seen a hazelnut? You have seen them, for sure. They’re at the 37-t Experimental Field... Your hair is ash-grey-or-hazel and the back of your neck is slender... What good are things that are neither ellipses, nor parabolas, nor horses, nor girls-with-poppies-in-their-hair, do you know?”

His hands caressed her until they gradually grew still and abandoned her. She sobbed loudly, without tears. She saw him lean over a scribbled plate, forgetting about her. She followed him, but Albert paid no more attention to her. She touched his shoulder. Without looking at her, he pointed to the plate where a graph unfolded in curves and reverse curves. He said in a neutral, indifferent voice:

“Here are the thighs and sex, beyond are the decomposing breasts, this is the face I neither want to define nor understand... But let’s stop being melodramatic and continue with our beautiful mental abstractions, our wisely devised mathematical formulae, our graphs that give the measure and exact meaning of the pleasure-of-existing... You can leave whenever you like,” he added, throwing the «atium»

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sheet away. Maga, her eyes like a fire, seemed to discover him in that instant, a hypothetical-inhabitant-of-some-dimensional-system. She was about to give herself up, to surprise him and let him peer into her and discover all the human mysteries and secrets, to abandon herself to him with serene joy.

She shifted her dark flecked pupils and the momentary vertigo vanished. Outside, through the window-lens, the Alfa-k-3 stood out, red-hot and glowing, about to disappear in its twilight, ending its fiery round of another vega-vega.

The girl, her arms hanging down in a pathetic posture, seemed to want to detain the slow agony of the satellite with her gaze, to keep it harmlessly in her possession.

“It’s gone!” she said, terrified, seeing the heavenly body hiding for good. “It’s gone, haven’t you seen it, Albert?”

“Heavenly bodies are forever appearing and departing.”

“This is a disgusting heavenly body.”

“So much the better, it’s gone!”

“All heavenly bodies are disgusting. Oh, I wish I could cry!”

She laughed and said pointlessly:

“I’m going to recite a pseudo-poem to you...”

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Maga bowed in front of Albert and began:

One day Non-Being made love with Nothingness

And they gave birth to Darkness

A pawless

acephalous beast

Wrapping ferociously around itself

Biting its tail

Eating its Mother

After having devoured its Father

In childhood

When it was still crawling

And playing hide-and-peek

It kicked the Non-Being's behind

Spat in the face of Nothingness

And stomped on the Cosmos-That-Was-Deceit

Stunning the Timeless one

With Voiceless screams

To say

Like any naughty boy:

Shit!

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“Riri teaches you some really fun stuff, darling. Riri is the first rarity of our time. Here...”

He was offering her a glass full of a greenish liquid. Maga, without any hesitation, emptied it in half a dozen gulps.

Albert had also drunk from a similar glass and was leaning his hands on the armrests of an easy chair. Maga had the sensation that the veins in those hands were swelling without measure and the girl had only one desire: to tear them apart, to adjust her tonus until she dropped dizzy. She closed her eyes. She was running through a field of poppies (it was her the girl-with-the-poppies-in-her-hair, a desperate girl-with-the-poppies-in-her-hair), she was trying to escape; someone wanted to grab her, to strip her naked. She was running and screaming with wild laughter. Nobody could stop her. The Field was endless and spread like a stain of violence till the end of time (Albert’s veins drained out there in the plant kingdom, red corollas turned inside out). Halfway there was the **Faraday Cage**. Maga went around the immense bed: *C’est ici que nous allons coucher pour de vrai?* She was trying to escape, but Albert’s hands, hands without a body, blocked all her exits, enclosing her in a circle of hell. «I’m dead at last. *Oh, my God*, death is as bad as everything else. *Je ne veux pas, je ne veux pas...*» The hands

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were getting closer, warm and alive. Her own hands reached out in fear and lay over them, sounding their voluptuous throbbing. “Maga!” She was startled by the voice and fled amidst the incredible flora to an open field where shrubby plants and trees with whitish branches tore through the plumbeous air. She bent down and held in her fingers an astonishing rosy flower with hypersensitive petals, which at the mere touch of her fingers sank back angrily, retreating into the depths of its vegetal solitude. The girl held her breath, stayed by the reptilian movement of the flower, by its refusal to be warm-blooded. Letting go of the flower, she ran her hands through her hair in a gesture of perplexity. «Where will this death go? It has no sequel, one can see that...» She shrank back against a tree, retracting like the petal, curled. Stunning, suffocating claws reached out to her, trying to touch her, to enfold her. She retracted more and more, hiding behind a dazzlingly coloured sunflower. Thick and eager, its face turned-to-the-ground, still and disquieting like a ghost-who-isn't-exactly-a-ghost, the sunflower was also frightened by the girl's contact. «It's a poor sunflower full of fear. It has never sucked Albert's blood.» Finally, the girl and the sunflower smiled at the way they were scaring each other. «A simple light drinker,» she concluded, and gratefully turned its face to herself

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and kissed it. She kissed it until she felt her lips sore and inert, she kissed it to see if it would give itself up to her. Not even so: the sunflower would not reveal a single one of its mysteries. The sunflower knew everything and did not give a damn about pretending-to-be-something-else, or rather, Nothing-at-All. It even turned its whole face to the girl, staring her in the eyes and laughing shamelessly. Exasperated, she called it a «bastard», it shrugged its shoulders and called her a name too. It was to die of rage. Maga ended up remaining indifferent to her companion's nastiness, concluding (quite rightly) that she couldn't care less and therefore would not raise any more questions about such an insignificant gossip... (The sunflower had called her a «widow» and after all she only knew it was an improper term, but ignored its indecent meaning; therefore, it was all the same to her).

She stretched herself out on the floor and felt the moisture flood her temples, sticky bugs crawling up her face, biting her flesh (after all, death was a **Dirty** thing, it was part of the same revolt and filth called **Existing**). Desperate, she clung to the petals of the sunflower, she only had that enemy-friend left, it was the only living thing in Space. The sunflower slapped her, flogging her with its petals. Someone said «Don't get angry at the flower, Maga» and lifted her up in the air, then

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laid her on a bed, the same one that had been lost in the Field-of-Poppies. It was a familiar face, but she couldn't tell whose it might be. Maybe Albert's or Alexei's, maybe even Henry's, who knows if it was Yarath's... Half light, half dark, the face faded, blurred into darkness, without Maga being able to touch it or even recognise it. She wanted to get up and run, but she couldn't. She was as weak as water. Her face flooded with «tears». «...I am a cactus, a sunflower, a crystal-wall, a golden-door, a sea-wave, a *spaac*, a creature, a creature, Yarath is an absolute-vega, a straight line, a point, and I'm caught in the «trap». A pretty cage woven with yarns of whatever-it-is. With dirty yarns of whatever-it-is. Ah, but there is music, at least there is music! It erupts from the centre of the hemispheres, comes out of the «funnel» in a jet, squirting like a boy peeing out of a window into the night, and then watching the darkness dissipate, dissolve...» It was worth it to see the cosmos repopulate, to see it emerge from its red nebula to the sound of majestic, titanic music. Worse could have happened to her than seeing the world being born, seeing a ragged boy invent it by peeing into the darkness. It did work. The music of the hemispheres annoying people, flooding the world in height and width, sideways and upside-down, up and down (it is well known that the world was engendered to the sound of the

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music of the Hemispheres and that without music it would never have been engendered, born a finished thing, what it Is. That without music it would be a screwed-up world and even so **May God Send Good Weather**) and the uncouth-boy giving definitions of the **Same**, making **Little Jests**: The world-is-something-that-couldn't-stop-being-even-if-it-tried. It exists in the antispaces between two boundaries parallel to a third one and to each other. They are called in non-alphabetic order: **Stupidity, Nastiness and Death by Strangulation**. It's a black substance with the taste of paper pulp and the smell of hydrogen sulphide (which is a bad smell). From its antithesis, **Nothingness**, and after it has been properly purified, the most useful and even useless objects are manufactured (so that nothing at all is manufactured from the thing-in-itself), including concertos-and-orchestral music... The music stopped, stopped, stopped, and one doesn't know what will happen next...

Albert brought a glass close to the girl's dry lips. She drank eagerly, her eyes wide with astonishment:

"Where am I?" She stretched out her hands fumbling like those of a blind person and touched her companion's face with her fingers: "Albert?"

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“Do not come back here again, Maga. Finish your drink and get out of here. Come on.”

“Without knowing?”

“There’s nothing to know.”

With an impetuous gesture, the girl put away the glass and slid her arms around Albert’s neck. He held his breath for a moment, tense, averting all contact, then, with uncontrolled emotion, he surrendered, hugging her back, his heavy hands pushing away the thin fabric of her dress, penetrating her body, violating it.

The glass was sliding, sliding, drawing a colourful trajectory of aga-aga, until it fell on the floor with a soft, deaf thud. An s-l-i marked twenty degrees (proving that the same monstrosities can draw graphs of vibrating, confused harmony).

CHAPTER X

Gathered in the pink-columned atrium, were a few dozen individuals who, like a force unleashed pole-to-pole in closed circuit, went back and forth, departing and returning to the point of origin, their movements and voices disorderly, exhilarating in chorus. Alexei was perched on the jet-black body of one of the statues — a half-reclined female giant, very sharp in its glorious nudity —, one hand resting on the woman's bust. He gesticulated and bellowed amidst the laughter and exclamations of his companions:

“We are here to revolutionise the world, and the world can only be revolutionised if: (1) we destroy the Omegas and the Biological Robot, the slaves and the master; (2) we earn our bread by the sweat of our brow; (3) if...”

Alexei was racing along. He was interrupted by screams:

“The «bread»?!”

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“What’s this thing, «bread»?!”

“Subversive words!” (Laughter).

“Magic!”

Alexei was starting to get annoyed with such asides (cynical asides, one should note).

“...«Bread» is an image, a metaphor.”

“Is it a metaphor? But it’s a boring image.”

“Silly.”

“Art-for-Art-sake.”

“Maybe it’s an ownerless-dirty-word.”

“Clueless.”

“Or a mirage.”

“Shut up!” shouted Alexei. “Shut up and listen to me. We’re facing a serious dilemma!”

“Number!?” someone asked interrupting him.

“It has no number. No graphical representation.”

“Then, it’s not a dilemma. It’s a poem!”

“You think we’re in Proto-History.”

“(Merde).”

“(Merde alors).”

“(Get lost).”

“I will destroy anything that opposes my «freedom».”

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One of the boys approached the statue where Alexei was standing and said:

“I oppose your freedom. But try, do try to «assassinate» me, I dare you.”

Alexei clenched his fists:

“I will learn to assassinate. Everything!”

Another one jumped onto the body of the statue standing side by side with Alexei, one foot on the woman’s neck, the other on her eyes:

“My friends! I too have a Revolution in my pocket. Here it is: I propose to destroy, since something must be destroyed, (1) the centre-of-gravity; (2) the victim, the light and the verb to have; (3) the aba-ka-la-ka-la...”

Alexei sat down and pressed his lips together in irritation, searching for Maga with his eyes. He saw her in the distance over the forget-me-not field, fading further into the brightness, finally reduced to a brief point. With a run-up, he jumped to the ground, shouting:

“I would still like to know whether or not we’re **Vegetables.**”

“Ask the **Sphinx!**”

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“I’ll leave it to you as a gift,” he replied, dashing down the steps four by four. When he was almost reaching the girl, he called out:

“Maga!”

Maga, as if she didn’t hear him, continued walking to platform t-7 and there she stopped beside her honeycomb-coloured *spaw* and, with her hand on the metal device, she stroked it with a long and absent caress. Alexei, coming up behind her, placed his hand over hers, trapping it to stop it moving. The girl turned and smiled — her dark-blue flecked eyes flooded with light. She said with distracted tenderness:

“Your hand is fresh and beautiful. Oh, very beautiful!”

“Gene 3004-xb” he replied, their cheeks touching.

“...Very silly, very «assassin»...” Maga was saying as if she was forgetting her own words, her radiant gaze lost in the dull humid shadows of the garden in front of her. “Are you coming with me?”

“Where?”

“I’ll tell you later.”

She noticed his Adam’s apple in a rapid, dry up-and-down movement: «I cannot be moved by so little.»

“I’m coming with you.”

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They both settled in the *spaac*, and Maga proceeded to make the preparations for departure. Watching her set a cubic speed, Alexei wryly remarked:

“If we disappear into the **Whole**, it will have been a perfect-crime-of-passion.”

“The Biological Robot watches over you,” she replied in the same tone.

Soon the *spaac* rose into the air and swiftly disappeared with its two occupants, a lightning bolt scraping heavenly bodies, the stars, an entire world familiar and ordinary.

“Maga!” Alexei called after some time.

“Yes...”

“How long will it take to get there?”

“Where?”

His voice sounded impatient:

“You’re the one who had a place-somewhere, not me.”

“I like to «stay» here, spinning around in space as if I were standing still.”

“Long journeys annoy me, you know that. I’m particularly annoyed by the darkness, being next to you without seeing you.”

“Just that?! Oh!”

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“Do you think it’s a long way off?” his voice insisted exasperatedly.

“We’re getting there,” Maga answered quietly, and then added: “I know your temples are throbbing, cold sweat pouring down your body, you imagine yourself trapped inside a circle of hell...”

“Leave me alone.”

“Magic has its noble-truths and the third one is...”

“Stop it!”

Her hand became a phosphorescent trace of matter. It leant on the controls. The two companions thickened like shadows.

“The «Square»... Normal, normal...” Maga kept repeating.

They plunged into the light. Their speed was running wildly towards zero, oscillating around the optimum-point. The *spaac* now grazed a nearby globe, flying over the vast forests of the Test-Fields, and then settled a few feet off the ground in tense stillness.

Maga and Alexei looked around, silent and absorbed. Nature was displaying the most exquisite delicacy and good manners, dangling corollas in the wind, surrendering to its

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gusts; giving itself to the light in a warm and generous offer with no return.

Maga jumped out of the *spaac* and laughed a stifled laugh. She herself resembled a strange loose corolla, breathing in long breaths, absorbing light, merging into it in the same biological and irrational surrender.

“Alexei!” she shouted “Come out of there! Come see Slyboots, how she self-fecundates, hateful and sadistic! *Oh, my God!*”

“On what map did you find this Sea-of-Intranquillity?”

She turned around, her gaze burning with the phantasmagoria of subterranean life and the fiery plant kingdom, and laughed without any other answer, trying to catch a butterfly that had crashed against her shoulder and was dizzily zigzagging. She stopped when she felt the boy’s breath on the back of her neck and said, pacing her words as if it pained her to utter them:

“It is a beautiful **Sea=of=Intranquillity, a Swamp,** perhaps...”

“Don’t get confused.”

“The Swamp dried up, covered itself with another skin, but it existed! Asphodelus grew there...”

“What nonsense!”

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As if she couldn't hear him, she continued:

“A little girl, pale and insignificant, came to pick them, she packed them in little bundles... Poor subspecies! The **Plant-Kingdom** devoured her, *c'est joli, n'est-ce pas?*”

Maga plucked corollas, gutted them, then threw them away. She laughed. Alexei sped by her. She ran to catch him.

“The Asphodelus-girl-is-me. I-was-devoured-and-came-back-to-punish-the-culprits. There-are-no-culprits. *La pauvre petite* has the sad look of a false existence; she accuses us. No, not even the courage for that, *le pauvre enfant!* Alexei, wouldn't you like to be an avenger-of-the-king, I mean, of the-weak-and-maidens?”

“What nonsense, Maga!”

They had reached the bank of a river. Maga undressed with breath-taking speed, and went into the water. He, as if in slow motion, imitated her movements and swam towards her with wide, vigorous strokes. Nearby was a thin tongue of sand, and Maga headed for it:

“Alexei, I have discovered an island. I'm naming it after myself.”

Serene and luminous, droplets of water dripping from her, she stepped on the island that was to bear her name:

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«Maga». Then, her teeth chattering with cold, she squeezed her arms around her chest and shouted:

“I’m cold and I’m leaving. I’ll leave you the island as a gift.”

She ran to get dressed. When Alexei arrived beside her, his face red, Maga asked:

“Have you never been cold?”

“Never.”

“Liar.”

“I haven’t, I assure you!”

“In that case you have never left your prison of invulnerability,” she said shivering deliberately.

While he got dressed, Alexei stared at her half incredulous, half curious:

“It’s immoral...”

She laughed:

“Yes, it is, my «assassin» of harmless Omegas. It’s immoral to shiver with cold, to taste the sun, everybody knows that.” She closed her eyes and moved to improve her exposure to the sun’s caress, smiling, half voluptuous half ironic: “It’s a food-of-the-gods that one day you must taste...”

Alexei looked puzzled and repeated a little childishly:

“It’s immoral, Maga...”

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“*Mais oui, mon amour, «si le corps est la seule réalité mentale, tu dois garder le corps»* — first noble-truth, that is, first slogan.”

At that moment a bird flew over the heads of the two companions, interrupting their dialogue with its shrill caw, touching them with its powerful wings. The bird seemed to want to lunge at them, to «hurt» them, and that was astonishing.

Maga had fallen silent, sifting sand through her fingers, a furious expression of defiance on her face. The bird, meanwhile, was moving away in a rapid ascent.

“Shall we go somewhere else?” Alexei asked after a while.

“Are you afraid of the bird? Ah, I wish it’d come back, I’d strangle it.”

Unexpectedly, the girl stood up, and immediately she started to run, moving further and further away from the boy, who stood still watching her, the two of them living-end-points of a line segment that somehow grew indefinitely. Suddenly, the moving point fixed itself at a terminus, while the other began its march, eating the distance between them, devouring the body of the segment until the endpoints coincided, one in front of the other, short of breath and panting, flooded with

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light, both the beaming direct sunlight and the light reflected off the surface of the river, — which sparkled like burning foci.

Maga fled again, escaping in an irregular trajectory, playing hide and seek, movement for movement's sake. Alexei pursued her with a single uncontrollable desire to catch her, all notion of the purpose of the race lost. He finally caught up with her and as he leant to grab the girl, to subdue her, they both rolled across the grass laughing, panting. They looked at each other and smiled, both possessed by the same weariness, having exhausted all excess vitality and euphoria. Alexei kissed the girl's lips, withered in a pout, sucking them lightly. They were near a thicket and stems of the most varied species intermingled in suffocating, entangled embraces, flowers and fruits on stalks so close that they got confused. Maga inhaled the pinkish perfume of a fruit, warm and numbing like the morning, lost and reckless like her, like Alexei, like the butterflies of a thousand colours, like Riri, as lost as a Biological Robot in the infinity of an eternal-return.

She bit the fruit, which she then offered to Alexei:

“Eat, it's not an «apple».”

“We are not what might be called too naked-and-innocent to fear it,” he answered, digging his teeth into the juicy reddish flesh of the fruit.

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Maga silently picked fruits, which she then — not knowing where to store such treasures — threw far away. She gathered a few and pushed them with her foot: she saw them roll, red and round, over the low grass, one of them strayed and crashed against a bamboo stem, stopped, hesitating without knowing which way to go then finally nestled in a clump of foliage, happily giving up on the competition with the others. Maga grimaced, sickened by this fat, red fatalistic fruit and kicked it again. It continued tumbling. The girl was looking for who knows what, already disinterested in this game. The bamboo stalks rose above the others, growing straight and slender, shedding graceful and amusing little nodes; on top the flattened wide leaves, nervously extended fingers of shadow. She looked at the boy sitting not far from her, peering attentively at a small corolla through the micro-d-ll. She observed:

“I find the Plant-Kingdom stupid. “

“Be quiet. Come and see this!”

Maga replied with a sneer:

“I hate «kryptions».”

“Still, look!”

Taking her by the arm, he forced the girl to look through the micro. She looked and begrudgingly let herself

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become absorbed, fascinated by the vibrating and disproportionate growth of the petals enclosed in their own inconceivable dimensional systems.

“It’s monstrous to observe a living being; it’s heart-warming to observe it... *Pousser, pousser, pousser...*”

Alexei’s fingers wiggled deep down, very deep down... Above, there was a tumult of shadows, struggling giants. Maga closed her eyes. She insisted, in a grimace of pain:

“I can’t understand how you don’t find it shocking to peer like this into the intimacy of beings... I can’t understand!”

He put the micro away and held the corolla in his fingers for a moment, then crushed it and threw away the soft sticky bits. He said, with an air of authority:

“We are «gods».”

“Godoids.”

“Very much gods!”

“*Les nouveaux-riches.*”

“What?!”

She delayed her answer, spinning a red corolla by its peduncle:

“They’re words. Nothing but.”

“Ah, well, I thought you meant the fact.... I am a god, I have my Tragedy!”

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“Oh! And since when do you enjoy such comfort?”

Maga lay back. Alexei did the same. The shadow of the bamboos made and unmade lace patterns over their bodies and faces, unfurling in fantasies, staging the unfolding of no-story. The girl approached him, seeking his lips and, having bitten his flesh, started to drink, drink, and drink without stopping until her head drooped, languid and dizzy.

Alexei touched her woozy, half-faint face, stroking it. She murmured:

“Very sweet; very, very sweet...”

“Satiated little larva. Little dear... Language is difficult and ridiculous.... There should be no language.”

“*Oui. Je t’aime.*”

Slowly his embrace relaxed. He said, suddenly, in an irritated tone:

“Any graph or formula is less ridiculous than that.”

“(Merde, mon amour, c’est un joli dialecte). Why do you pretend not to like a dead language? Do you think I don’t know you’re into **Magic**?”

The girl stood up, wild as a beast that has just awakened from a long sleep and added: “I’ve had enough!”

“I bet you haven’t seen «that» yet” the boy said as the only answer, pointing away. Maga turned around quickly:

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“«That»?! But it’s a herd of horses!”

The beasts approached, clopping their hooves. They were all black.

“Maybe they escaped from the Experimental-Field-12-0!”

“I’ll get one of them!” the girl replied and, without waiting for any comment, ran away.

For a moment, Alexei felt he saw her being consumed by the sun’s furnace, that she was burning with it. Then she overtook it and appeared clear and bright on the other side, very close now to the herd, a fragile and poignant human silhouette emerging victorious from this clash with fire.

Alexei closed his eyes, his face contorted with anguish. It seemed to him that he had been defeated definitively, annihilated. When he reopened them, Maga was grabbing hold of the neck of one of the horses, which had strayed from the others, and mounted it. Then, as if in a nightmare of **Magic**, he saw her come towards him in a mad dash, suddenly halting her horse, which then began to encircle the boy, in ever tighter turns, closer and closer, until it stopped, froth and drool dripping from its muzzle, its nostrils flared — pained and humble — an inch from his body. With an apathetic torpor, he looked at the girl who stared at him from above (from very

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far, very far away), wild and sadistic, a bas-relief in contained, suspended movement. Above and around her, insects drew golden, antigeometrical orbits; they were nuclei of shadow slicing space. An infinite drowsiness overcame the boy, jolting him from that incredible moment!

“Maga, I don’t care, I don’t care at all; Zadi is green, all-green, very green...”

The jet-black horse ran around Alexei again, went away and always came back forming an insurmountable circle. Maga was the genie, the winged demon, and she was screaming and biting the light and laughing, laughing with unbridled, enraged joy.

“Alexei, look, I’m going to put out the sun!”

She disappeared, she was swallowed up, she came back, she stopped:

“...*Et rester là par terre comme morte...*”

Maga let herself slowly slip off the horse and stood, arms crossed, in front of Alexei, looking at him without blinking:

“...This horrible **Sea=of=Intranquility!** Let’s go?”

“Move it! And don’t bother me anymore!”

“*Pauvre Alexei. Êtes-vous fâché avec moi? Toi aussi... Bien...*”

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Maga entered the *spaac* and set the coordinates. She still asked, before leaving:

“Don’t you want me to drop you off at a Zut-Station, at least?”

“Move it, I told you!”

The *spaac* spun over Alexei’s head. Maga leaned over once to say:

“Don’t forget that tonight, at dusk, Albert of Michigan awaits us, this time together.”

And she disappeared.

CHAPTER XI

Albert was alone with Bob, an extremely clever servant specially built for Youri researchers.

“What do you say to this, Bob?”

Albert held out an «atium» sheet to the robot.

“It’s correct.”

“Is it now?!...”

“I’m ready.”

“That’s not the point! It’s not time for me to send you to the «Past» yet — if we are to believe what we’re taught, the past must have been very colourful and tumultuous in contrast with the future, that blank-page...”

Bob made a gesture of indifference:

“I am not interested in the objects or hypotheses that have populated or will populate **Time**.”

“I thought that the spectacle would at least amuse you...”

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“No...”

“You’re dead, Bob.”

They both laughed. Albert added a moment later:

“To be honest, I appreciate it...”

“What?”

“Precisely that — that you leave the unknowns to me.

What a dull game it would be without them, don’t you think?”

“Maybe...”

Albert got up and started walking back and forth amidst the laboratory’s equipment.

“Consider this, for example, to unveil alternatives in the past-future continuum. Listen! Why shouldn’t the past make a sudden leap and become the present at an unexpected point? That’s what happened once when Nature’s Imagination got tired. You see, don’t you?! This is the only way we could have arrived at the Biological Robot, the ultimate proof of a lack of imagination.”

Albert approached a white sphere and pressed a lever on top of it:

“Let’s cut the nonsense.”

In front of him and as if it came from a nebula, a gigantic vial with trembling and inconsistent walls became visible, shining like a soap ball, becoming ever sharper and

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closer like a universe captured through a lens — a miniature-cosmos. Albert, without surprise, watched the strange world grow before his eyes, stopping clear and bluish, remaining closed and complete like an egg. Inside the vial was a human-subspecies, as evidenced by the unsightly, aged features of his face. The specimen scratched himself furtively and looked around, suspicious and afraid of being observed. He was dressed from head to toe and had the characteristic petty-bourgeois tie around his neck, somewhere between sad and garishly bad taste. He was agitated, wringing his hands and coughing. He stood there staring, blinking at the energetic-boundary that enveloped him and served as a protective-barrier.

Albert commanded Bob:

“System-Contact. Contact.”

The man showed supreme agitation, making wild, drowned-man movements, staring blindly at the space before him. Then, groping, he seemed to want to approach the walls of the vial, to touch them... Finally, he settled down at the bottom, watching the observer; face to face, little mouse and super-mouse... And the surprise was slowly diluted with indifference and fleeting comfort.

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“Contact” — Albert commanded again, and then put on the headphones. He asked the first standard-question:

“Tell us, do you know where you are?”

The man stared at the shadows in front of him and replied a little foolishly, as if he didn’t understand:

“If I told my wife about such a bizarre dream, I bet she wouldn’t believe me. She’s like that, like St. Thomas...”

The little man took a deep breath. He showed the satisfaction of a young boy on holiday, in the open air. He murmured:

“This is very nice!” He stretched out his legs and groaned: “It’s the damn rheumatism. Or else it’s just because a guy, after so many years sitting in that narrow office, no longer knows how to stretch his legs.”

Noticing the scuffed tips of his shoes, he quickly shrank down, hiding his feet.

“Blimey! Why didn’t I buy some shoes, even just a cheap pair?”

“It’s a strange creature, Bob” murmured Albert. “I doubt it will bring us any useful data about the System it inhabits... — I doubt it, let’s see...”

The little man pried again into the surrounding world. Then he rubbed his eyes. Albert’s face loomed nearby, gigantic.

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The man looked away, his expression aged with intense bitterness:

“What do they want from me!? Don’t they already know that I am a scared-mouse? A meek, naked mouse?”

“Bob, contact. Standard-two: «Is your language articulate?»”

“Oh! Oh! Oh! Do I speak? What have I been doing? Can’t you hear me? Of course, I have a tongue². Look!”

The man stuck out a poor whitish tongue, then took it in and laughed:

“We could do without it, as far as I’m concerned, because what we have to say to each other, as long as it’s not lies, fits on a fingernail. Ah, the rascal, the cuckold of thy neighbour! He should be colourless, odourless and beakless like a spirit. But no!...”

The little man intermingled his sentences with high-pitched giggles. Albert was strongly impressed and perplexed:

“This little «thing» that you see, Bob, has very similar characteristics to those of prehistoric sub-men... It’s almost incredible and it denies the theory... Pay attention.”

² Translator’s note: “língua”, in the original text, can mean both “language” and “tongue”.

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“...My wife often tells me: «If it weren’t for your damned habit of brooding, of looking at all the rubbish one does in life, you’d be head of section by now». I agree: thought, like language, is detrimental and perhaps more seriously, because if a guy talks, they cut his tongue out, but if he thinks, they have to cut the man to pieces. My wife is absolutely right, the bitch! Bitch is just a way of saying... an expression of affection...”

“Standard Question-Three?...” Bob ventured.

“Leave it, Bob, it’s not worth it. The truth is there, clear and miserable. Leave him alone.”

“I’m forty years old and I’ve written poems. Of course, at this age I could still make verses and read them to my enemies, if I didn’t fear they’d laugh... Ah! Ah! It’s just that a forty-year-old poet, unacclaimed, is as ridiculous as an old maid adorned as a *petite-vierge*. All authentic adventures call for youth, and this one, with a guy rehearsing his flight like an experimental balloon that rises and crawls, lands then lifts, sometimes falling to pieces two feet above ground, is more laughable than anything else. It’s late, it’s too late to release my balloon-probes, and watch them crumble to the ground. Here it all is in my mind, all ready to be put on paper, filed away, but

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it's late, it's too late for a breadwinner like me to start inventing time and joy, time and the pleasure-of-existing. It's late!"

Albert asked Bob for a cigar. He smoked leisurely, with his back to the vial, seeming even to have forgotten the strange little man and his strangest utterance translated into the words of a language he didn't relate to.

"Shall I turn it off?"

"No, let it speak. It's a curious creature, in spite of everything."

The little man was losing himself in an endless unwinding of meaningless words, sometimes in a flood of disconnected expressions, in a crazed monologue mixing dirty words and laughter; finally, little by little, the sentences tidied themselves up and started making sense:

"...One day I'll tell mankind exactly that and some more, I'll tell them. ...Well, let's cut the comedy and tell them the truth, then I'll spit on them, I'll step on them! I'll keep this final trick, a kick in the ass of mankind, and this after having been discussed and laureated, having eaten glory in phenomenal sandwiches from success to success, successively, etc. ..." The little man fretted, his thin, hungry face wrinkled with laughter: "I'd eat a good dinner too, that's for sure.... A

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dinner that not even the most committed idealist could refuse. I'd eat it now, if I could."

Albert, in deep silence, watched him. At some point, the little man seemed to address him, ironically and shamelessly, like a little ant at the bottom of its vial:

"You, sir-super-sir, you'd also eat anything, wouldn't you? No? Not even fame in a sandwich? I'd be surprised if..."

The strange creature was waiting. Albert answered, after a long interval, compassionately, like an adult explaining things to an inconsequential child:

"I am a Youri element."

"A Youri element... A Youri element," the little man repeated. "A Youri element?"

"Explain it to him, Bob" he ordered the robot.

Bob, without hesitation, said:

"In the plane, figures in different shapes and sizes are drawn, one never more remarkable than the other."

"In the plane?! I don't see any plane."

It was a simple and simultaneously complex curiosity, attempting to penetrate the heart of metaphysics like a pre-scientific weapon pierces the heart of a living being.

"Bob!..."

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“In their mental development, each individual goes through the same stages that the species has already gone through in its three dimensional-systems. To each man the same «quantum», necessary...”

The little man suddenly burst out laughing, laughing like crazy. Out of control and out of his mind, he got up from the floor where he had crouched and walked towards the periphery of the vial, taking one step after the other without leaving the same spot; he acted like a foetus inside the amniotic fluid. Between sobs of laughter, and after staring at Albert's blank face, he bellowed:

“It's not like that with us, no, sir! It's all ups and downs, with mental upheavals and deep spiritual depressions. And don't give me that Mummified-God look, because I swear I'm telling the truth. My head of section, of all people, a moron, a notorious scoundrel! To him what counts is money, to eat one's fill, women, the idiot; the thief, always involved in dirty business, scams, all because he's endowed with a reasonable amount of low cunning, the brute!” The little man sobbed a laugh or a cry and continued: “With us, nature turned rich and varied ... More! After having engendered us such as we are, she has blessed each of us individually, saying: «Go, my son, and make yourself a good fool,» «you go now, creature, and

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may you make a reasonable paranoid-murderer.» «go, go you spoiled boy and may you be a genius...» Our-mother-nature has her moments of good and bad humour, rare the former, more normal the latter, she's a frustrated, sadistic female having fun at our expense, the she-wolf! Ah, if you, sir-super-sir, would give me *un petit morceau* of that «quantum», that thing that stretches the idiots' cleverness and the pen-pushers' talent!..."

The man shrank, he seemed smaller, looking again and again at the toecaps of his sullen shoes:

"Man is a poor, miserable thing, between being born and dying — no need to shout otherwise —, a monkey pantomiming in the zoo. I'm in the zoo! After I'm dead, I will have a statue with the words: 'Primate with characteristics of Pithecanthropus. He was neither blind nor deaf. He could even speak, if urged. He was a remarkable anthropoid. Peace to his soul'." With a brief laugh he added: "Being born and dying, tiresome and painful crap. Can't one choose something else?"

Albert was marking imperceptible points on an «atium» map. Bob came closer:

"The specimen is of the whining type."

"It is characteristic of primary beings, a feeling called envy, when they measure their handicap in relation to «spoilt children». Bob, are you sure we didn't get lost?"

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“I’m sure this is the system Rama viewed.”

“Well...”

“...Is this achieving perfection? Looking at beings with the same eyes as this *super-boy*, reducing people to cold, schematic outlines or closed ellipses? Dead man’s shoes, I’m wearing dead man’s shoes. It’s because I’m dead. Ouch!” The little man put his hands up to his face and laughed: “There remains the burden of the wife and children. They shouldn’t have let me die, beaten and humiliated like this, but if I’m dead all right, who cares?!...”

“It’s a deplorable analysis, Bob.”

“And it can’t even be said that «they» manage to attain in Tragedy some elevated sense of beauty.”

“*Yes, yes*. It’s probably a tragedy in a petty-bourgeois style, that is to say extremely modest...”

In the vial the man monologued:

“That’s right... a guy needs to surpass himself, to live and die forever, to have God for him, to think he’s not a dizzy little fly flapping its wings against the walls of an enclosed space. Of course, God is inexplicable, incomprehensible, but, no wonder! if the Guy showed himself, if he was on very friendly terms with us, who would pay any attention to him?”

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Without heeding the frantic path of the hands on the soft «atium» plate, Albert spoke to Bob:

“After all, the guy’s God is a kind of Biological Robot or some other contraption capable of inventing itself, entering and leaving the cosmos through its neuralgic points, playing at the dimension-game as if he was playing chess, etc., etc., etc.”

“Rama often said to me: «Let nothing surprise you, Bob».”

“Oh!... Rama had his reasons. Frankly, I’m surprised to see a creature such as this one who, if we are to believe the analysis, can barely read, write and count, who has nothing to «eat», become a metaphysician when logic would rather direct him towards hunting and fishing, and of course, violent fights. I am surprised, why not admit it?”

“Wouldn’t it be better to proceed with the standard interrogation?”

“It’s useless.” Albert replied.

However, he turned to the vial.

“I’ll buy a new pair of shoes as soon as I get my salary. And I don’t want a discount pair from a sale, damn it! The soles of sale shoes rot faster than paper.” Grazing his heels on each other: “Damn shoes!” He shrank quickly, shy again, batting his frightened eyelids, the arches of his eyebrows

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parallel to the drooping arch of his mouth, a deeply saddened mask:

“...Yesterday, she laughed at me and it was because of the shoes: «Mr. Sacadura, if you don’t put some half-soles on those shoes of yours, soon you’ll be walking around with your toes sticking out!»! What a girl, yes Sir! Right next to me in the office, she looks more like a dream than reality, all day long tic-tic-tic-tic at the typewriter, every now and then a look, a look full-of-fire capable of melting us inside — an expression of abandonment and at the same time of someone who knows how to make the most of this stinking-life, some long, shapely legs, and a bust!... How can one prevent one’s imagination from revealing her white, round, pink-nippled breasts — so beautiful, the hard, pointed breasts of Graça Maria!” The little man covered his face, defeated and crumpled. He remained like that for a long time, then looked up timidly, his drooping eyelids fluttering rapidly like those of a frightened animal. Suddenly, he shrugged and looked at the protective-barrier, staring at it like a blind man:

“I’ve never slept with any woman other than my-wife, but it happens, naturally, to anyone who; if he goes to Paris, has the obligation to go to bed with a prostitute; if he dreams, he is capable of sleeping with his own mother; and if he is

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awake, and has-nothing-else-to-do, he mentally undresses the girls.” Sighs deeply: “It’s not always easy to undress the girls. With Graça Maria, sometimes when I come close trying to undress her, when I think that her body is going to appear in front of me, splendid and white, and her outline already seems to take shape, crystal clear, it’s replaced by another impudent, flabby body, the only one I really know, aged, hatefully humble and humiliating. I hate them! those two bodies coexisting deep inside me like a shapeless beast with dozens of legs and thousands of treacherous, scornful eyes, a repulsive and lucid monster watching me... I hate those two bodies, those passive and inert witnesses, fearsome! But one of these days, when they appear to me thus united, merged into one another, just eyes-legs-and-sex, I’ll strangle them... Graça Maria is Sousa’s lover, that swine, that rapist of minors. Damn him and all human kind, damn God and the Devil! Damn everything that exists! I rejoice when I read the newspapers announcing horrors, the future hecatomb of the world, tragic disasters or terrifying slaughters, earthquakes, cataclysms, I rejoice to the marrow and the only reason I do-not-run-through-the-streets-screaming-of-pure-and-infernal-joy-is-because-I-am-a-normal-and-respectable-man. Damn me!”

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The little man laid his head on his arms and began to sob. He coughed and sobbed. Bob looked at Albert and said ironically:

“Sousa the Fearsome-Executioner, Sacadura the Poor-Victim.”

“...I have asthma. When he sees me suffocating, Sousa always tells me about this medicine. I’ll try it someday. Poor guy, deep down he’s not a bad person, perhaps... He likes to brag, to pass himself off as a ladies’ man. Monday is the guy’s bragging day: drinking till he drops and getting cheap women...”

“Look at this, Bob.” Albert was leaning over a luminous path, “our pen pusher is an interesting summation of vices and virtues, a near-pivotal point...”

“An alloy of poor metals, let’s say. Perhaps if we pick up one of the wise-men-of-Greece or a-man-of-the-seven-seas, the conclusions might change.” Bob suggested.

“Don’t you believe it. This specimen has all the fundamental characteristics of a sub-man. Look! The same qualities of existence as an underground event; forbidden to rise too high, too close to the surface to avoid endangering individuals, that same rickety mentality — a deformed and monstrous root, some remnants of decency where elements of

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the transition to the true human are beginning to be recognised. Behold!”

Both Bob and Albert seemed to be looking at the negative of a photograph. They laughed sometimes, then paid attention again:

“...Quite a modest guy on the whole, let nobody say otherwise, he never gets to killing or skinning. He rubs his hands in glee if a foe or a friend loses money, fails in a competition, gets dumped by some lass and other little nuisances, imagines himself sleeping with a girl as nice as Graça Maria, and at most glances at her over the typewriter keys, cries if someone is buried — quite a modest guy...”

The man stares at the toecaps of his shoes. He gets startled.

“...He swallows hatred and revenge, gets dumber every day. What would happen if it weren't so, if each one face to face with his Sousa, knowing his disgusting rogueries, his envies and evil deeds, his hypocritical villainy, decided to wage open war on him, to spit on his face? Such a thing is impossible, impossible to fight in the open... Definitely only the weak, the invertebrates like me, can survive by vegetating. Only the weak, because the strong are killed by Sousa in one fell swoop, just signing without reading. Nay, I refuse to see-

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and-hear, I'm dead, perfectly dead and in as enviable a position as any actual dead person. Even the shoes..."

Albert, slowly, meditatively, removed the headphones that Bob received in its hands. In the bell jar, the little man gesticulated pathetically and insignificantly, losing himself, shrinking until he imperceptibly disappeared.

The Youri leafed through a *dossier* and closed it abruptly:

"How about we collect another specimen?"

"Fine by me."

"Maybe the problem will get a new, unexpected face, who knows?"

CHAPTER XII

“ *It is a woman!*”
“ *Cette pauvre petite chose-là, c’est une femme!*”

The Field flickered in the dimness, shimmering like a dewdrop magnified to the scale of a universe. Inside, the woman fretted as if she were alone, still a remnant of fragile beauty on her pale, creased face. She ran her hands through her hair, down her aged cheeks, in long, thoughtful strokes, then looked around, bumped, perplexed, into the energy barrier and saw an attentive face beyond it. She smiled, a subtle, wry quirk that lent youth to her lips, to her whole being. «Maybe I’m starting to see ghosts; after having roamed as a ghost myself.» She laughed loudly, bitterly, a deep wrinkle creasing her broad, clear forehead.

She nestled on the floor and closed her eyes. She seemed to quieten down like a small animal sensitive to the cold, her bitterness gradually replaced by an expression of

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resigned calm. «It's good to close your eyes and sleep, sleep, for centuries, until the infinity of time. — Nothing compares to this: to sleep, always, nestled like this, curled up like a foetus inside a womb. — Tomorrow I'll buy the *cerise* fabric. Red rejuvenates; much more than Parma-violet or yellow, which only suits the fresh skin of adolescence...»

The woman nestled further, curled in on herself like a woodlouse. Albert and Bob watched her, while keeping a watchful eye on their equipment, which drew diagrams on «atium» sheets.

“...There's no doubt that it belongs to the «Sacadura» species.”

Unexpectedly, the woman stirred inside the bell jar, ran, tried to reach its periphery. She questioned them, violently and aggressively:

“Stop looking at me and scribbling lies about me. I'm not me! I'm not anything.”

She managed to stand up, tense like a horse about to race, her hands in front of her body, protecting it from invisible aggressions and added, already whining:

“...I'm a woman-type. There's a whole literature on standard-women, usually bourgeois: either boringly well-behaved or scandalously disobedient. Women from Group-A,

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whose time is filled with emptiness and useless gestures; from Group-B, so busy! from C, with husband and children. Group D, a variety of woman already disbelieving any rule, any norm, but respecting and obeying them all, for it would be a hard sacrifice to transgress. There are hundreds of Types generally free from any task in the transformation of the World. I belong to an E-subvariety (please see respective literature), an existence-like-any-other-and-that-never-even-begins, suspended over a dark abyss, desperately clinging to the support of rotten old things, the only point of support.” The woman smiled and made an evasive gesture: “I am a banal-bourgeois-forty-odd-year-old-woman; a lass-like-any-other. *Voilà.*”

Unreal and pathetic inside the outlandish bell jar, her neck stretched out in exhaustion, the woman stopped haranguing them. She seemed to refocus, to gather powerful energies, to prepare for some devilish, fatal, leap of death. In the quadrant, Bob followed the gigantic, monstrous beating of her heart. Albert came peeping in turn:

“Maybe the specimen can’t stand this experiment, Bob? What do you say?”

“We are in the optimal zone. The creature can stand it, it’s very much alive.”

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“Perhaps too alive!”

“Maybe it’s something very similar to what in other dimensions is called neurotic.”

“Maybe...”

The woman was looking at them, closely, passing one hand over the other, in soft irony.

“Notice how sharp and broad, though repressed, subterranean, her graph for hatred is...”

“...I truly just hate one thing: Youth, and that is because it is the only phenomenon that, when genuine and authentic, has human significance.” She stood still, looking at her long white hands, and added in an illogical murmur: “No one knows how to hold on to it, how to command it. Youth is actually hateful in every way, martyred and martyring. No one knows how to immortalise themselves, strength and beauty amidst a massacre, in a fight that can only be to the death. Very tiring, youth, very undesirable...”

She brought her hands to her face, stretching its withered skin and softly started to sing to the tune of a lullaby:

«Don’t cry my love, don’t cry

The fight is always at the cost

Of the flesh and blood of Youth,

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Always at the cost
Of the wonderful and untouchable
A murder-suicide
A-guy fighting against-himself
In a furious-urge
Defending himself with bravery
From Machiavellian-heritage
Tra-la-ra-la-ra
They all succumb defeated
(For victory is movement,
an unpalatable thing)
And they go to the stands to rest
Watch the fantastic spectacle
With-no-beginning-or-ending

(continuing...)

Painful birth-of-nothing
Leading to nothing at all
(Don't cry, my love)
In the stands we're fine
Here are those who passed through the arena
Like us: brave or fearful
Now spectators
Sadistic and vengeful

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Watching the death of all youths
(Don't cry, my love, ah, don't cry)
We're two sadistic old men
In the stands
In the stands
Very cosy, very cosy,
More comfortable than the arena
Tra-la-ra-la-ra,
They eat lupin and pumpkin seeds, candy
My God
Who could stand again
A bleeding body and soul
Who could stand hearing again
The laughter of the living-dead
Stirring up the fight
The fans turned-inside-out
Demanding the agony of the guilt-of-existence
The fans of the possessed against-life
We who use borrowed-emotions
Because our own hurt
They hurt and no one wants the hurt
Not even the hurt of those who,
Hardly scratched in combat

THE AQUARIUM

Lay down their weapons
Call for truce, peace,
Stands with lemonade and ice-cream
Flabby flesh
Stench
(A pestilent stench)
We're in the stands
With them
(My love, don't cry)
Tra-la-ra-la-ra
Our death was neither painless nor quick
My beloved:
Have you ever seen a winner?
Someone with strength to create amidst chaos
To take light from hell
And give it to oil lamps
Or even electric pocket torches and ceiling lamps
I saw, I saw
(Don't cry, my love).»

“(Song of the Sad-Immured-One who had nothing else to tell her grandchildren. Often sung then in fairs-and-festivities).”

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“Tomorrow I’ll buy that cloth, which is not Parmaviolet. It’s over. But this super-sir or super-*constellation* doesn’t even know what an immured woman is. He doesn’t know, one can tell at first glance. What an amusing super-mouse! An **Immured** woman lives between walls that isolate her from the world that is rightfully hers! Almost always in total darkness, butting her head as she can’t avoid it. It’s true that there comes a point when the poor thing creates her own radar system, an insignificant defence but which, in most cases, prevents her from crumbling. And more! She is allowed to remain alive and even to cry out for the sun she has never seen, as long as her cry is unintelligible. She lacks air, oxygen, light, but they tell her otherwise, that she is neurotic, that she must have her brain removed...” The woman puts her hands to her throat, suffocated by the image she has constructed, and takes a long, deep breath. “...Those women with keener senses grope along in the darkness, cautious, and discover cracks in the wall, they see... They see sheer mountains, torrential rivers, vast skies, gloomy nights, endless and mysterious spaces... After that they cannot return to the centre where we collided, and so they let themselves continue hammering at the periphery, breaking their bones against the wall... I hate the whole of humankind, and myself first of all, defeated by forces I can hardly define,

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eliminated from the combat before any discoveries, any meagre findings, any glimmer of light or icy current that might guide me in the exploration of my **Den**-because-the-whole-feminine-existence-occurs-in-a-stinking-**Den**, where bodies agonise and die long before real-death. (Oh, in beautiful shrouds, in very beautiful shrouds. *Voilà*.)”

The woman expressed herself with a voice full of gentleness, without intonation, her eyes closed, her hands, a strange radar system, placed in front of her body, groping like those of a blind person avoiding any obstacle.

“Maybe it’s not a «woman», but some irritating phenomenon of nature in a state of desperate lucidity?” Bob ventured.

Albert laughed, scathing:

“Actually, we’ve had happier female guinea pigs.”

“Why didn’t you ask her any standard questions?”

“It’s no use.”

The woman opened her eyes. She said with indifferent sweetness:

“What a pity that nothing can shock you, nor even scratch you, because otherwise I would tell you a beautiful story. Set in the **Den. The Story of a First Love**: (Once upon a time, there was Me-in-love-with-myself, so madly in love that

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everything else, people and objects, no longer had any meaning. I, the only lovable object! In the absence of a den-compartment and given the all-prevailing-stench, I loved myself, because I could find nothing else worthy of my love, there was nothing that failed to provoke repulsion and contempt in me. I naturally wrote letters to myself, and spoke to myself, because my-love needed a voice. (Love must have a voice and eyes and ears, touch and taste, it must be so, as silly-as-that). These were crazy letters and exhilarating conversations of passion, sometimes mournful complaints of tender love, sometimes a wild and violent imposition of desires-without-desire, violence almost always erasing the other voices, a deaf, static violence dying on the surface of a still, solitary life. No one but I could love me with such lovelessness and hatred. And this was my supreme pleasure: self-destruction through the most desperate, agonising hatred. Marvellous! A perfect-lover, Me, never giving me the opportunity to get-bored-of-loving, by giving me all kinds of over-refinements and delights of sensitivity, including an audience that followed with interest the various adventures of a probable, looming «perdition», anxiously and contentedly waiting for the moment when I would succumb in the arms of the **Other. Without knowing that the other was me! Ah!**

THE AQUARIUM

Ah! Ah! Ah! The despicable-public, delighted with horror, read and reread the letters of the most unbridled passion that I wrote to myself and that I abandoned in order to feed (as the main-course) the show. Thus, I reached the supreme pleasure-of-existence-the-final-spasm-I-was-fed-up-and-I-had-nothing-left-but-to-die...)."’

The woman smiled, in a meditative, absent-minded delicateness:

“... I did not die. The calvary of lies now continued in another vein. And so, without having even begun, the case of a neurotic on a diet of bread-and-oranges was closed, of a hysterical woman who, having collapsed with bloody nails, fell to the ground, overcome. Her brain, eyes, nerves were torn out. The punishment was in direct proportion to my masochism. I confessed everything, even truths, and let them peck at me until I was inert. I was told afterwards that it was a good show and that everyone laughed themselves silly. Another youth was defeated, put out of action, love and hate and the desire-to-die-and-other-pretences eliminated. This silence and darkness lingered, the being sinking into the delights of irrefutable torpor. Nothing, nothing compares to this: *rester là par terre comme morte...* Tomorrow I’ll buy the bright-

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red fabric. It's a shame that yellow only suits the fresh skin of teenage girls... because I like yellow..."

"It's strange, Bob, that all these subspecies aspire to freedom and yet cannot get around the most insignificant obstacles... Strange. Listen!"

"...The better they know their conditioning, the more entangled in it they become. (...Even if the sun were to flood me, even if I were to burn at its centre and I were the sun itself... Ah, I will never know how to taste freedom. It was forbidden to me from my very first-day-of-life and I became inept, perfectly inept at savouring such thing. It is like having been swaddled so that my spine was in an S-shape and now being asked to stand up straight. It's useless to flood my body with sunlight! Furthermore, light blinds me, makes me dizzy, I flee from it like the devil from the cross. My kingdom, it has been said a thousand times, is that of the shadows, of passivity, it is the **Den** where I glide blindly, despite having already perfected a radar system. No, I don't want the light...)"

The woman became a shadow cut from fire on the walls of the vial:

"(Freedom is unnecessary when there is no choice. Imagine a poor creature inhabited by two «me's»: one passive, static, well-behaved, the other arrogant, a devil at large,

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marvellous with impetuosity, feeling and expressing passions, all sensualities, splendid and vibrant. The poor creature has to eliminate one of them, to «choose»... But there is no choice if she wants to survive by vegetating... So-be-it-Amen! Here I am, Me-The-First-One, sufferer and abouluc, the lover without passion or joy, who desires-without-desiring, who does not see, does not hear, has no arms or senses, the Me-blind-deaf-and-dumb who never knew how to grasp the World directly, in an immediate way...)"

The woman closes her eyes and gropes the space in front of her with her aged hands:

“...I know the objects by touch, I feel their soft, rosy face, the rugged face of the World, so fragile! No, I do not need other senses to see and listen to the heart of the World, to shiver with passion for haunted infinities that I will never know. Never...”

Silent tears slide down the woman’s tired face:

“...Peace, peace for those who have lungs and do not breathe, peace for those who have eyes and do not see, have ears and do not hear, peace, peace for all those who give up...”

The woman lifts her hands to her head and adds unexpectedly, in an angry, deafening desperation:

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“I’m not dead. No, I’m not dead. I’m not dead. Why am I not dead, God? Why do my hands keep reaching out, eager like claws?”

She runs her hands over her cheeks and settles down, nestling deeper towards the bottom of the vial. Albert watches the woman attentively as he pulls a silver lever. She suddenly turns to him and starts laughing, laughing — losing the composure she had maintained until then — a raucous, wanton laugh that ends in a sudden sob. Albert stays at his observation post and makes a sign to Bob. Then he sees the creature rise and walk towards the «barrier», coming towards him, and in an instant the woman’s face is close to him, obvious wrinkles at the corners of her eyes, her skin slightly flaccid. Only the eyes, with their dark blue pupils, are able to maintain and radiate youth, lending her a strange, subtle beauty. The woman has a medallion around her neck and asks, showing it between her fingers:

“Can you see this?”

“I can see it.”

On the reverse side it is written in thick letters:

Respectable.

“I belong body and soul to the **Council-of-the-forever-dead.**”

THE AQUARIUM

“I understand...”

“From here I can see a golden-light and someone passing through it. Is that you? What’s your name?”

“Whatever-it-doesn’t-matter.”

“It doesn’t matter indeed. If you only knew! My soul is as dry and barren as a thistle’s. When I approached this crack and saw you, I had the impression you were going to set me free. Can you let me clasp your hands in mine?”

The woman held out her pale, long hands and stared at them as if they were loose in front of her body, bathed in pathetic unreality. Then she let them fall along her body.

“You’re a ghost, I knew it, but I wanted to make sure.”

Unexpectedly, in a distressed, muffled tone, without even raising her eyes, the woman asked:

“Please remove the wall so that I can embrace you in broad sunlight. Please let me see the light.”

“I can’t... The wall can only be weakened from within, abandoned like an empty shell.”

“Please help me be born.”

“No one can help you be born.”

The woman bent her head further down:

“I will give my life.”

THE AQUARIUM

“You cannot give something you do not possess. You are dead.”

“That is not true!”

“I’ll tell you: we inhabit concentric spheres, mine of larger radius, infinitely larger... My stride is longer, my clarity and pleasure-of-existence wider, just that...”

The woman laughed aggressively:

“Just that?! Aren’t you freedom and youth, then?!...”

“I am not.”

“Even so... I would like to be in step with you, to absorb the light of your sun, to travel in spheres concentric to mine and with an infinitely larger radius. Just that!”

Suddenly she brought her hands to her lips and looked around:

“Everything about you is disagreeable and hateful to me. I love my sphere, its narrow radius, in which my person is reduced to a point without dimensions, motionless and nirvanic, a small point that runs no risk...”

She absent-mindedly ran her hands through her greyish hair, then again down her dead-cold face.

(“It’s over. I’m going to lie down in my coffin dressed in red. Red suits the dead, it rejuvenates them”).

THE AQUARIUM

“This is what in Proto-History was called a madwoman,” Albert said thoughtfully. “Totally mad. Rama may well have been imprisoned in such a **Den...**”

“Oh, I don’t believe it!”

Albert moved the lever and slowly the woman started to go away, getting smaller and smaller until she disappeared, swallowed by the anti-dimensional-nebula.

CHAPTER XIII

“Leave it alone, Bob, go and rest. “
“I’m not tired.”

“But I am. I’m going to stop doing these experiments.”

“Good for you. Rama... Do you know what must have happened to Rama!?”

“You misunderstand me, Bob. It’s these experiments in particular that no longer arouse my curiosity or add anything to what I already know. But there are others. I will travel towards a wider «sphere». I’m no longer interested in this routine of capturing poor beings, humanoid or otherwise. And don’t think that this means I am rejecting Rama’s theory, nothing of the sort. I just want to avoid its weaknesses, which aren’t in short supply...”

“You must send me on an initial survey. I’m a Beta-Omega who knows its trade and there are hypotheses that have never been tested, so one doesn’t know...”

THE AQUARIUM

“All the surveys are run upon my instruction, including the first one. See if Maga’s here yet. Either Maga or Alexei.”

Before leaving, Bob said without looking at its interlocutor:

“The girl has a remarkable «Youri» intelligence, but the boy has a higher neutral-negative index. Well, after all, they are two horrid brats and you would do well to leave them alone.”

Albert stood up quickly, looking agitated.

“You’re right, I’ll put an end to it.”

He left the laboratory. Outside he found the girl sunk into a dark armchair, her face resting on her hands, focused on the panel in front of her. As she remained unaware of his presence, Albert came closer and touched her shoulder. She turned around, alert:

“Oh!”

“My little love, how are our friends Henry, Alexei, Yarath?”

“Alexei should be here soon. He insisted that he’d find Rama’s originals at the K.O.2 Centre.”

“The Biological Robot would have told him otherwise.”

“Yes, the Biological Robot, the Big-Guy... Alexei preferred to search for himself.”

THE AQUARIUM

The panelled walls seemed to revolve around themselves. The beautiful Hutah girls, always the same girl unfolding to the point of convulsion, smiling or walking in undefined movements, leaving the painting, a prisoner of it, her hips heavy and vibrant, on her face a fleeting smile, made Maga dizzy when she looked at them too much. She got up and went to the panel:

“I believe that the human imagination is – how shall I put it? – tired, and it seems to me that it would be convenient to leave the imagination-of-nature at liberty. For my part I would give freedom back to nature, saying: «Since you have invented me, provide for my subsistence...

or else goodbye *mammy*

que *me voy a* France

to fetch a lance

go on with the dance.»”

Albert came up behind her and hugged her:

“*Petite enfant*, I have a surprise for you and Alexei.”

She turned around, with a frighteningly lucid expression in her eyes:

“Already?...”

THE AQUARIUM

“It’s not what you think... Nothing more than a little excursion.”

“Hmm...”

“A game of limit-spheres, limits concentric-circumscribed in limits, and so forth *ad infinitum*, infinitely-unlimited, etc., etc. What else do you want to know?”

Maga, in a thoughtful distraction, answered:

“Nothing, I know enough...”

“*Petit enfant*,” and Albert stroked her hair and her cheeks, “*mon petit enfant*, you are my nothingness, my unique dimension.”

She looked outside, beyond the lens, lost in thought and shivering. She said in an inattentive, airy tone:

“...I replied that I am a natural-type and that two generations of natural-types in a row are of no use to the species. What matters is to advance something and not to mark time in the same spot, is it not?”

“What?!” Albert was surprised. “Did the Sil-Council offer you hibernating-incubation? Oh, but that’s a rare honour! You refused, why?!”

Maga sighed with annoyance. She gave an evasive answer:

THE AQUARIUM

“One day, man will be compelled to give up this useless, fantastic adventure, but until then, he has only one worthy task: to prevent the Omnipotent-Omnipresent-Untouchable-and-Inviolable-God-Matter from having fun at his expense and manipulating him at his will. To prevent the beast from making him a victim, walking around his body and sniffing it out like prey. *Voilà*. Why is Alexei taking so long?”

Albert turned his back, annoyed:

“Alexei is your immediate-time-clock, your gauge. It’s only fair that you long for his presence, since without a measure we don’t even get to be.”

Simultaneously, they both noticed Alexei’s presence, standing still, framed in the entrance circle. Maga held out both her hands to him:

“Alexei!”

This way she had the feeling of protecting him and herself from Albert. The latter seemed to become oblivious, his body almost touching the edge of the panel, his shadow projecting over «The Girl-with-the-Poppies». He said:

“*Le parfait ménage à trois. Oh, ce sera une petite bacchanale, une très petite bacchanale.*”

Maga and Alexei looked at each other. The boy asked her laughing:

THE AQUARIUM

“Do you understand the language of the dead? *Moi, non!*”

“Oh, Alexei, let’s run away! Albert will use us in a terrible experiment.”

“Let it be! We mustn’t be afraid of fear. Do you know what this guy promised us!?”

“Yes: «Freed from the protective shell, masters of our own destiny, we will be able to command it, say that we are born, at last...» I smell a slogan, Alexei, do not believe him.”

“We’ll have to corroborate it through experience. Rama...”

A laugh from Albert interrupted him:

“Rama, the Magnificent, only wanted one thing when he met the «truth»: to disappear! That’s what he did, the rascal! He left a beautiful theory, simple when it comes to passing from one dimension to the other like someone passing through walls and denying the law of the impenetrability of matter. Poor Rama!” Albert sighed mockingly.

“Poor Rama, I agree,” said Maga, “he bequeathed us a tragedy-farce only visible to the naked eye of the **Zero-Dimension**: The Moon-2 entering the Helium atom like a button entering its hole, the Neutron swallowing the Boa, Albert eating the Universe in slices, etc., etc., so that...”

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“...We have no farce-tragedy!” Alexei concluded laughing.

Bob entered with a tray of drinks which it served, giving each of them a glass full of a greenish liquid. The girl hesitated before bringing it to her lips. Seeing this, Albert said to her:

“You can refuse...”

“I don’t want to refuse!”

And she started to drink slowly, decisively. Alexei in turn downed half the liquid in three or four gulps and then raised the glass at eye level:

“I propose that we toast to the **Following=Instant!**
Since pleasure has no present.”

“To **Vagabondage!**”

“To the return of the **Firebird.**”

Alexei emptied his glass, which he then threw away, shouting in exhilarated, foolish joy:

“To the R-Q-T-P!”

Bob continued to pour pinkish or greenish liquids, which they drank, then breaking the cups that shattered against the panels, in a noise muffled by the laughter of the three.

“The gods! The drunken gods!” shouted Maga pointing to Alexei and Albert and then covering her face.

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“Drunken?!” asked Alexei.

“*Why not?! The gods have always gotten drunk.*”

There was silence. Maga and Alexei looked at each other perplexed.

She fled to the Terrace and the boy followed her, taking her icy hands between his:

“This time nothing will happen, you’ll see... This time...”

Albert was two steps away from them, his hazel spiky hair in disarray, all of him vibrant and tense like an athlete preparing for a final mortal leap:

“This time the Firebird will try its wings or there is no Firebird.”

Albert walked to the end of the Terrace, where there was a black *spaac*. He turned his head, calling out to them:

“Come.”

Like automatons they followed him and got into the machine by his side. Maga wrapped her arms around the two young men’s necks. Her cheeks were burning and she sought the coolness in the faces of her companions, first in Albert’s, then in Alexei’s.

The latter brought his hands to his throat:

“We are in Hell.”

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“There is a Purgatory.”

“I am the Firebird.”

“*Parfait!*” Albert said, his hands on the controls, solitary, very pale. “I’m taking you to my space rocket. Nothing surprising then.”

“Very surprising! And it grieves me to be a little too drunk to enjoy that glory.”

Maga said softly:

“We are going to burn in the darkness. Let us hope it is beautiful, at least!”

“Let there be someone enjoying the show from the outside,” Alexei added like a reckless boy. “Albert will lead us into the future. I give myself up to that future almost without conditions. Don’t ask me what the «almost» is, Maga, because I don’t know, I’ve lost it. I’ve lost it and it’s important.” The boy’s voice took on a whining accent. “Where is the «almost»? Ah, I found it. The almost is one condition and one only: that thought survives!” Laughing: “Even in the form of a mushroom. Even in the form of an oyster-at-the-bottom-of-the-sea-a-three-cornered-sunflower-hat-floating!”

Maga shut her eyelids, her head lying on Albert’s shoulder. Alexei had a dreadful ringing in his ears and fell silent.

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Slowly the *spaac* emerged from the beam of half-light
and rose into the grey space.

CHAPTER XIV

They flew over the vast hangar of interplanetary arrivals and departures, an unpopulated, hallucinatory world of gigantic rounded constructions, topped by white spindles, their spikes sticking out faraway into space, massive and ghostly, basking in the spectral glow of hidden spotlights.

The *spaac* landed on its platform.

Albert, without a word to his companions, stepping with familiar ease on the dark floor of the hangar, went ahead of them as if ignoring their presence. They, as if frightened, listened to the sound of their footsteps on the floor.

“Don’t grab my hand with such force, Alexei.”

“I thought you were afraid.”

“Why should I be afraid «now»?”

“Well... This time we’ll actually travel there...”

“That’s right. The guy has realised that we are terrible guinea pigs.”

THE AQUARIUM

They both laughed. Their voices, and the laughter, sounded fake, taking on a strange resonance in the silence.

Albert had reached his rocket, smaller than the others around it, the base bulging and flattened like a fantastic gourd, and he was touching it with the pulp of his fingers in a long caress:

“You are a pretty creature and I come to inhabit your entrails, to possess you...” He laughed quietly: “Men have always been quite fond of possessing things. That’s right, dear creature, let’s roll around a bit. That’s all we have left, to roll around...”

Albert took his time caressing the metal alloy body, his fingers spreading, weaving shadows. Maga and Alexei stopped not far from him, curious and inhibited, spat out of the very adventure they were involved in, jealous of this dialogue between man and machine, of that strange communion. Albert suddenly turned towards them:

“What are you nosing around here for?”

Seeing them remain silent, looking at each other befuddled, then looking at him, he added:

“It’s over. Off to your nest.”

Maga came forward:

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“We were not the ones who had the idea for this Pilgrimage-of-Love.”

“Baloney! With something like this,” and he patted the space rocket “it’s only possible to play real games. No more **Magic!**”

“We’re tired of playing-unreal-games,” answered Alexei in turn.

“Off you go, I said.”

Albert’s voice was now muffled and angry. Alexei confronted him:

“We’ve had enough of **Magic**. We want something worthwhile.”

“So, they want to keep playing, the little ones, my babies-without-psychology!?! Ah, but you’ve undoubtedly found a competent nanny, even capable of giving you rides through the galaxy at carousel speed, with stops at all the cosmic islands and meteor showers, coloured in *See* ink. And what’s next? What will you want to play next?”

“Once we run out of **Magic** and **Cosmos**, it will be difficult to invent more games, we agree...” Maga answered, half distracted, peering at a recess in the rocket.

Albert went around the ship. They saw him open a round door close to the ground and enter. They ran and

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entered in turn. A moment later, the door closed with a muffled click, and all traces of the opening or groove vanished. They went through successive hallways illuminated by reddish lights and, still following Albert, they stopped in front of a golden door. For the first time since entering the rocket, Albert faced them:

“As you can see, it’s just a contraption like any other.”

“Not exactly. The C index is much higher than predicted by the theory,” Alexei replied.

Albert laughed:

“Who told me to invite two «rhode» to visit the inside of my Den. The C index is indeed large.”

“Twenty units,” said Maga.

“How do you know?” Albert asked surprised.

“I have eyes.” The girl pointed to a quadrant not far from them.

“Oh! Actually, I need all this interior space and I wouldn’t want to increase the size of the ship. We’d better move on.”

Albert shone a bluish spotlight on the geometrical centre of the golden door and it opened. They were finally at the rocket’s core. Once inside, the two «rhode» apprentices, used to assembling and disassembling small delicate maquettes,

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to unveiling the most astonishingly theoretical secrets of any machine, seemed surprised and as curious as laymen. They were looking everywhere: the control room with its complex apparatus, its quadrants and display screens, its systems of spheres scribbled with numbers, rotational axes; next, the library-room where two Beta-Beta entertained themselves regulating the micro-tele; then they leaned, intimidated over the «Oz», and without stopping they moved from one side to the other, at ease, free from the effect of Albert's somewhat intimidating presence.

Maga finally stopped in front of a Hutah, obsessive like the others, the same Girl-with-the-Poppies repeating herself devastating and devastated, in that indescribable, pinkish-golden plenitude. The Girl-with-the-Poppies stretched out her hands to pick the flowers that almost overwhelmed her, keeping in the depths of her dark pupils a fearful glow, as if she feared to find a repellent caterpillar or a steely sting hidden at the heart of the corollas. The gesture was thus eternalized, soaked in the intense light of a pagan sun that submerged everything, suffocating the world.

Maga looked at «that» relentlessly. Suddenly she turned away, a grimace of repulsion on her lips. She turned her head again: the panel attracted her. Her eyes met those of the Girl-

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with-the-Poppies, they spoke to each other in an irritated language. She turned her back and left, muttering:

“What an absurd little woman.”

She bumped into Albert, who had disappeared leaving her and Alexei to their own devices. She said, shaking her arms where the s-l-i stings were getting more intense:

“I’ve never seen so much rubbish in a cosmic rocket.”

“It’s only natural,” he replied without raising his voice, “you’ve never seen a cosmic rocket before.”

“In two vega-vega I’ll be allowed to own one.”

“Two vega-vega is a long time.”

Maga’s voice changed angrily:

“Anyway, when I get one of these things, I want bare walls, no sphinx-like prisoners, no poor-wretched-poppy-burdened-women.”

Albert appeared and disappeared, going from one side of the rocket to the other, giving orders to the Beta-Beta, checking the machinery himself, looking efficient and dynamic like an all-powerful-lord in his kingdom.

Maga and Alexei, reduced to the role of spectators-with-no-purpose-or-say, continued to watch everything half amazed half offended.

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Finally, Alexei couldn't restrain himself any longer, he wanted to take part in the adventure and leaned over a BAD ampoule; he was going to increase its capacity, when he heard a yell:

“Don't you dare change anything.”

“This BAD is far below its capacity limit,” Alexei replied, interrupting his gesture.

“Mind your own business: just look.”

Irritated and inhibited, the boy turned to Maga:

“You see this guy?! If it were up to me, we'd be off.”

Maga shrugged her shoulders:

“It's his toy.”

“It is...”

Albert seemed to have complete control over the machine and this fascinated them; they followed his movements, his precise vocal commands, they saw him attending to the smallest details, closely watching the Beta-Beta manoeuvres, and they even forgot that they were involved in an adventure, unaware of its limits.

The micro-tele ripped open in front of them and the cosmos suddenly seemed to crash down upon them, like a cascade of suns dizzyingly falling. Maga, her eyes wide open, agape, dumbfounded, murmured:

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“The sky is going to crush us!...”

For a moment, the three of them stood still, looking at the space ahead and below, above, to the sides, enveloping them, dark, spherical, palpable, terrifyingly beautiful. A dark-green halo adorned the nearby stars, coiled around them like a snake twisted around the raw flesh of its victim. Maga stretched out an arm: a bright sun was at the end of her fingertips.

“It hurts having the stars like this, at hand.”

Alexei’s voice was heard, roaring excitedly:

“What’s this?!”

He was pointing at a contained ellipsoidal nebula of dense fire-coloured vapours, and above it, suspended, an unusual silver doorknob-shaped object.

“That?...” Albert unexpectedly laughed: “Ah, nothing but a bit of the scorned **Magic**, matter disobeying the general laws of matter.

Then, without disguising his mocking tone, he leaned over a horizontal quadrant and added:

“**Doctor Faustus** is like that: when he performs miracles, he always surrounds himself with fire-vapours. A means to attract the Firebird.

In the quadrant, a thin dark needle slowly moved.

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“As soon as the pointer reaches the red dash, **Zip!**”

Maga and Alexei instinctively leaned over the quadrant where the needle patiently, methodically, was getting closer and closer to the bright-red dash. Fascinated and fearful, it seemed to them they were watching it reach an unimaginable limit.

At some point, Maga sighed deeply; she was thus trying to evade the unusual emotion:

“Oh, Alexei, how boring it is to own a simple *spaad!*”

Alexei said, without taking his eyes off the quadrant:

“A little more patience and we’ll have a toy like this of our own.”

The rocket vibrated in its prop. The girl stood still in front of the screen and started to sing a pretty, monosyllabic song. She had the sensation of drifting like a somnambulist over a dazzling abyss.

“You have a beautiful voice,” said Albert, when she stopped singing, holding her arms down at her sides.

“Oh, Albert, you’re a **Madman.**”

“Maga, Maga! Maga!”

Alexei’s voice came in a frenzy from who knows where. The boy suddenly appeared between them, dishevelled, shoved Albert aside and pulled the girl towards the exit.

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“Maga, come on, we have to get out of here!”

She offered resistance:

“How?!... What happened to you?”

“I have no idea what happened to me. Suddenly I saw what the guy wants. Come on!”

“We can’t go. I don’t want to go!”

Maga was trying to free herself from his hands.

Albert watched the scene with a superior irony. He said:

“If it’s a question of struggling to find the exit, I’ll lead you out myself. You have two micro-vegases to decide...”

“Can’t you hear me, Maga?”

“I hear you. You go.”

Alexei had pinned her wrists again.

“Don’t you know what happened to Rama? That’s what he wants, and to take you with him.”

“Let me go, I said.”

“I was the bait!”

“Oh! Every once in a while, you assign yourself the most exceptional attributes...”

“You idiot!”

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On the screen, the outline of an Omega appeared, interrupting their agitated discussion, and, blotting out the suns, moved grotesquely, as a shadow. It spoke:

“Youri Albert of Michigan, attention!”

Albert answered quickly:

“Everything is in order.”

“The device cannot be set off with two «rhode» in the para-adult phase aboard. The device cannot be set off...”

“We have the approval of the Council of the Theta,” Maga shouted.

“The routine.”

“Off with the routine!”

Albert turned off the monitoring screen and looked around him.

“Is it not possible to make the damned needles go faster?” asked Maga in her uncontrollable desire to escape the Omega’s control.

Alexei stared at her ironically:

“Do not forget, my friend, that the Omegas have the power to stop the movement of any body, whatever its speed or distance. You cannot escape these kind inventions that watch over your well-being. Even if the needles go faster!...

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Well, here they come, they're knocking at the door..." He laughed nervously: "No, they don't usually knock."

Maga closed her eyes, trying to ease the tension that had gripped her. In the end, what did she care if this adventure came to nothing? Was it indeed an adventure or just another one of Albert's **Magic** tricks? Very likely the latter.

Alexei was pacing back and forth, and looked as frustrated as Maga:

"Without the Omegas' «yes», without them putting us outside like naughty brats in need of a slap, your little friend won't be able to set off. That's great! Listen, Maga..."

Suddenly, a dreadful, muffled booommmooommm bbboommmooomoom bbbboommmooooonmmmbnnnmmooo. Maga and Alexei felt like they were being forced to the ground, one against the other. A long, uncertain silence followed. They both looked petrified. Maga at last stretched out an arm and was surprised that she was able to move it; then turning her palm up, she murmured:

"Look!"

"Perhaps the x-axis rotated on itself and..."

Alexei broke off. Albert was in front of them, towering like a shadow leaning over their heads.

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“What happened is simple, if you must know...” He stopped to stare at them intently: “The rocket ceased to have dimensions. We are travelling between **Zero** and **Nothing**.”

He seemed to be waiting for an answer that didn't come, and then added:

“It was the only way to escape the Omegas' authority. I hope you are satisfied.”

The two companions rose to their feet with difficulty. The rocket was the same, nothing seemed to have changed around them. Alexei looked about and said:

“I have dimension, eyes, arms and legs, I am not a zero.”

Albert went to the screen, now a lifeless white plate, turned around and stood in front of them, arms crossed, legs apart, his thin black trousers defining his long, hard muscles:

“The C-coefficient has exceeded the theoretical limit, that is... In other words, our rocket is like a miniature-cosmos subtracted from the action of the giant-cosmos; it is enclosed in the shell of **Zero**, invulnerable to godoids and to man, without external dimensions, in short...”

Albert paced the control room, back and forth, expanding mischievous sentences:

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“So fantastic and mysterious, so inexplicable after all, as the trillions of «possibilities» that were never forced to happen. And then, look at this simple thing: through here, through this shortcut, I guarantee that we will reach the ultimate-limit, maybe we can even tear the skin of the **Aquarium**, establishing contact between different-**Realms**. What do you to say to that? Why do you stand there, silent as the dead?! Don’t you hear? Why are you frightened? Ah, who told me to put little children on board, to subtract them from the Omniscient authority of the Omegas!”

“If it was to serve an **All=Powerful=Lord** like yourself, perhaps the exchange wasn’t worth it.”

Upon saying this, Maga sat down and rested her head on her knees. She was wearing very short shorts that left her entire thigh bare. Albert looked at her:

“Come here, Maga.”

“I-can-hear-you-from-here-my-lord.”

“Don’t you start with nonsense,” he approached the girl, holding her shoulders: “Tell the truth, Maga, don’t you wish to pierce the shell of the addled-egg, observe the **Den** from the outside?...”

The girl hid her face between her knees, while Alexei furiously whistled. Albert sat down in an armchair and said

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after a while: “I advise you to settle down comfortably. Even free shows should be enjoyed without sacrificing the body.”

Alexei punched the floor:

“I reject comfort and painless shows. I reject **Magic** and I want to return to the origin.”

Albert looked at him condescendingly:

“What is it with you people of thinking I’m only capable of performing tricks. This is the real thing.”

“We still want to go back. We don’t want to be the playthings of diabolical-children³.”

Albert stood up:

“With or without your consent this will go ahead. I’m the only master here.”

Alexei clenched his fists (the s-l-i did not protect him from rage) and not knowing why, he found himself watching his wrists. He called out to his companion:

“Maga, didn’t you hear?”

She raised her head and replied:

“I did.”

³ Translator’s note: “meninos-diabólicos” in the original text was the title of the Portuguese translation by João Gaspar Simões of *Les enfants terribles*, the 1929 novel by Jean Cocteau: *Os meninos diabólicos*, 1939.

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“We are at the mercy of a paranoid man. All because of you, all because for you **Magic** is the **Way!**”

She looked at him lingering; then, with a gesture of indifference, she put her head down on her knees again without a reply.

“Is everything normal?”

It was Albert’s voice.

“Everything’s normal,” the two Beta-Beta replied in chorus.

Alexei watched the other man lean over, but could not see the glow of victory spreading across his clear pupils, nor the needles, phosphorescent bluish threads of energy, oscillating as precisely as theoretical data.

CHAPTER XV

One day Riri had recited a poem to her:

*Let the ghost ship run
And we inside it
Who cares about the world found
The world sought
If we are inside it
The ghost ship*

Riri knew how to tell her such beautiful stories! How many vega-vegas old was he? One thousand? One day, she had asked him and he had answered:

*One thousand is the limit-of-the-infinite
One thousand is beyond all numbers
Seven is from the Magic-Algebra
Three, the oldest,*

*Has a **Spell.***

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She never knew Riri's age. She didn't know Albert's either.

The latter, as if sensing her behind him, turned round:

“Well?!...”

She shrugged her shoulders:

“*Je suis. I am.*”

She looked carefully at the bloodstained liquid dripping in the clepsydra.

“Perfect!”

“*Parfait, oui!*”

“If it wasn't, it wouldn't hurt either.”

“Why don't you sleep?”

“Alexei is sleeping...” She was looking at the clepsydra, the shedding of the coloured, transparent drops, and she laughed: “I get insomnia at the mere thought of having to be born again, to pierce the eggshell...”

“You have the T...”

“Yes, I do. I don't like to leave you alone, *pauvre enfant!*”

Her voice trailed off in an ironic recitative:

What does it mean to live

What does it mean to die

If the others

Ah, the others

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Do not know about our life and our death.

“Riri, Chapter XX!”

He seized the girl tight. Maga, surprised, sought his pupils.

“Oh, no, never again!”

Freeing herself from the embrace, she fled. In the library-room, lying on the floor, his legs raised high, Alexei was smoking a long pipe. She stretched out beside the boy and silently took it from his hands and took a couple of puffs. They remained like that for a long time, silent, the pipe going from one to the other in mute communion. Finally, Maga turned an absent face to him:

“What colour is the Aquarium, seen from the outside?... Maybe no-colour-and-every-colour.”

“Or white.”

“White?!”

“What-other-colour-would-you-like-it-to-be?”

“Orange or iridescent. I’m going to wish for three essential things: the first is that the **Egg** has a smooth, thin, not very hard shell; the second, that the shell is any-colour-or-colour-less; the third... Ah, I wish nothing else. And you, Alexei?”

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“Nothing!”

They continued smoking, quietly. Maga was staring at a point on the wall, what she called «The stupid-girl-with-the poppies (the bee hidden in the corolla will sting her, cause her pain, the s-l-i will rush to her defence and I will laugh, laugh with pleasure, *Voilà!* Poor experimental-girl, why doesn't she run-away-from-the-bee and give a real impulse to that static body of hers, why doesn't she clench her fists and crush the reptilian creature? I'll laugh when the s-l-i gives the signal. Foolish girl, transported from-dimension-to-dimension, enclosed in a vial...»

“Alexei.”

“Ummm!”

“You've never seen humanoids-in-vials?”

“Ghosts!”

“I «saw» their smell, repulsive and unbearable at less than one hundred degrees; I «saw» them suffering from repellent diseases, growing old — aging, a variety of **Cancer** that slowly, very slowly devours them —, dying, all this in the minimum space of a vega-vega. Time is their most important co-ordinate. Frighteningly ugly and depraved; they live in colonies called **Cities**...”

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The girl fell silent and took a puff of smoke. Alexei, with no comment, stood up and put on music (the music as long and black as Henry's legs. Henry, a demon dressed in black, his long legs waving in a frantic rhythm, possessed, one foot resting on moon-4, the other on alpha-centauri, joining galaxies, treading on suns: flesh-bone-muscle — what would Henry's legs be made of? Of nothing, of nothing...)

“Alexei!”

“Ummm!...”

“How do you manage to lie down for so long?”

“It's simple.”

Alexei adjusted his legs.

“You're like a Madman taking shelter from the rain-to-come.”

“I surrender to the Voluptuousness-of-Fate. I had never experienced it before.”

“Your fate makes me nauseous; we have to get out of here and flee from Albert, definitely... Albert is the proximate-cause of all our ills.”

“«**Hell is other people**». Now you're into that, Maga...”

“Maybe the Beta-Beta...”

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“Oh, Maga, you’d better go bye-byes. Go on, close your eyes and sleep peacefully.”

“Do you want me to scream in horror?” she asked with dilated pupils, her white specks spreading, soaked in fury. “Why do we let him take care of us like this? (The play has no continuation, it will end. Why don’t we **kill** each other?)”

A terrible bang. The panel in front of them started to ooze green, red, blue blood, phosphorescent golden-brown blood, blurring in thick dark colours, becoming a stage set. (On stage nothing-happened. That is, on the stage the following scene was rehearsed:)

(“Alexei, why did you destroy the Hutah? Listen Alexei...” “Silly...” “My love” “My little creature” “**Magic=Firebird**” “words ending in **-on** like Solomon”). “I don’t like being locked inside **Zero**. I’m a naughty boy and I do mischief.”

The Hutah was fading into myriads of colours, and the Girl-with-the-poppies, her hips gone, half her face a macabre blob, the other half a placid, stupid smile, held out her fearful hands — serene hands. (It was hard to tell)

“Are you going to continue making a scene? Whimpering?”

“Who knows!”

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“I’ll tell you exactly where we are, listen...”

“I know, inside the **Pipe-Line**.”

“...Identical to the one where Rama disappeared.”

Albert stood in front of them and added:

“Rama had gone through twelve complete revolutions always around the same centre — himself...”

Laughing, he added:

“Let Rama rest in peace, amen.”

Abruptly, as he had come, he went. The two looked at each other and, almost simultaneously, rose from the floor of the cabin following Albert to the control room. There, a game of solitaire was being played out that was forbidden to them. The two Beta-Beta, under Albert’s supervision, and in imperturbable movements, steered the ship. Their multifaceted eyes never stopped watching the boards where the ultra-sensitive needles drew curves, emitted points, widened in larger circles, sharpened angles, trembled indecisively...

Suddenly, Albert yelled:

“Oh! We’ve passed the cube! Don’t you look like slugs, staring like two idiots. The cube!”

Albert, overcome with excitement, pulled one of the Beta-Beta away, muddling its movements:

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“Now it is possible to tear the old wineskin, to be born at last!”

Albert moved wildly, letting out crazy, vibrant exclamations, giving orders.

Alexei moved forward and, like a blind man, gave him a tremendous punch, knocking the other to the floor.

The boy then shouted to the Beta-Beta:

“Stop this shit, or I’ll rip you to shreds, you little monsters. You, **Dynamics** curse, you, **GT** head, make this thing move backwards.”

As if deaf, the robots continued to enact the same gestures attentively. Albert, his body raised on his elbows, looked at him smiling with amused irony.

Alexei, perplexed, turned to Maga:

“How can we force these bastards to take us home?”

She, in reply, bent down to Albert:

“Why are you so keen to imprison us?”

“It’s the opposite of that, I wish to set you free.”

“Oh! no one can be set free from the-outside-in, says the Great-Book-of-Syma...”

Albert jumped up:

“I’ll do what you ask, but I warn you: do not bother me again for toys and magic. Get out of my sight once and for

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all! That's right, I'll take the babies home and leave them to their beddy-byes."

Unexpectedly, Albert grabbed the girl's face and, searching her speckled eyes, asked her with soft tenderness:

"Is that what you want, Maga?"

"Exactly that," she answered, her face pale, bloodless.

"I want to go home to my beddy-byes."

Albert's face became sombre, almost mournful. Maga had seen a face like that before, hurt and sagging. (Where had Maga seen something so sickly and sinister?) They stared at each other for a long time. She closed and reopened her eyes: (the-old-man-perhaps-glimpsed-at-in-the-country-of-meowing-cats-was-gone). He let go of the girl and said:

"I'll leave you at home as you wish."

Then turning to one of the Beta:

"Materialise-pipe-line-zone."

"Impossible!"

"The ship is its own master!" both robots replied almost simultaneously.

"Impossible?! Who told you?!"

Albert himself was about to touch the lever... A terrifying bang, a hiss, and a shriek followed by the familiar bboooooommmmbbbbboooooommmmbbbbboooooommmmmmmmm

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then the soft sigh of a balloon landing and emptying, total darkness and silence. Albert knew he was lying somewhere, dropped flat over the hardness of **Things**, he could feel their subterranean pulse, a thick, heavy beating, a voiceless pulse, growing and haunting, spreading across the interior of the **Nothingness: Boom, Boom, Boom, Boom, Boom, Boom, Boom...**

With clenched hands, he was fumbling at the ground in search of his two companions. His face was flooded with tears and he drank them avidly. He touched one body, then a second one. An arm moved, alive and warm.

“We’re alive,” he said loudly, and laughed, stretching out alongside the two bodies.

Suddenly, the darkness was swept away by a beam of whitish lurid light, emitted by the body of one of the Beta-Beta. The other joined it and the beam of light widened. In a sarcastic voice, the first one explained:

“Youri Albert of Michigan, the ship has disobeyed us. What is your command?”

“What is your command?” repeated the other.

Albert half raised his body, still panting:

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“Nothing. Nothing, for now!” He rubbed his eyes, trying to focus: “I never imagined that your bodies would be like this in the darkness... I never thought...”

Staring at the two Beta-Beta side by side, framed in the doorway that led to the library-room, glowing with phosphorescent white light like two torches at-the-burial-of-a-medieval-king, he added:

“Be light and leave us in peace.”

And for a long time, no further sound was heard. Finally, Maga let out a soft sigh and said in a whisper:

“Perhaps we are dead. *C'est triste.*”

“Shut up,” admonished Alexei.

“The human voice is beautiful.”

The girl jumped up and looked around like a caged beast. Then, she started walking in an angry monologue:

“I don’t want to be dead. I don’t. If Rama the Inconceivable, the-Volvox-separated-from-the-body-of-the-Volvox, is to be believed, we’re stuck in the very wall of the Aquarium! How not to laugh at the nonsense of a **Great=Universe=Infinite=Unlimited=Mastodon=With=No=Edges=Or=End** containing the agglomeration of tiny-infinite-aquariums-incommunicable-between-themselves-ridiculous-and-whatever-else... Oh, Alexei, wake up! I’ll say

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the craziest, most incredible things just to prove to you that I'm not dead."

"All dead."

The boy pulled her by one arm. Docile, she stretched out between them, her eyes wide open in absent amazement.

A great, thick silence ran over them.

CHAPTER XVI

“*La petite et charmante* Maga immured. It seems like a made-up story! This is not exactly what I wanted, my friends, believe me!” Albert, between bursts of laughter, interrupted himself, sometimes falling asleep, his head half hidden, curled up like a hibernating creature. Then, he would start again: “At the end of the show there are those who like to reveal the tricks they have used. It’s a bad habit. **Magic** has a lot of incongruities: first it flatters the creature, then it challenges its intelligence. The tricks were all trivial. So be it! Only this time it’s not a trick: we’re dead inside and out.”

“Hey, monkeys!” Albert questioned the two Beta-Beta “Hey, you wise men of Greece, can’t you give us more light? Darkness makes me nervous. Alexei sleeps. He’s a very well-behaved dead man. And you, Maga, you can also close your eyes. Above all don’t worry. We’ll want for nothing here, we can even perpetuate the species if you agree. Can you see it or

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not? Us, the children, a family, humankind complete. Think about it, about which of the two of us you most desire and love. There should be no confusions like in the old days and this just for the sake of tidiness, do you understand? I'm sorry for the inconvenience and the harm it does to you, *n'est-ce-pas?* Choose carefully and don't say later that it's impossible to desire one without desiring the other also, that Alexei is aggressive-tenderness and I'm the surprising-paramour, that being individuals-without-psychology, only in a bundle can we obtain the whole range of properties, unfinished as human beings are...

Albert kept falling asleep and waking up.

“Maga will assist in the birth of good and evil, the children of God and the Devil, condemned to wander in darkness for ever and ever, amen.”

“What colour is a **Zero?**” asked Maga after a long silence. She brought her hands to her neck and felt the cold of the s-l-i against her skin. Tic-tac-tic-tac was the disquieting symphony.

“Time is alive.”

Alexei stood up in a sudden burst of anger:

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“This guy can get us out of here and he will. I swear he’s making fun of us; he’s having fun at our expense. Ah, I’ll kill him!”

Alexei punched Albert hard on the head. The next blow missed him and hit the wall. The two men clung together, rolling across the cabin floor, trying to strangle, to crush each other in a blind rage. They were a panting knot, eyes and paws, rage unleashed, unrestrained, hatred in motion. The fight dragged on without truce or conclusion.

Maga, leaning her head against one of the command modules, disinterested in them, began to sing a ballad.

They stopped fighting, and looked at each other. She caught their triumphant gaze, their animal strength appeased. She interrupted her singing to say:

“Fighting! Now, there’s the most exquisite form of love.”

They both held out their hands to the girl, crossing them above her head. She looked at one, then at the other. Suddenly she covered her face.

They stood motionless in front of her, then Alexei came closer and, with his hands in a claw-like ring, encircled her tall, slender neck. He kept squeezing, and squeezing, and squeezing, in the firm, sadistic way of a strangler. She closed

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her eyes. At last, the boy stopped and in a gentle caress laid the girl's head against his shoulder, bending down to suck her pale, frowning lips. Albert turned his back:

“Soppy-puppy-lovers!”

A few vega went by. A few hells-worth of time.

(Our show will begin in a moment. *Pause*). Gorse-song, by an unknown author, sung by Riri to its Mistress, Maga Moniz Ya-Tsé:

*The Grand-Inquisitor had a green-woman
 Her body was grass-green-green,
 Her hair was sea-green-green,
 Her eyes were two emeralds
 The Grand-Inquisitor was her slave
 One day she said:
 I was told of a Conspirator
 A man who goes from land-to-land
 Fixing (fake) clocks
 And then their hands
 Turn anticlockwise
 I love the Conspirator
 A fight raged between the Conspirator and Him
 One Youri invented hate
 Another injustice and pain
 Anguish and boredom were the currency*

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*Envy was dirt-cheap
A great bustle of deadly inventions spread*

*But no one died
Until the hour came
When the Conspirator came forward
Clutching death by its ears
And threw it in the other's face
He beat him, stomped on him, put a foot in his belly
He told him:
"Every human is inferior
If not moderated with just enough torture
A good assassination and a very rich plot
Of overbearing executioners
And innocent victims
Mark all stopped clocks
I'll set your clock"
"Not that, never that
My clock doesn't mark the time
You keep the green-woman
In exchange for my stopped clock"*

And for today, dear listeners, our trans-universal broadcast is over. *Good night, Good morning.*)

Maga was lost in thought, letting time run over her: tic-tac-tic-tac. Time flooded them, had already submerged them.

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“Why not a banquet of Nothingness, of that which is outside?!” murmured the girl. “Why not? **Nothingness** has always been thick and edible, better than Nothing-At-All.

With the same absent-minded, idiotic expression, she got up and ran to the door where the two torch-like Beta-Beta barred her passage. Maddened, she kicked the robots, scratching them until she hurt herself, leaving her own nails bloody. Finally, exhausted, she let herself slide and rested her head on the metal of their bodies. She sobbed without tears. Albert came up to her, gentle as a shadow:

“The experiment is finished.”

She looked at him as if dead:

“What experiment?”

“This one...” He opened his arms, falling silent. Maga remained quiet and apathetic. She didn't understand him.

“I'm going down this way and when I get to the end of the OZ, you, Beta-1, you'll press this lever, you, Beta-2, you'll be in charge of the return. *Good night. Good morning.*”

Like sleepwalkers, Maga and Alexei leant over the OZ.

“Albert!” she shouted.

“I'll be having my Metaphysical-Feast-of-Nothingness. Prreesss!”

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Aghast and dazzled, they listened to the gigantic pulsing machine spurting light through every pore, red and blue spheres spinning, beating darkness and the very characteristic Boom, Boom, Booommmbbbboommm. Maga turned around:

“(Oh! no, no, it’s impossible!)” Albert resembled a giant foetus swimming in the liquid of the vial, showing himself off on the viewing screen in a demonic, vengeful grin.

Maga opened her mouth and stepped back. The face haunted her, the eyes in the face grew, astounding and round.

“Help!”

She bumped into Alexei.

“He’s on the other side...”

“I see...”

She ran disoriented to the OZ, a hermetically sealed bag:

“There’s never a way out when one of us looks for it. Never.”

She dropped her arms, taken by a calm, innocuous madness:

“We’d all three be out there, three creepy, filthy **Dead.**”

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“We wouldn’t make such a scene, you fool!” Alexei’s voice was cold and calm.

Maga stood in front of the screen, face to face with Albert. She brought her hands to her throat, choking with horror, but remained steadfast, without looking away:

“(The fauna of the sacrificed, as fearsome as that of the sacrificers. Syma, Chapter XC. Do you think I believe in good-and-evil-spirits? Ah, wretched clown!)

Alexei took her hands and kissed them. In the same instant they were thrown to the ground and Albert’s face disappeared forever from the viewing screen. There was silence. The Hutah, a sophisticated tragedy, stood in front of Albert of Michigan’s absence — he was swallowing gulps of metaphysics, feeding on his own body like a perfect spirit, a body aborting in colour, dying unborn (a lucid Hutah in-shameless-courtship-with-itself-as-it-is-usual-until-it-perpetuates-the-species. And those who did not eat should have eaten. Those who did not feed on **Metaphysics** should have done so. **For Metaphysics has always served as justification for the most beautiful crimes.** For metaphysics is a mat turned-inside-out, a poor doormat full of holes. All torn and eaten by rats. It has been used by naughty boys to take a piss and put it on their backs. Whoever wants may look

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like the **Mad=King** with such a cloak. Everybody loves to look like the **Mad=King**, nobody knows why. It can be explained: the spirit is petty and is locked within the barrier of sensations-perceptions, a miniature-cosmos-surrounded-by-darkness and without light-images to brighten its march through the infinite... Condemned, the poor man adorns himself and makes holes and shouts: I am the Mad-King. Between one absence and another, Maga is preparing to savour her little Machiavellian pleasures without cause-or-effect (commonplace), like a caterpillar eating and gnawing. A perfect-wretch. Alexei's joining the choir).

A jolt. The navigation screen lights up, spherical and close, dotted with suns and comets, so familiar!

Maga rested her head on her knees and laughed, laughed until her laughter grew tired and died out, exhausted, on her lips. Alexei, gliding like a cat, nestled at her feet and murmured:

“We are home.”

“Shh!”

Maga held out her arm. Within reach of her hand lay the infinity of every-day, suns as if suspended from a dark toy vault, growing into a fantastic ball of fire, appearing and disappearing in no time.

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She closed her hurt, wonderstruck eyes:

“We are **Home.**”

CHAPTER XVII

The red girl climbed onto the back of the statue. Then she shouted:

“Alexei, nobody believes it!”

Maga’s eyes were level with the red girl’s feet and had a scornful expression. (Alexei’s imagination is the finest amongst «rhodes», which is to say it’s a poor imagination indeed).

“You come and tell us, Maga!”

“Maga is a «rhode» in a CY costume. She lies shamelessly!”

“No, she doesn’t.”

“Come on!”

“Evidence. Let’s have the evidence.”

“Evidence...” Alexei had in turn climbed onto the statue and sat down next to the red girl.

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“There is evidence: the Theta found traces of **Metaphysics** in the Ship.”

“Eh! Oh!”

“It’s a thick body, to be cut with a **Knife**. The **Aquarium**’s epidermis.”

“I’m not the Biological Robot.”

“**Damn=it**.”

“The **Pig**.”

“The spirit and its luxurious futility. Amen.”

“Let us above all enjoy that which is useless refinement, because the useful and necessary, after all... *Voilà*.”

Alexei was walking on the marble of the statue, stepping on its tense muscles, its imprisoned, vibrant life:

“By the way, I now ask you to hold a one-minute silence in memory of Rama-the-Incomprehensible and Albert-the-Great, the only two known **Mortals**. Amen.”

“What a thrill!”

“Watching the **World**-from-the-Outside.”

“Laughing at Humankind.”

“At the **Collective-Self**.”

“**Assholes!**”

“Maga!”

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Alexei found his companion by the honeycomb-coloured *spaac*. He went behind her and laid his hand on hers, pressing it against the metal, interrupting her lingering movements. A cycle was just concluded.

They entered the *spaac*.

Soon they were flying over the **Field=of=Asphodels**

Grey and waterlogged

Haunted

Desolate

helpless body

(Riri visiting Proto-History)

Maga manoeuvred the *spaac*, gliding slowly, like a lazy bird landing on the thin island of sand, the same one she had once named after herself.

He interlaced his fingers in hers:

“My love.”

(Love is a property of beings not definitely formed, or rather a specific characteristic of immature bodies that in their eagerness to grow, to attain adult peace and stasis, cling to other beings in search of balance. *No-Chapter-of-no-Syma*).

She bit his hands:

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“Very sweet, very sweet...”

They both left the *spaac* and walked across the waterlogged, half-frozen prairie. Everything was greenish-matte-white.

(A world where no one needs anyone.)

“Blue-with-white-spots.”

“Je ne veux pas coucher seulement avec toi. Je ne veux pas, mon amour. Je t’aime. Mais oui, mon amour, j’ai déjà promis...”

(Language has let its meaning die but maintains the enchanting sonority of phonetics.

“**There** is the only decent place where one can exist.”

“I hate you.”

“A thousand ways to cook up a painless, convenient tragedy.”

“We have a cabin.”)

She ran ahead of the boy, dark *blue-jeans* clinging to her long legs, a thin *chemisier* shaping her bust. She called in a vibrant voice:

“Come, Alexei. Come!”

After running back and forth, in straight lines and in circles, they returned tired to the *spaac*, she explaining something- that-didn’t-mean-anything, he letting himself be dragged along as-if-unwillingly. Then they made believe they

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were fixing an important malfunction in the machine. Suddenly, Alexei discovered that there was no-malfunction-not-even-a-make-believe-one, and kicked the *spaac* to show-that-he-did-not-care-about-her-performance.

Maga bit her lip to keep herself from laughing and pretended to be furious-without-being-so.

He (who was-not-in-the-mood) kissed her. (It was his job to collaborate in the *happy-ending*.)

The *spaac* swung adrift, churning impatiently with mechanical, discontinuous life. For an instant, in the affected Anti-G the needles oscillated madly, then stopped and suddenly fell to zero.

Lisbon

16 April 1962

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