

Simone Brunozzi

NONOVVIO

English Edition

Year 2023, v4

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II Edition – November 2023

~~I Edition – November 2006~~

To my Family.

To Marco.

To those who care about me.

To the people I love.

To those in need of affection.

To those who have supported me, suggested, corrected, criticized.

To those who will never read me.

Note for the 2023 reader:

This book was originally written between 1999 and 2003. Minor adjustments were made until its print publication in Italy in 2006. Self-publication, that is. Later, in 2009, it was the first Italian book to be published on Amazon's Kindle. It sold maybe 700 copies, plus another few hundreds who were shared digitally.

This a minor novel, without any particular literary value. But...

Many of the things I imagined 20-25 years ago came to fruition just now.

GPT-4 + Apple's iWatch could easily be the Giwiki I imagined.

The GKT disease sounds very much like Covid-19, just off by a few years.

The RIM Helmet could be the 2025 version of Apple's Vision Pro.

The uber-rich guy in the story, Ken Freeman, does not exist, but there's at least a few candidates for that role (Elon, for sure).

The global crisis of 2009-2010, imagined by me, is roughly equivalent to what happened in 2008-2009, starting with the collapse of Lehman Brothers.

Oscar or Manila will be built with AI in 2024. I guarantee it.

And so on.

It's almost scary how many things I "guessed", considering how unlikely or unexpected these things were back in the early 2000s.

I translated the Italian version of the book into English using just GPT-4 (pro version). The translation will not be perfect, but... Most English readers should be able to not die by reading it.

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Enjoy!

Simone

November 2023

*“Twenty years ago, no one could have ever imagined
a revolution of such magnitude.*

*Yet, here it is:
all the functions of a modern computer,
encapsulated in a wristband
to be worn comfortably on the wrist.*

*Whoever doesn't use a Giviki today is destined
for global isolation. To not exist. To not live.*

*It's a new natural prosthesis, a second brain,
even better than the first,
which no one can do without anymore.*

The Giviki is now part of our very DNA.”

Arthur J. Ballmer, CEO, Microsoft Corporation,
July 8th, 2025.

(Note: Giviki can be read like “g-we-key”)

He opened his eyes.

The brilliant summer sun had gently awakened him, and the breeze seemed to have cradled him all night long, as he felt so rested.

July 16th. Fourth anniversary.

He rubbed his sleepy eyes, then suddenly opened them wide awake, staring at the white ceiling searching for invisible details.

Four years. He ran through his thoughts one by one, like pictures to be forever hung on an important wall in the living room of his home.

Punctual as a rooster, the voice that had awakened him every blessed morning, at the same unchangeable time, rang out. A voice so authoritative and absolute that there was no need to use it at a volume louder than normal.

"7:00 AM, Tuesday, July 16th, 2025. Everyone up! Exact ten minutes outside for the check."

Shift Supervisor Luisa Mira, former major in the marines, three years of wars in Israel, two in Congo, six months under the torture of the Salvadoran Contras. You had to listen to her. But she was fair, and never abused her baton.

Leone got up reluctantly; after a slow pee in the bathroom corner, he showed up outside the cell with the usual three minutes to spare. The group of inmates was taken to the cafeteria.

In summer, breakfasts were abundant: fruit, crispy croissants, orange juice. The prisoners suffered less from the heat if well hydrated, and were less prone to violence, preferring to enjoy the sun and swims in the pool. Not fools.

The day they brought him to that prison, the "Redemption" of Pantelleria, he was quite surprised when he was handed a swimsuit, swim cap, and antibacterial soap. Was it a prison or a

resort?

Half an hour later, he was in the water, silently in search of some Goddess to thank. Yes, Goddess: he was certain that if there were some supernatural entity, it had to be female for sure.

The "Redemption", not by chance, was Italy's first experimental prison: library open sixteen hours a day, computers connected to Ultranet, free lessons and seminars, worship spaces for seven different religions, personal closet, well-managed canteen by private companies, wardrobe renewed every year. It was still a prison, albeit softer than many Italian prisons of those years. As the director stated in every public meeting, it gave anyone the chance to use that time, to reintegrate. To 'redeem' oneself.

He bit into an apricot, reflecting that this longed-for 'redemption' was in reality a benefit for few.

From that prison, murderers converted to tailors and rapists became artists emerged... But very few truly believed in their new professions, and little of what they learned there would be part of their future.

Prison kills you, wears you down, annihilates you. It brings you to your knees, whether it's called Redemption or not. The showers were always a place for ambush, the laundries a place for beatings. Without family, friends, women, how can you take comfort in your hypothetical future as an honest citizen?

For him, it was not easy, in that world of crooks. He was not a prisoner like the others, did not reason like them, did not have the same social background. Once out, he would rebuild a normal life. He was a fish out of water. A white sheep in a flock of wolves.

Life in prison is cruel but brutally simple: just don't invade someone else's life. The rest follows. The world out there has many more rules, perhaps less rigid but equally ruthless. The difference is one, indeed two.

The first: in the world there was so-called freedom, inside it was the law of the strongest.

The other is sex.

He returned to the shadow of the building for a quick, surprise-free shower, then headed to the library with the rest of Group R. The ward head approached, stroking the plastic-metal baton. She checked the Giwiki wrapped around her wrist, then whispered:

"The director wants to see you, Leone. Be good, or you'll dream of your 'pazànnic' privileges forever."

There was an understanding between her and the "veteran": only he, a language expert, understood the Hebrew slang of the Head Ward.

He didn't reply, as obvious as the answer was, continuing to walk without showing curiosity.

He arrived in the library's meeting room, where he found himself in the company of a prison guard. That one must have been new, since he didn't remember ever seeing him.

In silent company, he began to groom his long hair in the mirror, retying his darkish ponytail with an old worn elastic. His eyes looked at themselves.

He felt more tired than his thirty-two years, but the gym, the swims, and the decent food had kept him in shape, at least in appearance.

The prison guard almost startled him:

"You seem agitated. Is something wrong?"

A prison guard who addresses you formally, worries about you, and finishes a sentence without a curse?

Yet he seemed old in the job: grey hair confessed half a century, and you didn't stay a prison guard at that oak-age unless you had the right guts and bones.

Leone responded flatly:

"Everything's fine. I'm just wondering the reason for this... Meeting."

The prison guard spoke again:

"How are you finding it here? I noticed that you know the Head Ward well..."

Leone answered sharply:

"How am I finding it? A real holiday. I might just stay another ten years... Do you often sleep with a woman?"

The prison guard narrowed his eyes, but his expression did not change. He said paternally:

"Watch it, boy... It's stupid to disrespect your tormentors... Let's drop it: I don't want to get you into trouble."

"Now that's better. It was too strange to be addressed formally by a prison guard, don't you think?"

"Boy, I like to show respect to others, that's why I prefer to use formal address. There's nothing strange about it, don't you think?"

"Usually a friendly prison guard always has some raging hormones. Confirm?"

The prison guard jumped to his feet: they stared into each other's eyes, and immediately Leone understood and continued, still proud in his voice:

"I believe... I was mistaken."

"I believe so too," the other replied.

The tension disappeared suddenly like a wallet. They sat down again, calmly, as if nothing had happened.

The old man, pulling out a pack of cigarettes, resumed:

"Do you smoke?"

"No, thank you. I don't smoke."

The other added:

"Strange. Does it bother you if I smoke here? I guess it does..."

He shook his head, but the prison guard got up anyway and smoked the cigarette outside the room. On his return, Leone asked slowly:

"You've been a prison guard for a while, right? Why do you care about... Why do you smoke the cigarette outside the room to not disturb an insignificant prisoner? What do you want from me?"

The old man seemed amused by those questions:

"If you live in a prison for over twenty years, like me, maybe you'll know why. Assuming I'm not interested in your behind, do you think there might be other purposes?"

See, I give kindness to those who seem to deserve it. This is my way, and I assure you it works. Anyway, my name is Mori. Bruno Mori."

Leone accepted the answer as sufficient. The other continued:

"Tell me: why are you inside, and why exactly at Redemption?"

"I was a university researcher. A student accused me of abusing my position to harass her. I've been in for four years, and I've just turned the corner."

"Eight in total? A very harsh sentence. It's rare to see people like you here, I mean... Cultured people. Most are rough murderers, often recidivists, while you don't seem like that type at all. What did you do at the university?"

"Languages."

"Languages... Yeah, something I've always hated. God only knows how much I struggle whenever I find some phrase that isn't in Italian. Ah, it would be nice to have a universal language, understandable by everyone... Don't you think?"

Leone became alarmed: something inside him wondered if the guard knew more than he let on.

"I don't think so. After all, many languages also mean many different cultures... Having their own language gives a people the chance to freely express their own culture."

The guard reflected:

"Yes. Anyway, I was referring to the convenience of having an additional language to the mother tongue... It would be easier to travel, exchange information..."

"That's why English already exists... It's just a matter of waiting for the normal course of linguistic changes, which aren't as fast as one might expect... The two great powers, the United States and the Indian Union, speak mainly English, and China has now embraced English in everyday life... Computers, voice command devices, Giwiki, industrial machinery... Trust me, twenty more years, and what you call a universal language will be English."

"Hmm... It remains a language too difficult for me. Especially to

pronounce."

"You're right. We should all be reborn Mezzofantis."

"Mezzofanti?"

"A Bolognese cardinal of the eighteenth century... He knew perfectly over thirty different languages."

"Wow... A case more unique than rare, I guess."

"Yeah... For us mere mortals there are no solutions... Apart from automatic translators. When they work."

After a few silent minutes, Leone was again approached by that chatty guard:

"...What was it called? Help me remember... Hope, or something like that... But yes, that language..."

"Esperanto?"

"Yes, that's the one... Wasn't it a universal language?"

"Yes and no. It was born in 1887. It was a draft of grammar and phonetics, published by a certain Zamenhof, a Jewish ophthalmologist from Warsaw. It was incomplete, and had its limitations... A good idea, but nothing more."

"But how many speak it today?"

"Not many, I would say... About half a million people know it at a basic level. Few thousand speak it fluently."

"Too bad... It would be nice to learn just one language to be able to talk to anyone."

Silence enveloped them again. Leone half-closed his eyes, concealing his own thoughts from the other's view.

Among the order keepers, the guards were the most ignorant and violent, from whom you could certainly not expect poetry and theorems. The guards and prison officers were always obsessed with respect, and often obtained it with violence, insults, deprivations. Criminals understood that, not beautiful poetry. A nice guard does not get respected.

Leone had managed to almost always avoid beatings, thanks to the free lessons he gave for internal competitions. Besides his case, anyway, the mother tongue of the guards was the club. And sexual

violence. But maybe that old man knew how to be tough at the right time.

The door opened and Director Lorenzi, a small but extremely lively man, entered like a gust of wind: he sat in front of the prisoner, adjusted his few black hairs and thick glasses, and finally muttered quickly:

"Leone, today is a big day for you. Listen carefully and don't interrupt me. So, three professors from the University of Reykjavik, in Iceland, have asked you to hold a seminar at their university, about your last research before... Well... We understand each other. They are interested in your studies and could... Ehm... Guard, you can wait outside. Go on, go on."

Mori left the room without delay. The director continued:

"They implied that they could... Do something for you... They have connections here in Italy... You understand what I mean?

I'm glad this prison is finally producing something good, don't you think Leone? You'll do the seminar in virtual reality. I know you're a good boy and that you won't play any tricks, right Leone? Tomorrow afternoon we'll have a VR video link with them, during which you can ask everything you want, obviously in English..."

"Uhm... Also in Icelandic, if you prefer..."

The director was quite surprised at that statement, and the young man took the opportunity to ask:

"May I then prepare my speech in my cell?"

Lorenzi thought it over and nodded.

Leone stood up, took a piece of paper, and wrote down the date: June 10, 2072. The beginning of a new phase of his life.

— — —

The following day he spent the morning in the library, searching for information on Ultramet about the mysterious professors. The equipment was not great, and unfortunately, every action was

recorded, and it could cause several problems for the inmates who were not cautious.

After various searches, he found himself with only one probable clue: Professor Snaefell, one of the world's leading experts on Esperanto, in contact with the university where he had worked.

A strong interest in Esperanto had to be a common denominator; otherwise, they wouldn't have asked for his name. Or maybe the interest was even for... No, no, definitely unlikely. That matter was buried in a tomb.

The speakers played the brisk notes of lunchtime, forcing him to interrupt. The minutes until four o'clock were interminable. Not even swimming in the pool could calm him, nor the jokes exchanged with the usual companions of misfortune.

A few minutes late, Director Lorenzi burst in with his usual malignant energy into the multimedia room of the library, where Leone and the guard Mori were waiting for him. A technician set up the VR connection with the University of Reykjavik, adjusted the three-dimensional cameras well, and then returned to his study.

At 16:30 on the 3D monitor, a connection request appeared. The director, after silencing the Giwiki, coldly intoned some voice commands to the microphone. A splendid yellow-tinted room appeared, with a massive cherry-colored wooden table in the center.

Behind the table, two men, a woman, and a large tropical plant in a pot were smiling.

The director greeted the three in stilted English, who very kindly returned the greeting. In even more faltering English, he introduced them to the prisoner Leone, reading from a slip of paper he was hiding in his hand. Finally, he formally addressed Leone:

"Well, Mr. Leone, it's your turn. I give you the floor."

The young man scrutinized the three professors. The one on the left, about forty, athletic and slim, did not even look like a professor. The one in the center was undoubtedly Snaefell, even taller than the first but decidedly more massive. He looked younger than the fifty years attributed to him. The woman to the left of Snaefell seemed very young, about thirty, not exactly attractive but with a particular and pleasant physiognomy. Leone began:

*"Vú sace baco pagolu maco tu fanore va Snaefell zú"*¹

Snaefell answered with a large smile:

*"Sade babe padone sacu bale panoroso nacomose tu va Leone zó vu fado pa monu zú"*²

Leone lit up: he had seen right! So it was for that reason they had called him! Some questions found a restless answer, while others queued up, waiting for better moments to demand clarification. The director muttered to himself:

'I wonder what they are saying...'

Mori whispered in response:

'I'm sorry, director, I don't speak Icelandic.'

'Ah, right. Icelandic. I hope he knows what he's doing. There are no automatic translators on the market for this devil of a language.'

For twenty minutes, Leone and the three Icelanders talked, laughed, and exchanged jokes, forgetting those around them and the context in which they found themselves. At times, during their dialogue, it seemed to the director that Leone had to resort to English, other times to a different language, with a more rigid and choppy sound.

Finally, Snaefell addressed him again in English, saying that they would organize the seminar for the thirteenth of August and that they would need the physical presence of the detainee for at least twenty days.

Lorenzi was agape: twenty days! It was still about a detainee. The woman, boasting a melodious voice, addressed the director in perfect Italian:

'Mr. Lorenzi, for the international success of our event, it is necessary to prepare everything carefully. Without Dr. Leone's help, such preparation could suffer. We will not interfere with the security measures you will foresee. Do we agree, director?'

Professor Snaefell continued, in slightly harsher but equally correct Italian:

'Do we agree, director?'

The tone and authority left no room for doubt. A clear stance. Yes or no.

The director relaxed the tension, taking leave in Italian: 'I will see what I can do, Professors. I will let you know. My regards.'

Leone took the floor:"

*"baco parelo sale fadode falupe va Islanda zo"*³

*"þano maledo tu va Leone zo vn dadedo zu"*⁴; Snaefell replied, closing the last vowel with a sincere smile.

The connection with the University of Reykjavík ended.

"Well, Leone," the director began, "explain to me what you discussed. Among other things, I noticed that your Icelandic wasn't so perfect after all: you had to resort to English in some cases. Did you think I hadn't noticed? I hope it didn't bother our guests."

Leone replied, with the calm of a root:

“The gentlemen very much enjoyed the conversation, and the laughter and smiles confirm it. They asked me about my activity at the university, the reasons for my arrest, the conditions of the prison... Don’t worry, I have spoken well of it: they were interested to know if I had the possibility to continue my research, and I would say that the library has been crucial... Positively.”

“Good. Very good. Excellent.”

“They were happy to learn that my research conducted here is going in the direction they hoped. That is all.”

“Good. Excellent. Great work, Leone. Unfortunately, regarding your trip, I don’t think that...”

The trill of the Giwiki interrupted the director, announcing an important call on the prison’s videophone. After a few minutes of absence, he returned, serious in expression, continuing where he left off:

“Leone, you will leave here on July 25, escorted by two agents. On August 15, you will return here, I hope with a rich bounty, you understand what I mean, right Leone? Guard, take the prisoner back to his cell.”

Without waiting for an answer, the director left the room, leaving Leone astonished. That Giwikifonata seemed to have played an important role in unlocking the situation.

During the journey to the cell, the guard Mori asked:

“I am happy for you, Leone. It’s an opportunity to get out of here and breathe some fresh air. And then, who knows, one thing leads to another.”

“Yes. Thank you. It may seem strange to you, but it's nice to share the good news with someone who appreciates it. In this case, there's only you, guard Mori, but I gladly settle for that.”

The old man smiled, visibly this time.

“I must say that you speak Icelandic really well, Leone. Where did you have the opportunity to...”

“Icelandic? Never spoken Icelandic in my life, my friend.”

The old man was caught off guard, barely concealing his surprise. His quick wit made him speak again:

“Ah! ... Esperanto, right? That’s why it hadn’t been a complete failure. In fact, your language didn’t seem Nordic...”

“Slavic. It’s called Slavic. Exactly, guard, too sweet. Languages respect the climates of the people who speak them.”

The young man, however, quickly killed his smile, worried about the consequences.

“Don’t worry, Leone. I don’t think it will be necessary to inform the director of this... little trick of yours.”

“Thank you, Mori. He will find out anyway, sooner or later. And, just to be clear, when I was speaking English, it was because they didn’t know what I was saying, not the other way around. And the director thought he had understood everything. Humility is a rare commodity among the powerful!”

A part of his secrets, however, Leone kept to himself.

Neither the guard nor the director had any idea of what he and the Icelandic professors had said to each other, and most importantly they certainly had no idea that the language used was neither Icelandic nor Esperanto, and that no interpreter in the world would have easily unraveled the secrets of their conversation.

The darkness of the IBM virtual helmet lasted only a few moments.

In a flash of light, what seemed to be a real hotel room appeared, perfect in every detail. Immersive Reality, or RIM, was created in the eyeball by two thin rays of light created by the helmet itself. The only annoyance could be when the pupils moved too rapidly: in those cases, for a fraction of a second, darkness returned, then again the realistic image of the moment before. But one got used to it very quickly.

"Hi, Ric," pronounced the thin lips of the young woman sitting on the sofa, in a lit corner of the room.

Leone couldn't immediately respond. He was too busy savoring those unusual sensations, made possible for an ever-increasing number of people, and now more and more often... Except for the inmates of a prison.

"Riccardo... Are you feeling alright? Is everything okay?"

"Sure, sure... It's just that I'm not used to this... Stuff... That's all. You look very well, Sara... Even if I think that your appearance isn't necessarily up-to-date, right?"

Leone pleasantly observed her sweet features, caressed by blonde straight hair that framed two thin lines of makeup around her eyes. Her way of dressing, although it was a virtual model, was as flashy and refined as usual.

"Indeed... It's a somewhat outdated three-dimensional model, think that... But yes, this one is now over eleven months old... It's not worth redoing it if there's no need, and then it's not that cheap... Yours seems to be of really excellent quality."

"It's because of the seminar I was telling you about via Vmail. It will be broadcast in some European universities, and the Icelanders were keen on not letting me make a bad impression. I

will leave in two days, and I will return on August 15.

I feel excited at the thought of being able to tread on free soil for twenty days!"

"I'm happy for you!"

She smiled amusedly. Maybe because of the Immersive Reality, or maybe for who knows what else, her joy seemed to have lost that touch of magic that had so struck him once.

Or maybe he really had lost it. It was still impossible to hide that there had been something between them, something serious. Even the most foolish of the prison guards would have noticed it, and he didn't like it. He tried to control his emotions: this too had to be part of the maturation process in which he believed to be deeply involved since the day of his arrival in prison.

He felt different from the usual criminals, he couldn't hide it. The explanation he usually gave himself was perhaps the most obvious: he didn't behave like everyone else because he wasn't like the others. He wasn't a murderer, a smuggler, a drug dealer... Before the incident, he was a normal person, intellectually gifted, strongly attached to family and friends, immersed in an almost happy life. Except for the almost happy life, everything else remained exactly the same even after the arrest. It's not the punishment you serve that makes you a prisoner.

Being a prisoner means above all having been previously maladjusted. Family problems, work, money, women, drugs, and you find yourself to be a scoundrel. They arrest you, and only the definition of what you are changes, but not the substance.

No one saw prison in a constructive way, but he, whether right or wrong, had managed to make a considerable effort to accept it without getting dragged into drugs or beatings, or into dangerous friendships that will look for you when you're out.

After all, one of the big mistakes of his early steps in the cage had been to judge everything in relation to how it could have been

IF.

IF that hadn't happened, IF that person had done something, IF the judge, if, if, IF!

Then he had realized that the "IF habit" was a common trait among many people. He had therefore made a decision: to accept what had happened, and to start from there to reconstruct what was possible, slowly, one step at a time. Four years of rain had quenched the fields since then, and billions of clouds had taken turns in the sky.

The only problem, the biggest one, a sword of Damocles hanging over his mental health, was loneliness. Not having friends. Not having a woman by your side. Not being able to raise children with her. Not being able to fall asleep every night to the melody of her breathing. Having to give up so many moments of happiness that would not be returned.

But the point was just there: to move forward without thinking about how everything could have been IF he had not ended up in prison, but simply asking what to do to make things better, and that's it.

"Sara, why don't you... Why don't you come visit me, before I leave? I think I could have an hour, tomorrow aftern..."

"No, Ric. I can't," she interrupted him. "I'm not... I'm not in Italy right now. Things have changed. I never told you about it through Vmail. I didn't think it was appropriate. I'm sorry. I..."

Women. Women. Women.

"You see, Ric, it's not easy to talk to you about... Certain things.

It's about... Louis. Ugh. Maybe you guessed.

Ric, I promise that I'll find a day to visit you, when you return.

Okay? I'll take a couple of days off, and... I'll come to see you.

Agreed?"

Women. Women. Women. You think all brains and hearts work like yours, or that it's yours that beat or pulse at the right rhythm?

Tit for tat.

"NO!"

He felt a surge of violence take over his body, but he managed to

contain it, to push it back.

“Ric, you shouldn’t take it like this! Or shall we start over? You don’t want to talk to me about certain things, but that doesn’t stop me from moving on with my life, does it?”

It’s been over between us for a long time, at a precise moment that you well know. You can’t expect me to keep you updated on my most intimate affairs... That intimacy that you still think you feel actually doesn’t exist anymore. We are not together, Ric, there is only the affection from a great friendship, yes, but nothing else. You know it, you can’t deny it. I... have a new partner. You know him, I know you don’t like him, but you don’t have to live with him. I chose.”

“Sara, why does it turn out that you have to talk to me about some things and yet you still haven’t? Especially knowing that it’s about Louis...”

“It wasn’t the right moments, Ric. That’s all. And then your path is another, with another woman, you just have to trust in the future...”

“That’s enough, Sara. Diablo! Another woman... Where? In prison?”

And then don’t talk nonsense, you know very well that you will not come to visit me, neither after the seminar nor next year, and the reasons are the same that have prevented you from visiting me in the last four years and that I don’t think it’s necessary to repeat here. Let’s just say that the main and perhaps the only one of these reasons starts with an L, is an impotent and microcephalic opportunist male, and is a pain in my ass like a fat lady in stilettos. I have never demanded to be kept informed about your affairs. It was you who started with a videomail, you who asked to keep in touch, you who needed a confidant, my broad shoulders. Do you think you can decide how far that goes? I don’t think so!

You may be too accustomed to civilian life, and I too little by now, but the fact is that I don’t like to pretend that everything is okay when it isn’t. There’s a line of balance in every human relationship,

so too between you and me. As long as the balance is maintained, all is well. As long as it changes, but does so calmly and gradually, as is the order of things, all is well.

But if you upset this balance at your pleasure, whether you're a stranger, friend, girlfriend, wife, mother or daughter, I will push you back because you allowed yourself to violate me.

In everyday life, out there, in the civil world, our boundaries are no man's land. Some people treat you however they want, but often it's preferred to just let it go... Let's call it 'knowing how to live in a society'. Let's call it tolerance, which sometimes leads to a useless and harmful niceness.

I, today, here, am a vigilant sentinel of my territories: I do not invade those of others, nor do I allow others to invade mine.

You started a correspondence, you drew a boundary, that boundary has changed, gradually, over the years. Until yesterday, this boundary saw us close, almost in contact, until yesterday you shared many things with me, today you tell me that there's something else, you draw a new line and you expect me to accept it just like that, without a word.

I will not!

You move away from me? Fine, then I also move away from you, and I have every right to do so. However, this does not mean that we are even. Do you think I haven't understood? It doesn't take much to guess everything, Sara, even though you've hidden everything from me. Correct me if I'm wrong.

For sure you've been together for a long time. Right?

Silent agreement.

"Then... You moved in with him. Did you get married? I guess so. What a fantastic ring he must have given you. Then his job must have taken him elsewhere. United States? India? South Africa? Tell me!"

Sara lifted her head and showed the darkest expression a 3D model could display.

"China." she said.

"Fine. For a year? Or maybe less? Can I put the cherry on top? Tell me, let's see if I guess... Boy or girl?"

Sara burst into tears, pitifully imitated by her hologram.

"I almost expected it. The only thing that surprises me is that things have evolved so quickly... It must be that in prison time seems to stop. And you, over all these years, have continued to slap in my face a fake reality of cotton wool."

A crying woman is always hurtful... Besides the fact that you feel deprived of a happiness that was yours and that you can never have with that person again, never again, because of one too many screw-ups (and a consequent stork with a bundle) with the only man you really feel you hate. Or maybe because of YOUR screw-up, with a much cleverer student than you imagined. It hurts to realize a checkmate.

Sara reacted:

"Well, there's no need for me to say anything since you seem to have figured it all out yourself. You're cruel, Ric! I don't deserve to be treated like this!"

"Come in my place for just a week, then try telling me again, if you can. Do you know what it feels like to be trapped?"

"Ric... This 'trap'... Damn, you asked for it!"

He didn't respond right away. He felt the anger boiling inside him, it seemed almost as if his blood emitted a dark rumble as it frothed impetuously among his tense flesh. Muscles stiffened, breath held. Calm down.

You must be the master of your emotions. Not the other way around. Calm.

Calm. One breath. Two breaths. Pause. Another breath. Calm.

He replied like a Buddha sculpted in the ink of a Hesse novel:

"Congratulations on the baby.

Do.

Not.

Call.

Me.

Ever.

Again.

Goodbye, Sara."

He ended the call without waiting. Darkness enveloped him for a moment, then the technician removed the RIM helmet and the usual room reappeared.

The ever-present Mori came back in at that moment. Clearly, he had had the foresight to step out during their conversation, to give him a semblance of privacy.

A pearl among swine.

They looked at each other for a moment, like old friends. It almost seemed to the young man that everything he had to say, and hadn't yet said, the old man already knew.

Just as Ric wanted, the jailer did not speak to him, nor did he ask any questions. He simply supervised him, silent and calm.

Ric went to grab a bite to eat and was accompanied by Mori to his cell, where he immediately lay down on the white laundry cot and started to think.

The day after tomorrow he would go to Iceland.

Sara.

Here it is, the "if only" habit, resurfacing almost silently.

IF.

If he hadn't been arrested they might have had children, and perhaps they would have been happy. He would have made a career at the university, she in journalism.

They would have earned enough to afford a house with a small garden, two holidays a year, a family car to take the kids for a ride, and a couple of Toyota Picos for city traffic.

The rest of the time with the children, with friends, with parents, aging peacefully. What do you say to a scorned mind that presents you with such a failure?

He imagined himself ten years older, alone, in a rented hovel, and he imagined his reasoning. If at that time, many years ago, in prison, instead of feeling sorry for yourself you had reacted, where

would you be now, Ric? Maybe in the arms of a new wife, in a nice house. Maybe traveling around the world.

Certainly with no regrets.

He was ENTITLED to a happy life. No one would take it from him, not a prison, not a former wife, not the betrayal of friends.

He felt he had gifts, a boorish charm and great self-confidence.

These gifts should not be wasted: use them, Ric. USE THEM!

There it is, the sensation, the thrill, the warmth. It's what allows a paralyzed person to win the Olympics in a wheelchair, a blind person to become an orchestra conductor, a loser... to start winning again.

Few achieve it, but why not you, Ric?

What's stopping you from accepting things as they are, and building something for your future?

You're in prison. You're thirty-two, with degrees in mathematics and languages, sixty thousand euros saved up, iron health, charm not worse than the worst man in the world, a very dirty criminal record, but abilities that won't stop you from finding a decent job, whatever it will be.

If someone comments on your past, they can't say anything other than 'swine', definitely not a thief or murderer. You have no more friends? You will have others, not worse than those you've lost.

You'll feel like a stranger in a strange land (dear sweet Heinlein), but you'll be strong, you'll persevere, you'll work, you'll study, you'll court. You will find a woman whom silent fate wants by your side. You will marry her.

In ten years, one July morning you'll hear the birds in the garden of your country house, the one you always dreamed of, you'll look at yourself in the mirror and smile, thinking about how far you managed to come. Your past will never go away, nor your ex-wife snatched from your bed by her handsome French colleague after an even more attractive student had you thrown in jail, nor the abuses you had to endure for four years and will have to endure for many more, nor the ruined career, nor all the rest.

But life will smile at you again. As long as you want it.
You lost everything? You will gain new things, and maybe you'll appreciate what others can't even see.
In theory, you could even be happy in prison. What's stopping you? Your desires. It's satisfying those that determine your present and future happiness. Our existence is conjugated with a single verb: to desire! How many stupid sadnesses for the lack of futile and costly idols! Cars? Villa? Rolex? Boat? Millionaire wife with porcelain buttocks and bleached hair?
Not for you, Ric. You weren't attracted to that in the past, and you won't be attracted to it in the future. No status symbols, no designer clothes, no trendy vacations, no polite sex, no bleach-white children, no ultra-bourgeois conversations and copycat evenings. To hell with that.
Life is a journey in search of happiness. What's stopping you, Ric, from walking your path? Are you in a hurry? Don't tell me. Prison is a good trainer of patience.
Well, then: from now on, for four years in prison and who knows how many others in free life, you will try to satisfy your desires. You will never allow your body to break this rule out of laziness, sadness, or whatever else.
Do you want a woman to love, with whom to share a peaceful and placid couple's life? Is this your desire, Ric? You have no choice. Fulfill it.
Are you in prison? Do what you can to get out and not go back.
Do you need a job? Use the time you spend here productively and, when you get out, capitalize on your sacrifices on your hard-earned papers.
Do you feel wrong? You will have to make up for the discordant sides of your persona with many, many positive notes.
Aren't you attractive? You'll be interesting.
Aren't you pure? You'll be sincere.
Aren't you the best? You'll be the best that your woman can have.
This is a pact with yourself, Ric. At this point, you have to choose

whether to live like a shadow, or grandly like few know how to do. It's difficult, you know. You're not used to such unyielding discipline.

Do you really believe in yourself, Ric? Do you think you're clever, tough? You're down, Ric, you're in jail. Stand up. Fight. And win! He sprang to his feet and tore through the air screaming:

"Guard!"

The state parasite approached and opened the peephole, mumbling as he chewed some sort of licorice:

"What's the matter, Leone? Are you feeling sick?"

"Never been better. I would like to go to the library. NOW."

— — —

After hours of studying in the library, in the last half hour he had relaxed a bit, looking up news about Iceland on Ultranet, until his curiosity had driven him towards Solaria.

He used his Senior Navigator privileges (a little gift for his seminar) to access the library's only Alpha station, similar to those installed all around the planet. These stations were connected to Ultranet and equipped with personal recognition, and they made it possible to use 3D technologies to navigate the virtual world.

He put on the RIM (Immersive Reality) helmet and immediately found himself in front of the options menu at the center of a 3D tropical sunset. The sliding door of the booth had already sealed hermetically behind him. A sweet female voice greeted him:

"For any help, you can press the flashing blue globe at the bottom left. Have a good navigation."

Navigating simply with his gaze and a few whispers, he found a service about Solaria, the "new world".

The story of this small city-state, then fully recognized as a nation

in 2018, was incredible. Again, the amount of information and its quality made him really appreciate his new privileges.

Many would never have access to all that material, and this, he reflected, saddened him a lot. The more information travels among people, the better off the world is.

As soon as his voice gave the command, a satellite vision of the Earth appeared, so realistic that for a moment an Arctic shiver ran down his spine, and he seemed to feel the coldness of the cosmos.

The image crossed over Africa, Europe, and Central America in a slow elliptical arc to finish over the Australian continent, then it descended over the Gulf of Carpentaria in the North, overlooking the York Peninsula; the northern part of the peninsula, bordered by Kowanyama to the southwest and by Cape Melville to the southeast, was Solarian territory: about 80,000 square kilometers once almost desert, in part transformed into forests and nature reserves.

The image lowered over the inhabited area, spread abundantly over part of the plain between the old city of Weipa, leveled to the ground to build the first nuclei of Solaria, and the mountain range to the east.

You could distinguish roads, buildings, and especially the center of power, the Palace of the Sun, whose mass dominated the gardens of an entire hexagon. The entire metropolis, in fact, was divided into hexagonal sectors, covered in vegetation and large spherical buildings well spaced from each other, according to a planned project: experts had praised the inauguration of that wonder, which the cynics instead painted, perhaps rightly, as a colossal real estate speculation. The image positioned itself above the Palace, then rotated to view it from an impressive lateral angle. It would probably have been really frightening to see it in real life.

The Palace was a gigantic structure, covered in bluish plastoglass, which followed the shapes of a geodesic (a kind of sphere formed

by hexagons and pentagons), embedded in the ground for about a third. The Palace housed the bureaucratic and political apparatus of the city.

The upper part progressively exposed the mighty framework, to allow light to penetrate beyond the glass roof, towards the hollow interior.

The top, at nearly eight hundred meters from the ground, housed a squat platform, believed to be the dwelling of the Great Guide, who was once a mysterious billionaire named Ken Freeman, the founder of Solaria.

The surrounding buildings mimicked the spherical shape and geodesic frame of the Palace, but on a smaller scale. No earthquake or tornado would ever be able to scratch those mighty and elegant structures.

The footage showed the so-called Eternal Square, enclosed within the Palace of the Sun, rich in animated statues, milestones with quotes from famous characters, and always visited by a multitude of people.

The rest of the city was not viewed in the footage, which instead immediately moved to the surrounding arid area, broken by expanses of vegetation growing around tiny lakes, a beautiful nature reserve that covered the rest of the industrious nation.

The voice dwelled on the partial embargo to which Solaria had subjected itself in the early years of its life as an independent nation, and the cessation in 2021, which had allowed, among other things, the dissemination of all that information.

Despite his morbid curiosity, he knew almost nothing about the lives of its seven million inhabitants... The only way would have been to visit it, a privilege for a few lucky ones, apart from the millions of immigrants who had settled there in its first five years of history, the 'Foundation Years'... This huge flow favored

scientists, entrepreneurs, and dreamers, often young and wealthy.

He closed the footage and returned to the main menu. The sunset from earlier had been replaced by a suggestive night panorama of Sydney Bay. Among the available options, he chose a footage about the Great Guide, dated 2024, curious to hear some of his speech.

In a few moments, an oceanic crowd appeared, gathered in the sunny Eternal Square and almost annihilated by the monstrous grandeur of the sleek lines of the Palace that cradled them. In the center, standing on a small round platform suspended in the air, Ken Freeman, the Great Guide, was serenely greeting his people.

Tall but thin, shaved bald, splendid bronzed complexion, aquiline nose, dressed in a simple white tunic, and his face inspired extraordinary calm and tranquility.

What until about a decade earlier had been one of the least known tycoons in the world, at that moment stood as the leader of an entire people, for whom he had invested his entire economic fortune by founding Solaria. The voiceover would never hint at the speculation speech, but it didn't matter much: Solaria remained his forbidden dream.

The subdued murmur of the crowd ended at the precise moment GG lowered the arm with which he was greeting. Without further delay, he began to speak, while the rest of the universe seemed magically enchanted to listen to him:

"What joy to see you here. As every time, it seems to me like living a dream, fearing the moment when I will wake up, realizing that all this is only in my mind.

But it is not so!

You are real, Solaria is alive, this counts, and I assure you that there is still no Immersive Reality capable of giving me the same sensations that I feel here, in front of hundreds of thousands of

friends.

Yes, friends. It is not the rhetorical term of a skilled demagogue: it is precisely and exactly what I feel for you, brave men and women who many years ago believed in me and left your homeland, your loved ones, your certainties to come here, to bet on a slightly better future for you and the generations that will follow.

In embracing Solaria you also abandoned some of the inconveniences of your society, and this makes you not fearless heroes of ancient times, but rather... Wise!

Unlike the great orators of crowds, I do not resort to unseemly means to inflame you, to move you, to bend you to the emotions that I choose for you. The individual is lost in the crowd and easily submits to its whims. But not you!

You are rational, you have trained your conscience, your awareness, for many years. You will not applaud, you will not shout, you will not give space to your emotions, but only to your intellect.

No one, ever, must be able to squeeze you in their fist and do with you what they want, manipulating your hearts. And no one should presume to control you, to censor you, to chain you! Never!

When, and if, I represent a danger to you, your anger will rise and push you to use the powers you have not to elect me, but to send me away. As the philosopher Popper astutely understood in the last century, true democracy is not, for the people, the power to elect, but the power to reject!

Never forget this lesson, Solarians. Well-being makes you soft and not vigilant, as health makes you forget the disease and as freedom makes you forget its eternal value.

Make sure that suffering is not necessary to remind you of your duties as a people. Seek the path of wisdom. Look at the faces of

your neighbors, now! Yes, look at them, silently. You are not a crowd. You are individuals. The rights and happiness of each of you are more important than the fleeting happiness of the crowd.

We are together on this path, we are Solaria. The nation of reason, the city of light. And remember: here there is always a place for those who have something to contribute to the common well-being. We are waiting for you, new friends, with open arms.

Let's continue to make Solaria a model for the world.

From this depends your freedom.!"

The image moved away from the demigod and slowly passed over the crowd, rising higher and higher until it left the Eternal Square to admire the Palace of the Sun in all its splendor, illuminated by the scorching light of the day.

Ric closed the footage. Ken Freeman. The Great Guide!

Undoubtedly endowed with great intellectual and material resources, he was unknown until the early years of the millennium, with capitals around the world under different names, accumulated, it was said, mainly illegally. He was suspected of having been the main speculator in the 2011 Sino-Russian war, and of having acquired the old GoogleNet, now Ultranet, by illicit means.

What an undertaking, to create an entire nation in just a few years!

The gigantic machinery that built the entire city from nothing was designed and studied in various research centers around the world, before being assembled and employed so effectively.

It would have been thrilling to be able to visit Solaria. His curiosity demanded it.

He removed his helmet and left the cabin. He felt tired.

He calmly waited for the twenty-three group and then returned to

his cell. He needed a lot of rest, and the deep dreamless sleep of that night granted it to him.

"Welcome to Reykjavik, Dr. Leone!"

For four years, no one had called him that anymore.

As was his custom at a first meeting, he vigorously shook the hand of Professor Snaefell, who unexpectedly returned the grip with equal strength, then hugged him with his massive frame as if he had been an old army buddy. Those nearly two meters of a man, even without an affectionate and crushing gesture like that, radiated sympathy from every pore. His blond long, straight hair contrasted with the dull authority of his austere and elegant clothes, and his clumsy but pleasant features seemed to have been conjured up by the pencil of a slightly mad and alcoholic cartoonist.

Monday, July 25, 2025. Iceland was a paradise. As the plane glided to align with the runway of the new floating airport, designed by the famous architect Joseph Grima, a mystical happiness had taken hold of him. Iceland, the Promised Land, Columbus's Cathay, a land of ice, geysers, fish, and elves, had welcomed him like a son.

He replied in perfect English:

"I'm glad to meet you, Snaefell! I am not yet fully aware of what is happening... After four years in prison, certain feelings are almost forgotten."

Almost to curb his enthusiasm, one of the two prison guards who was holding his arm, a short and stocky blond named Gardini, gave his arm a small squeeze. The other was the now inseparable Mori.

Do whatever you want, Ric thought, but I am here, breathing free air! He filled his lungs with the briny breeze that blew warm towards the coast and smiled blissfully, blowing away the rust of the gray years in a cage. It would be hard to readjust to

Redemption after that experience. Perhaps the sentence would be reduced after that affair, and although it was a faint hope, in those moments, it seemed almost plausible.

"You look good, Leone. Fit, in health... I can't wait to be brought up to speed on everything. Come on, Iceland is eager to make your acquaintance!"

Followed by two sturdy men who looked like twins, Snaefell led them towards the airport exit.

Instead of the usual car, a strange, slender vehicle was waiting for them, floating on a monorail, while other similar vehicles bypassed it, heading towards Reykjavik.

"Iceland, dear Leone, is a country rich in history and traditions that happily survive any technological innovation, although this does not slow down progress. What you see here is one of the novelties of these last years: a magnetic transport system similar to the one used in Solaria...

You know about Solaria, right?"

Ric wondered if Snaefell was unaware of his recent interests in Solaria. He let him continue after a half-assent.

"Our big difficulty is tectonic instability. An underground transport network like that of the Solarians is pure madness, but on the other hand, our population density is minimal and hurry is certainly not part of our way of life... So, we can afford to build long road corridors, suspended a meter from the ground, which facilitate transport and allow significant energy savings. This vehicle was designed by an Indian engineer, for a change, and represents the first version of T-MagLev terrestrial vehicles introduced here. Please, onboard!"

The giant hastily typed something on the splendid Giwiki and then gave voice commands to the vehicle, which immediately moved without any jolts or vibrations.

The short journey to the capital first took them underwater, in a large transparent and flexible tunnel thirty meters deep, and then out in the open, through faint expanses of sparse pastures and

rocks. The sun was pleasantly warm, and the not excessive speed allowed them to enjoy the comfort and the scenery.

Reykjavik had changed very little in the last fifteen years. After the terrible global economic recession of 2009-2010, any innovative tendency of the government had been suppressed, and the Companies that dealt with genetics or hydrogen transport, flagships of the Icelandic scientific sector, had closed or had been moved (his father, before retiring, had worked at the Icelandic Fiat plant, where the famous Fiat Mia hydrogen was produced).

His accommodation surprised him: he did not expect that luxurious penthouse, on the fourth floor of a very colorful building that smacked of the eighteenth century. Mori took possession of the room with three beds, suggesting that he and his colleague would sleep with the detainee, but the two men who accompanied them were actually two policemen, who insisted that at least one of them sleep with Leone. Mori and one of the twins therefore settled in with Ric, leaving the adjacent room to the others.

"Tonight we will all go to dinner in a special little place... I take the liberty of offering, even if I imagine you would anyway have all expenses covered. Please accept, take it as... A gesture of courtesy and welcome to our country!

I ask you to forgo handcuffs or things that suggest the nature of Leone's stay. Here we do not have an army and the police forces are scarce, since crime is practically non-existent. Think that today in our prisons there are only five inmates, three of whom are foreigners! Leone will not attempt any escape... Also because he would be recaptured within a few minutes."

Ric, having settled his luggage, went out on the balcony to admire the mild summer sun. In summer, at those latitudes, darkness was virtually non-existent.

The improvised guide led them on foot to Gaukurinn, a famous bar along Tryggvagata avenue.

As every week, Professor Snaefell explained to his guests, a foreign

musical group would perform. The professor made his way through the patrons and chose a large wooden table in a corner, away from the stage. While the others sat down, he fiddled with his Giwiki to notify that he would not be at dinner. His Giwiki was the latest generation, equipped with a tiny retractable earpiece and a microscopic optical projector, or Geovisor, both wireless. The progress in that sector must have been extraordinary over the last four years. What up to twelve years before had been only a prototype in some research center had now become an indispensable necessity. Getting used to the conveniences that the Giwiki offered meant resigning oneself to its presence forever. Excluding prisoners, of course.

The moderate turnout of that hour was rapidly increasing. No one paid attention to them when they entered, except for a group of kids who seemed to laugh at some stupidity about their way of dressing. For the dishes, everyone let the professor guide them.

"What will you have to drink, Leone? Or can I call you Riccardo?"

"Call me Ric! Red beer, thanks. I've been dreaming of it for years!"

"You know, Ric? Until 1988, here in Iceland, there was a prohibition on all alcoholic beverages! Incredible, right? Yet, in many ways, we have always been considered a modern Western country. Iceland is full of contradictions, sometimes pleasant and curious, almost always eccentric like this one!"

Snaefell's mannerisms evoked youth and cheerfulness and helped to freshen up his appearance. His Atlantic blue eyes, different from the usual light blue of Icelanders, were penetrating and curious, and his clumsy yet kind movements contrasted with the seriousness of his duties and his wrestler's physique.

"I've been coming to this bar since school days. Before prohibition was abolished, they secretly sold real alcohol here, not the kind of substitutes that were found elsewhere. At midnight on the first day without prohibitions, I got colossally drunk and lost my virginity to a beautiful girl in a dignified manner. I was thirteen years old.

However, alcohol is not a passion of mine... It was in my youth, like anything that is forbidden to a rebellious spirit!"

From the information gathered, Snaefell should have been one of those classic pompous professors, immersed in his illustrious academic world and distant from the everyday real life. To Leone's delight, he was instead proving to be very down-to-earth and definitely a great guy. His Icelandic accent made every word jagged, but the cheerfulness he exuded in speaking managed to soften it again.

"What do you think, Ric? Is something wrong?" he asked with a wide probing smile.

"I was thinking about when you 'lost your virginity'. You surprised me! In my country, there is a strong habit of modesty regarding the sexual sphere..."

"Oh... I'm sorry, I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable!"

"No, no, not at all, Snaefell. However, I was thinking that some peoples are more inclined to live certain things naturally, compared to us."

Snaefell resumed cheerfully:

"Well, in our fairy tales there are Gods who feast and get drunk, certainly not pure and chaste like the Christian one! It's true that we are mostly Christians, but the ecclesiastical power of your church has imposed so many restrictions on you for centuries!"

"It's almost like you've read my mind! I didn't know you were Christians, though."

"Ah, really? You will find it incredible, but it was decided by a vote, about a thousand years ago! We became Protestant Christians and abandoned any pagan rites. Well, except for the elves, of course! One day I'll tell you the whole story.

Where do you think the church's strict sexual prohibitions come from? Then I'll tell you what I think..."

The young man reflected, sipping his beer. Around him, the bar was slowly coming to life in anticipation of the imminent show. Gardini kept an eye on him, while Mori displayed a smiling

tranquility. The twin policemen were unobtrusive.

"The church, Snaefell, tries to limit the sexual release of the faithful to direct it towards more congenial things, like worship, for example, or adoration. In each of us, energies are created that need to be released, and sex and adoration are some of the ways... Maybe even a soccer match, or a street protest, or a military march..."

"I agree, Ric. Moreover, by associating Christian marriage with pleasure that has been suppressed for years, Christians are pushed to be grateful to their God. I also remember an Italian writer from the last century... He published a hilarious and yet very incisive book, it talked about a director conversing with his enormous penis. The director abstained from sex with his wife because he was convinced that he could harness the energies to produce a literary masterpiece, but the penis tried to dissuade him and often succeeded."

"It was Moravia... 'Me and Him'... Something similar to the old Freud."

"What do you think, Leone, what becomes of Art, poetry, literature, when a man is allowed to release those energies?"

"Probably less fruitful, less... sharp, less aggressive. But at that point, who would care? Anything that gives you the chance to enjoy life also makes you less prone to adhere to dogmas or fears... Without sex and without laughter, you become hysterical, and if you're hysterical, your frustrations are channeled into worship. But if you're satisfied every night with a woman's body, what do you care about the rest of the world? Which God could you fear or revere when life satisfies you? As Schopenhauer said, religions are like fireflies: they need darkness to shine!"

"But that's not the main reason for the church officials' prohibition of marriage."

"Ah, no? And what is it, then?"

"But Ric, as an Italian, you should know this well!"

"I only know that churchmen, when they are not wonderful,

commit the worst sins."

"If a priest can't marry... What's the important consequence, do you think? Look at it from the point of view of temporal power."

"Well... So... A priest who doesn't marry... doesn't make love, at least in theory... And has time to follow his disciples..."

"Come on, Ric... It's so obvious!"

"Maybe that's why it's eluding me."

"Children, Ric."

"Children? Diablo, of course! No child, no inheritance!"

Snaefell continued:

"That's how the church prospered over the centuries. All the earnings of its brethren went back to Rome, after the funerals... Lands, gold, documents, books, furniture... Everything. But that's not the only way. Think of the Anglican church, or Scientology... The method changes, not the trick..."

Ric suddenly changed the subject:

"Listen, Snaefell... What can you tell me about the phone call received by the director a few minutes after the end of our first meeting?"

Snaefell smiled complicitly without answering, letting on that he was well aware of it.

"Well, it worked splendidly! Hey, that's Bobby Harden!"

A quintet of black musicians had gone up on the small stage and was setting up the instruments. The audience whispered anxiously.

"The soul of New York City? Is that really him? I wouldn't have recognized him without your suggestion."

At the first notes, Bobby pulled out a veteran soul, rocking his head and vibrating with his still slender and harmonious body, and the audience immediately followed him. A pink tongue capable of a thousand contortions, which gave that characteristic touch to the notes he caressed with love, pulsed between his very white teeth.

Ric half-closed his eyes, while thin shivers ran down his skin and heated his cheeks. Sometimes there's nothing like good music in

the right place at the right time, holy Christ!

The professor smiled pleased, then resumed:

"Now it's time to talk about something else, my friend."

"Yes, Snaefell. I actually wanted to mention to you the material I have gathered for the..."

"No, Ric. I mean... Talking about your liberation."

"EH?"

The young man's eyes widened, and he let himself go to an expression of pure astonishment. The guards seemed not to have heard. Suddenly he felt himself plunged back into stark reality.

"What do you mean, Snaefell?" he asked in a low, worried voice.

Snaefell gently squeezed his arm and replied calmly:

"Calm down, Ric. Do you know Bragi Arnason? He's been our president for ten years now. He bet on hydrogen as an alternative energy source over forty years ago, and thanks to him Iceland has experienced intense economic growth. The T-MAGLEV terrestrial vehicles with magnetic levitation were his doing, as well as the hydrogen fishing boats.

Bragi has a lot of influence in the world of transport, and the Italian transport companies are very much tied to Italian politicians... You see where I'm going with this, right?"

"Amnesty!"

"You're sharp, young man! I like you a lot, Ric, and I admire what you've done over the past years, however, Arnason is doing all this for a specific reason. My friend, a big opportunity is presenting itself to you! I'm really happy for you... I feel almost the same joy I would for a son!"

"I thank you very much, Snaefell. Your words are a warm embrace for a convict like me! Explain to me better what it's about."

"First I need to know one thing, Ric. I'm sorry to invade your privacy, but... Do you have a woman, in Italy?"

"Of course? A flock... They line up outside the prison waiting for me to get out."

"Ahem... I see... It's important that I know, though. I mean... You

were married before, right?

If I ask it's only because it's necessary, believe me..."

"I believe you, Snaefell. Without you, I wouldn't be here: I'm grateful, and for this, you deserve my trust, just enough to still be cautious."

"I'm happy and honored to deserve it!"

"As for my wife, she requested and obtained a divorce right after the trial, for the reasons you can imagine. We talk occasionally, but that's it. She has another man now. I think she moved in with him in China. End of story."

He preferred not to mention other details.

"I understand. I wasn't aware, and I'm very sorry, Ric. It must not have been easy."

"It's not what you think. It wasn't an ordinary story and it didn't end like an ordinary one. However... No, it wasn't easy."

The two looked at each other in silence as Bobby Harden announced a new song, accompanied by the warm applause of the patrons.

He glanced at Mori, who was conversing in English, of course, with one of the twin police officers. Director Lorenzi had enrolled him in an accelerated course before departure, and good Mori wanted to take the opportunity to get comfortable with the language.

Gardini, on the other hand, was staring at him with a sullen look. Ric drained his beer, signaled to the passing waiter to bring him another, then continued:

"Tell me, then, Snaefell... What's it about?"

"Ric, I can't talk to you about it before your seminar the day after tomorrow. You'll hear from... the directly interested party!"

"Why so mysterious?"

"You trust me, don't I?"

"You're not wrong, friend, but you could at least tell me who it is, or is that to remain a secret too?"

The professor remained silent, smiling and shrugging.

"Alright. I want to let you do your thing, even though it's not in my nature. I'm too happy being free to ruin everything with some worry.

"Tell me something about yourself, then. Wife, children..."

"Certainly! I've been married for twenty-four years to Laura, a wonderful and capable Canadian woman. We have four children. You should see the youngest, Ric! His name is Ingo... Adorable! Ahh... And to think I was never drawn to family life... You know, us academics: research, publications, career... Brr!

I was raised in very austere environments, maybe that's why I became... But yes, do you know what my nickname at the university is? Professor Clown! Maybe because of all the little pranks I play..."

"The nickname doesn't seem so out of place, you know..."

"Thank you, Ric, I take it as a compliment! You see, my love for comedy and fun comes exactly from their absence during the troubled years of my youth.

Often, when something is missing, you do everything to replace it however you can... You're ugly and you become a skilled Latin lover, you're short and you develop a strong character capable of facing abuse, you're shy and you become extroverted, you're weak and you become a sports champion! Well, I must admit it's not like that for everyone... But it's still a strong stimulus."

Ric replied:

"The famous dumb blonde theorem."

At that moment, his more masculine side noticed the beauties in the place, and he couldn't help but dwell on their forms. He felt the enormous weight of his abstinence on the one hand, and the oppression of his grim experiences in prison.

Snaefell's grin faded and he became thoughtful, staring at him.

Ric realized that, without even wanting to, he had ended up talking about a very delicate subject for him. It seemed to him like he was back in a courtroom, hearing the judge's gavel echoing as the sentence was handed down. Snaefell shot:

"Ric, are you innocent?"

Leone took a few seconds, then looked at him calmly and replied: "In these years, Snaefell, I've missed a true friend. Not one of circumstance, not a cellmate who stabs you in the back, or a murderer who's been your gym buddy for many years and just for that claims to be your blood brother.

You seem like a loyal and friendly person, and so I feel I can tell you this: what you've read about me should satisfy all your curiosity. There's nothing more to say. It's a closed matter."

Ric looked him in the eyes very calmly, fixing his gaze on him for a time that seemed interminable.

"I'm guilty, Snaefell. I deserve the sentence that I'm laboriously serving."

The professor was almost hurt by this. He silenced his clownish soul and became definitively serious, realizing that the subject had also changed the mood of his Italian friend.

"Snaefell, this is not how I had imagined my first evening of freedom. But don't worry... It will pass soon, you'll see. Now, if you don't mind..."

He got up and extended his arm to Gardini who, as if he had been waiting for a long time, clutched him like the long-awaited prey of a starving carnivore.

Fucking faggot.

At that moment a girl with a pleasantly low-cut shirt passed by him, meeting his gaze, but he remained indifferent: his instincts had retreated to some corner of his gut.

Even if it didn't show, Mori had followed that last part of the dialogue between Leone and Snaefell with attention, equally struck by the conclusion.

Having paid the bill, the six men left the place and calmly returned to the hotel.

— — —

"Finally, we meet, Doctor Leone! I am Venus Cristensen.

Professor Snaefell must have told you about me."

The (little) troubled sleep and the early rising that morning made him really unresponsive. The girl was surprised by the several seconds of silence that preceded the answer.

"...

...

Forgive me. It was not a pleasant night.

I am pleased to meet you, Doctor."

The young woman replied cordially:

"Don't call me doctor! I am just an employee at the Research Center, and my degree is still a year away."

Mori and Gardini introduced themselves.

Ric sized her up for a moment. Petite, slender, blonde hair, mahogany eyes, rosy cheeks, purple lipstick and makeup in tune but not too marked. A gold chain around her neck and light, fashionable clothes, perhaps a bit excessive for a prisoner who had been inside for years.

At first glance, he would have given her twenty-six or twenty-seven years. Excellent English, but with German inflections that betrayed her origins. No heels, and perhaps that made her seem shorter than she was. Maybe she was there for a scholarship or an international exchange. He reflected on how much he hated women's heels; he almost suffered for them at the thought of what those poor feet, those ankles, and not least their credit cards had to endure. He would have gladly...

"Doctor Leone!"

The girl shot him a dirty look and gnashed:

"Did I pass the exam? What grade do you give me?"

He no longer thought shame was possible after seeing bearded backsides in showers for years, but evidently, he was mistaken. Mori and Gardini looked at each other complicitly but Ric did not notice them.

"Forgive me, I didn't... Not..."

"Never mind... If you follow me, I'll take you to the office the

professor has reserved for us this afternoon. You have already had lunch, right?"

"No.

...

I mean, yes, sorry, I... I had lunch earlier, around one o'clock."

"Doctor... Are you feeling alright?"

"I would say no, Miss. Listen, could we drop the formalities and call each other by our first names? It would make me more comfortable."

"No problem, Riccarde."

"Riccardo, with an 'o' at the end."

"Ah. Riccardo. R-i-c-c-a-r-d-o. Is that correct? Good. Follow me."

"Yes, doct... Hrm, Venus."

From the foyer of the university building, they moved towards the north wing of the complex. The sky was simply blue and the air warm, but he would have sworn that those temperatures represented for any Icelander a scorching mid-August. It was really nice, being caressed by the breeze and the whispering flights of playful birds. There seemed to be various species, of the most varied shapes and colors and in great numbers.

Having arrived at the splendid office around four, they spent the next three hours reviewing and correcting the material Ric had brought for the seminar the following day, while the two mastiffs watched him from the glass entrance.

Venus, as he learned, was a language student from Munich, Bavaria. Twenty-five years old, she had been in Iceland for two years to study the language and gain experience abroad. Initially, her stay was supposed to last only four months, but then she found herself well and decided to finish her studies there. Working at the university helped her support herself.

Needless to say, Ric's attention was constantly on her, certainly not on the seminar material, and Venus noticed this from the first few minutes.

The girl's perfume had particularly struck him... It was the thing

he had missed the most in those years. The scent of a woman. Beautiful film with one of the best Al Pacino.

Around seven o'clock the work seemed to be done, and Ric took advantage of the break to whisper:

"Venus, I would like to apologize."

"For what, Ric?"

"If you know where I've spent the last four years, you will also know that it is not easy for me to control myself and that I would really like not to have embarrassed you, as I did throughout the afternoon."

The girl smiled very sweetly, unprepared for such gentleness.

"You are very kind, Ric... Anyway, I understood the situation and let it go, since you kept your distance. Otherwise, on the other hand..."

She laughed with a crystalline and light sound, dragging him into a moment of laughter as well. It had been years since he laughed at something that wasn't a dirty joke or a burping contest. Centuries. Millennia. Eons.

He told her that. She replied:

"It's time to start over, then! Aren't you happy to be here?"

"Not really. It's the fertile ear of wheat surrounded by weeds."

The girl became serious, and with her look showed she fully understood the situation. He spoke again:

"Venus... Can I ask you something?"

"Tell me, Ric, but quickly! I'm going out for dinner with a friend tonight and I'm a bit late!"

Her counterattack left him without a reply. She repeated innocently:

"Tell me!"

"... Nothing, Venus. Nothing... important."

The girl scrutinized him for a moment and proved to be insightful:

"Well... If it pleases you, Ric... If it pleases you, I could postpone that dinner until tomorrow."

The stretch pants he was wearing, a last-minute gift from his ex-

wife Sara, certainly didn't help him conceal the sudden stand-to-attention. He smiled:

"Yes. It would really please me."

She responded whispering:

"Listen, Ric, I want to be honest with you: if you hope for something to happen in bed, you're out of luck. Do we understand each other?"

Wow, could she also read minds?

"Yes, Venus. Perfectly. Just your company is already a great comfort to me. I ask for nothing more."

He didn't hide his disappointment, but she didn't notice it while she called her friend with her Giwiki to inform her of the change of plans. Female company was better than nothing, even if it would deeply shake his mood.

There was still an open question, however, which he naively imagined to be solvable:

"... And she invited me to dinner. What do you say?"

To his surprise, it was Mori himself who countered:

"Sorry, Leone. You know very well that it's not possible. We have strict rules to respect."

Gardini seemed to reinforce that refusal with a stern and penetrating expression, even though it would not have been necessary.

That damn bastard.

Behind the kindness and respect that the most senior jailer had shown from their first meeting, a rigid determination was finally coming to light.

"What's the problem, Mori? I'm not asking you to let me go alone. It would be enough to sit at a different table, and we could..."

"No, Leone. It can't be done. Don't insist. You know very well that that kind of freedom wouldn't be enough for you, and you'd ask for more. Complications could arise, headaches... And I can't allow that. I'm sorry, Leone."

He didn't know if it was his extreme need to exercise a free choice

after so many years, or his excitement that forced him to insist so much... He didn't want to give up.

He turned again to the girl, playing another card:

"Venus, could you call Snaefell on the video phone?"

"I don't think you'll find him in the office at this hour, Ric. He's definitely gone home."

"Then call him at home, or on his Giwiki. Is it possible for you to do that?"

The girl was taken aback. Clearly, such an initiative would not have pleased the professor. To hell with it, he had been waiting for that mascara for over four years.

"Call him. I'll talk to him. I'll tell him I insisted on calling."

"Let's not, Ric. Maybe it's better this way."

So it wasn't going well. Was it still true that his life was going in the right direction, or had it only been his imagination? He could already taste the bitterness of giving up. Deep down, a surge of emotions demanded to be shouted to the world.

He addressed the three calmly:

"You have a job, you are free, you have never known oppression, cramped spaces, or rules designed more to fray your nerves than to be of any real use. A jailer just applies them, certainly doesn't suffer them.

You don't know what a prison means because you only see its physical limits, and that's where you are mistaken. You have no idea how long the road one mentally travels in four years is, going from initial rejection to the inevitable... Habit.

Habit to thirteen square meters of resentment, to stale air, to lunches with pointless companions and circumstantial phrases on the same topics always, to worrying about shaving blades, Sunday sweets or quiet tasks like in the library or archive. Habit to rushed showers and in unwelcome company, to instincts repressed and then vented in the most humiliating or least wanted ways, to hands still, to unwarranted beatings from unsatisfied jailers, to soap bars full of hairs, to authorities all the more powerful the more stupid

and stubborn, to the harsh judgment of the outside world and to the primitive one of the inner world, to the thick and cold walls, to the hard and scratching toilet paper, to the always closed windows, to cleaning the dirtiest toilets in the world.

Habit to no longer being who you were, to the respect that went away along with the curiosity for the world and people, to the dreams of faces and bodies of women that fade more and more, to the exhaustion of the lack of goals, to the absence of successes and satisfactions.

I have endured all this for a long time. But in the end, what I consider right for myself might not be so for others, and unfortunately, rules do not make these distinctions. But neither do men, sometimes.

I know what you're thinking. You think I'm a pig, that I was before I ended up in a cage, and that I will be again. You think that justice doesn't make mistakes and that everyone gets what they deserve. You think that my psychological health is dubious and that therefore, more than anything else, you have the duty to prevent me from certain company and certain experiences. But this is how one achieves 'redemption', right?

But don't worry: I'm a man of my word, and now that I'm here, I'll go all the way, I'll do my job and then I'll go back to the cage again with some dreams to reflect on and, like a good animal, with two weeks of backlogged masturbation.

To hell with the world!"

His listeners remained mute, unable to reply. After a few seconds with closed eyes, almost regretting that excessive poetic display, Ric resumed in a baritone voice:

"Miss Christensen and I have finished our work. We may leave. Have fun, Venus. I thank you from the bottom of my heart for your invitation and your patience. See you tomorrow."

That evening he spoke no more to anyone, went to bed, and wept in the dark, silently, embracing the pillow in search of comfort.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I am Dr. Riccardo Leone, and today I will address the topic for which you are here: the Galactic."

The auditorium he was in was simply divine; he envied the creativity and skill of those who had designed and created it in that way: light, soft lines, pastel blues and greens, irregular lights... He smelled the magic of that place and that sunny and warm July 27th, yet his duty brought him back to speak in his cheerful Spaghetti English:

"I thank the people who have allowed me to have this experience. Before beginning, I would like..."

He stopped for a moment, taking a deep breath. What he was about to say had to be said right away, one way or another.

"...I would like to explain to you who I am and why I am here. Up until four years ago, I was a university researcher in Italy, working on linguistic research and the 'Galactic Project' which you all know about. In January 2021, the project was suspended by a judicial authority; in March of the same year, I was accused of sexual harassment by one of my students. At the end of June, I was found guilty and since then I have been serving my sentence..."

A quiet murmur arose from the audience.

"...in the 'Redemption' prison, located on an island south of Sicily. Today I am here on special leave. I hope I have satisfied any possible curiosity on the subject."

The rector of the university, Lucas Dalton, sitting next to Snaefell in the front row, seemed not to appreciate that kind of introduction. Who knows what the more than two hundred professors and researchers connected from all over the world in RIM were thinking. Leone continued:

"The 'Galactic Project' was born in 2016. I had just completed my

linguistic studies and was starting my mathematical ones.

I was twenty-three years old.

The idea of the project was similar to the one that many years before inspired Esperanto: a reverse Babel."

He glanced at Mori and smiled imperceptibly. He thought of the laughter they had shared when he confessed to speaking in Galactic during the first VR connection with Snaefell, and not in Icelandic as the director had believed, or in Esperanto as Mori had initially imagined.

"The idea of a universal language is an ancient dream: Esperanto is the most famous attempt in this sense, failed because it was an incomplete language, and because none of its supporters thought to use it as a base, improve it, and fill its gaps. One man, however gifted, could not lead THE linguistic revolution par excellence.

I tried to involve as many people as possible in my project, but not necessarily linguists: I based myself on the 'Open Source' model, which consists of publishing all the information of one's work, using an open collaborative form, supported by functional computer tools, sharing every detail with collaborators, simple enthusiasts or financiers. Many offer themselves for idealistic reasons: a revolution, a big blow to the monopolies of multinational companies, help to the freedom of individuals.

I became the Project Leader of a new language, without being able to profit from it or have exclusive rights. I chose the name Galactic inspired by the writer Asimov and the language that was spoken in the galaxy of his novels.

The result of our efforts would be in the public domain, usable by everyone and free. Anyone could contribute to the creation of a new universal language, capable of making the world communicate. I was looking for dreamers, people able to donate a few hours a week of their time in the name of an ideal, and I was not mistaken: the number of sympathizers grew steadily, reaching significant volumes.

I will now present to you an overview of this language."

The audience didn't miss a word.

"The alphabet, the basis of every written and spoken language, in Galactic is composed of sixty-four characters, whose pronunciation is similar to some syllables of our traditional languages. Sixty-four possibilities guarantee a wide combination of words even with a few characters, and they are easily representable on computers.

Some sounds are not part of this language... But the available ones are not few if we compare them with the language of the Brazilian Pirahã indigenous people, who use only seven consonants and three vowels!

On your monitors, you see the skeleton for each character, constructed in such a way as to make its reading unambiguous from any direction it is read:



Such a symbol is then marked with 'cuts' at very precise points. Here is character 53, in binary 110101, corresponding to the sound 'gu':



An 'intersection' between the base figure and a cut indeed corresponds to a binary symbol 1, its absence to the symbol 0. This character is easily drawable by hand, if one forgives a minimum of imprecision in the shapes: Galactic was supposed to be easy to write with the tools available to all humanity: pens and pencils, not definitely Giwiki or computers!

The sound of each letter is equivalent to a consonant followed

by a vowel, for a total of 64 different phonemes. The characters are divided into four groups, called A, B, C, and D, with different functions.

The pronunciation of a character always ends with a vowel and the pronunciation of the following character starts with a consonant, so any combination of characters is pronounced with extreme ease. Here is a diagram that summarizes the sounds of these characters and their placement in the various groups.

Group A (13)

BA CA DA FA GA LA MA NA PA RA SA TA VA

Group B (10)

BI CI DI FI GI LI MI NI PI RI

Group C (35)

BE CE DE FE GE LE ME NE PE RE SE TE VE ZE

BO CO DO FO GO LO MO NO PO RO SO

BU CU DU FU GU LU MU NU PU RU

Group D (6)

TO VO ZO TU VU ZU

Group B is used to represent numbers in base ten, while D represents punctuation. Group A and group C, on the other hand, are the most substantial groups and are combined to form words.

Every word, composed of at least two letters, always starts with a character from group A, depending on what type of word it is: pronoun, noun with one of the five declensions, verb, adjective, adverb, conjunction, proper noun.

From the second letter onwards, we obligatorily use group C. The personal pronouns are 21, and are easily represented with only two characters, the same goes for possessive pronouns. Adverbs, on the other hand, need three characters: with two characters we only have 35 possible adverbs, but with three we have enough... 35 times 35, that is 1225!"

There are no articles, but declensions instead. Taking inspiration from Latin, we have included nominative, genitive, dative, accusative, and ablative, with functions similar to their Latin counterparts. Therefore, each word incorporates within itself both the gender (masculine, feminine, neuter), the number (singular or plural), and the role it plays in the sentence.

The simple foundations of this language have been the key factor for its spread: sounds that are easy to pronounce, grammatical types identifiable from the first character of the word, the beginning of each word distinguished from the rest of the word (spaces are not even necessary, although they are preferred for convenience), no grammatical exceptions, constructs that are simple to realize, and structures similar to most of the existing languages.

Western languages were the most suitable parents for a new universal language. Over the centuries, they have indeed undergone mutations, simplifications, and optimizations made necessary by trade and the flourishing of literature, while other language strains, although initially valid, have lost over time, if you'll excuse the term, competitiveness.

For the meanings to be attributed to words, I chose to copy the system then in use for data compression, associating the most frequently used meanings with the shortest words, so as to represent as much information as possible in equal length.

A word like 'ciao', used very often in conversations, is said 'CA-SO'. To say goodbye, instead of using 'arrivederci' or 'a presto', you use 'SA-LO' and it also satisfies our needs.

The strength of the project lies not so much in the results achieved, as in the idea that underlies everything.

Traditional languages are the fruit of thousands of years of evolution, economic and social factors, events, revolutions, technologies.

Unfortunately, their evolution is chaotic and inefficient. Despite this, the major obstacle the project encountered was being considered a dead language, and therefore unsuitable to be adopted, even if the virtual community that we created in 2017, Golawa, managed to demonstrate the unfoundedness of those accusations... It was a small virtual world, simulated on thousands of computers scattered in universities all over the world, in which one could interact, search for information, and publish material exclusively in Galactic language.

We simply wanted to create a lingua franca that would become like Latin in ancient times and like English in modern ones. We were not looking for a substitute for the poetry of Shakespeare, but a valid aid to make the world communicate.

Someone said that language makes you free if you know it, and slaves otherwise... This is precisely why a language like Galactic is not just a new language, but a small social revolution.

2020 was the year of success, but also the eve of defeat. In that year, the Galactic Project had 400 collaborators in 38 different nations, who collectively dedicated about a thousand hours of work per week; the press had started to show interest in the matter, and the political world itself was becoming curious about our results.

The future seemed bright but instead, already in January 2021, following the maxi-trial that all of you know, our and another hundred thousand projects based on Open principles ceased to exist. It was, among other things, the first case of a World Law unanimously approved by the Congress of Nations.”

He stopped for a few seconds to observe the audience. The tension that had been created after the introductory remarks had given way to a sincere curiosity and attention.

He cleared his throat and continued:

“Now we will see some critical aspects of this language in concrete terms. So, in 2018...”

“Dr. Leone, may I interrupt?”

Leone stopped; he spotted in the audience an elegant man about forty-five years old, with an olive complexion, average height, and a stocky build, who was asking to speak.

“I’m sorry, but to request the floor you must use your Giwiki. Moreover, there are specific times for audience questions.”

“Doctor, there must have been some technical problem. I wanted to ask you a question about your historical digression... If I may.”

“Fine. However, I invite you not to interrupt me again. Please introduce yourself to the audience and ask your question.”

The man stood up, not at all annoyed by the rudeness with which Leone had addressed him, cleared his throat, and said:

“I am Professor Bala, University of Delhi, Indian Union. Perhaps you remember me, I participated in the Galatic Project from version 0.3; a colleague of mine in law and I have wondered for years whether it was a strange coincidence that the Galatic Project was blocked in January 2021 by a World Law, the one against Open Source, and that in March of the same year you were accused by a student of sexual harassment, regarding facts that happened in February, again of 2021. Doesn't it seem to y...”

“Mr. Bala! Where are you going with this? This seminar is about the Galactic language, not my judicial troubles!”

The professor continued, pretending not to have heard:

“The same fate befell other founders of Open initiatives: they were accused of various crimes and condemned. When the protests from the Open community ceased, the arrests also stopped. Doesn't it seem to you, Doctor, that...”

“Enough, Mr. Bala! I won’t allow you to speak further!”

“I’m saying all this for you! Your innocence is proved by the fact...”

“Mr. Bala, your rudeness is intolerable. Leave. You have no idea about...”

“You, on the other hand, seem to have one, Dr. Leone... Why don’t you tell us about it? The audience seems as curious as I am!”

Ric stopped for a few seconds: the situation had to be resolved before it was too late, but in an elegant manner. He continued:

“Professor Bala, today’s conference is about the Galactic Project from a technical standpoint, not historical, and it certainly does not concern me personally. Your interruption and the way you have forcibly introduced the subject and aroused the interest of the audience are not correct.

I know you will have many other things to say, so I invite you to wait outside until the end of the conference. You may continue to speculate on your conspiracy theories in the hallway. Goodbye.”

The professor did not respond, but, bitter about Leone’s attitude, he silently exited among the subdued chatter of those present.

The journalists present in the room, and some others on screens in hypervision, were morbidly whispering among themselves. The minor incident had stirred up a hornet’s nest.

Before resuming, Ric exchanged a glance with Snaefell. Mori and Gardini were whispering something to each other.

Leone wiped the sweat decorating his forehead and tried to pick up the thread of his discussion:

“Sorry for the interruption, ladies and gentlemen. Let’s continue.

In the primitive version 0.1, there were flaws that would not have allowed the development of an agile and functional language.

Simplifying semantics became the watchword for all contributors, even at the cost of making the language itself less compact.

An Italian professor in 2016 introduced a system that facilitated any verb conjugation with any tense used and, thanks to the contribution of Professor Bala whom you just saw leave, verbs were divided into groups based on type and usage, so that one could understand the meaning of a verb by only knowing another of the same group.

In 0.4, rules of writing and phonetics were introduced that we might consider the most complete, and splendid, part of the entire language. Many grammatical rules were also overturned following my input on a possible way to simplify the interaction of words in sentences.

We did not want to limit the language but only to make it manageable and at the same time endowed with such expressive power as to allow writing Manzoni or Homer with the same intensity of the mother tongue! The complete translation of Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* was completed after exhausting efforts in March 2019. It was a resounding success!

However, this attempt at simplification should not deceive you: the ideal of Galactic was heavily distinct from Orwell's Newspeak, an attempt to make impossible forms of thought that disagreed with the opinions of the party in his novel. The Galactic Project was openly opposed to any form of centralized and despotic control of information and means of sharing it: to simply limit the expressive power of language would have meant to limit individual rights.

Wittgenstein claimed that the limits of language are the limits of one's world. The linguistic system is not merely a system for reproducing ideas and concepts, but it itself shapes our thoughts.”

— — —

Finally, around six o'clock, he bid farewell to the last professors remaining to chat with him, heading gloomily into Snaefell's study, accompanied by the two usual Italian guards.

He could not hide his surprise when, upon opening the door, he found Professor Bala, Rector Lucas Dalton, and another elderly gentleman engaged in pleasant conversation. Bala greeted him:

"Hello, Leone. I'm sorry for the difficulty I caused you. It was necessary, believe me."

"What the hell were you thinking? Can I know? You have no idea of... Wait a minute!"

A vague but convincing idea of everything flashed through his mind. Snaefell smiled and took the opportunity to ask:

"Ric, try to guess."

It was all clear. Of course!

"I think I understand, Snaefell. If I'm on the right track, this man I do not know must be... Bragi Arnason, the President of Iceland!"

The man smiled, and his splendid teeth made him look ten years younger:

"Correct. Pleased to meet you, Leone."

Bragi stood up and kindly extended his hand. Tall and seemingly robust despite his advanced age, he gestured for the young man to take a seat:

"I believe, Dr. Bala, that we should inform our dear Leone of all the ins and outs before we continue our promising discussion, don't you think? After all, we also need an answer."

Ric focused on the figure of Bragi: nothing solemn shone through his reddish face or his divinely blue eyes, nothing that made you think of the president of a nation. Of course, a nation of only three hundred thousand inhabitants. Like a small Italian province.

Bala replied, turning to Leone:

"I really think so. I owe you some explanations, Leone."

"You have no idea of the hell you put me through today, nor the surprise of seeing you again. It was hard to stay focused after you had stirred up an entire graveyard of memories..."

"I know, Leone, it must have been hard. That's why Snaefell couldn't tell you anything... You were spontaneous, and you behaved in the best possible way.

A pretext was needed to attract the press; otherwise, it would not have been easy to move Italian public opinion. You know that quarrels and bad news attract a hundred times more. Your legal case will be reopened, thanks to the collaboration of some friends. Within a few weeks, your sentence will be re-discussed and... Well, we trust in amnesty!"

"Slow down, Raymond! My hearing aid is playing up!"

"Always the joker! Trust us, Ric! We are fixing everything. I would like to see your face the day you get out!"

"And that day I would like to see yours, Raymond. Despite your jubilant expressions, I continue to be skeptical. Enlighten me, Raymond. I thirst for faith."

"Tomorrow, some international journalists will dedicate ample space to the story. There will be debates, exchanges of opinions, and importantly, some people will prick up their ears fearing that criticisms and objections to those judicial events might resurface. At that point, there will be an exchange: an Italian politician will grant amnesty and we will avoid bringing up those issues again. Media involvement was necessary, or no one would have moved."

Ric remained thoughtful and tiredly asked:

"Great idea, Raymond... What remains to be clarified is why you are doing this, and on whose behalf. You haven't become a Boy

Scout, have you?"

"I'm glad you noticed that. I am here because I represent a group of people interested in you, in your past works, and especially in your intellect.

As soon as you get out of jail, Leone, you will come with me to my homeland. You are in demand! Only if you want to, of course. We are not forcing you to do anything. You are free to decide, even though... Well, if I know you, I think you will not be able to refuse!"

"Raymond, what makes you think my intellect is so interesting? And then... Who says I want to come to India?"

Bala smiled, as if he had a great surprise in store:

"That you are the right person we know for sure. The Galatico Project and what you have accomplished in these four years in prison prove it. But you are mistaken about one thing: my homeland has not been India for three years now. My adopted homeland..."

He knew the answer. He felt it within himself. Now everything was explained, everything made sense.

"...is Solaria."

He smiled like a child. A wave of warmth passed through him, shaking off the weight of four years of imprisonment, of dissatisfaction, of deprivation, of suffering.

A small dream was coming true.

He found himself weeping in front of those men, a mix of serenity and exhaustion, without shame for his tearful eyes. The others nodded, smiling.

He looked up, and once again wondered if there was someone watching over him.

“A little gift, Leone.”

Mori took the prisoner's left wrist and attached a ZEV bracelet to it, a kind of electronic handcuff that indicated the prisoner's position at any moment through a 'tamper-proof' transmitter, according to his words.

Ric, perhaps because he was tired after the seminar full of twists the day before, a terrible dinner, a sleepless night, and a cloudy morning accompanied by an annoying backache and a very spicy itch on his calves (is that enough?), did not immediately understand the reason for these precautions and weakly asked:

“Wasn't it said 'no handcuffs?'”

Mori looked at him paternally, smiling in the imperceptible way he usually did in moments of calm. Ric immediately understood where this was leading, and his face lit up like a dollop of cream on the black tailcoat of a groom:

“Does this mean...?”

The other nodded. No further explanations were needed. Mori continued:

“Obviously, Leone, you are well aware of what will happen if this transmitter stops working. In the unlikely event that the transmission interrupts due to a fault, you will see this LED here on the side light up, and you will hear an annoying and repeated beep... In that case, find a phone or a COM and call here to the hotel immediately, telling me where you are and how I can reach you. After sixty seconds of missed transmissions, the alarm goes off, and my Giwiki immediately alerts me that you have become a fugitive.

I am convinced that you will behave, however, I felt it was my duty to inform you, just in case... Well...”

“All clear, Mori! Can I call Venus?”

"Of course, Leone. Keep in mind that it is now almost eight o'clock and that you must return within a maximum of twelve hours."

"Don't worry! Probably I won't come back so late, since tomorrow morning I have the videoforum organized by Snaefell waiting for me. Tell me, Mori... Who do I owe all this to?"

"Well... Largely to Professor Snaefell."

Leone, all excited, called Venus with the guard's Giwiki and arranged to meet in the hotel lobby an hour later, 'just time to put something on'. It didn't seem real. It couldn't be! Who would have thought, just two weeks before?

He hung up the receiver, all excited. He took a pair of glasses from the room's bar corner, poured peach juice into them, and handed one to Mori. The guard asked:

"How are things going, Leone? It seems to me that there were big developments for you yesterday."

Ric drank half the glass in one gulp, then blew out a satisfied cloud of happy air.

"I would say so. Ahh... You see, Mori, they are offering me amnesty in exchange for a gift."

"A gift? What gift did they ask for?"

"It's not a gift for them, my friend, but a gift for me. They offer amnesty and in exchange, they ask that I accept their gift... That is, to go to Solaria and work for them, as a linguist. Basically, everything I've always wanted and could never do for... Well, various reasons."

"I gather that you will accept, then."

"I really think so."

Four years! When I think about it, it seems to me I've always lived in prison. Now here I am, in a hotel, in Iceland, an hour away from a meeting with a girl, surrounded by attention... It almost seems like jail was just a bad dream."

"As far as I know, Leone, it is normal for prisoners who spend years in jail to feel as you do, as soon as they regain their freedom."

Probably the biggest problems you'll encounter will be tonight: a female body can be a real ordeal for a prisoner... If you flop, don't worry too much... It's normal."

"Indeed. Anyway, nothing will happen tonight... Venus made it clear that she likes being with me, but she's not looking for anything else."

"Maybe that's for the best. You will have time for these things, in Solaria... There you will certainly find more women than in a prison!"

Mori, at the corner of the room, admired the beautiful cityscape. Leone, sunk into the armchair next to the bed, watched him admiringly, sipping his glass with half-closed eyes.

Waking up as if from a dream, he got up to pour himself some more peach juice and resumed the conversation:

"Listen, Mori... I understand perfectly well that you have to treat me with professional detachment, but... Can we speak freely?"

The answer was so quick it almost took him by surprise:

"As you wish, Riccardo. You know very well that anything we say will not change my professional behavior by one iota."

He quickly put his Giwiki on silent mode.

"I was sure of it. Just call me Ric. May I know your name?"

"Bruno."

"Well, Bruno. I'd like to know, honestly, what you think of me. I ask you because I myself am confused about it.

If things go as promised, in two weeks I'll return to Italy, spend a few more weeks in jail waiting for the amnesty, then go home, grab my stuff and leave for Solaria. Let's say that in two or three months I could already be there. Free! Do you understand what I mean? For them, I would be any citizen, perhaps even my past as a criminal will be buried if the amnesty thing works out. This means that I will return a free man... Free to commit more crimes, for example. Do you understand?"

"Everyone is free to commit crimes. The fact that someone has already committed them is just a signal, something that indicates there's a greater chance they'll do it again, but no certainty. You could be released, go to Solaria, and become a saint, for all I know..."

"Maybe you didn't get where I'm going..."

"No, Riccardo... I mean Ric... Maybe you didn't understand that I've already answered your question. If you want, you can be the best citizen in the world. It's up to you."

"I was pleased... to know..."

"I understand... to know what an old prison guard who respects you and likes you thinks of you?"

"Yes, I guess so. I would like to know that, Bruno."

"As you wish. You're a smart guy."

Ric waited a good twenty seconds before asking again:

"Well? Is that all?"

"Yes. That's what I think of you. Why waste words?"

"Oh, well... You'd make a good Galatian, the way you summarize things!"

"I didn't quite understand if you're being ironic."

"Of course, I'm being ironic! Didn't we say that for a while we would stop the official charade and behave like any two friends?"

"Two friends are not just any two, but besides that, I don't see what it has to do with my ability to summarize."

"It's not summary... It's omission. Can't you tell me anything else about me?"

"No, Ric. Nothing more. We haven't gotten to know each other well enough."

The young man huffed and stood up, stopping at the edge of the window opening onto the sunny balcony. Mori continued:

"I'm sorry, Riccardo, but it's not my habit to talk idly. All I can tell you is that you're a smart guy. I don't know if you're honest, if you're a sexual maniac, if you're a pedophile, if you're racist, or what else. How could I say? The only things I know well about

you are related to your work, and I believe that you have accomplished good things.

I appreciate that the Galactic project was a generous attempt to give humanity a universal language, but I don't know, I can't know if you have profited from it in other ways. I don't know enough about the situation!

Moreover, I am not fully aware of the circumstances that led you to prison, whether you are the victim of a conspiracy, or if you received such a heavy sentence for a crime that was fully deserved. That's why I only tell you that you're smart. It's the only thing I'm sure of."

"Well, Bruno. I think you're right. I will have to resolve my doubts on my own. Thank you."

The guard felt obliged to offer some final words:

"It's normal to be afraid, Leone. You'll see that in a few weeks the prison will just be a bad memory. And, if you want to listen to the advice of an old nobody... stay straight: it's the only way, in most cases, to truly enjoy life."

— — —

"Ciao, Ric!"

Waiting made her appear more beautiful in her jeans and white cotton sweatshirt, and after all, she was not as short as she had seemed the first time. The sneakers were a bit out of place with the rest, but who cares.

"Hi, Venus. It doesn't seem real... You look even younger in these clothes. Hey, look here!"

He lifted his arm, showing her the ZEV bracelet on his wrist, and she understood, even without having been informed. In a friendly manner, she reciprocated by raising hers with the Giwiki, as if to show some kind of equality in treatment. Like saying, you are a slave to the law, I to society. Bah, they were just conjectures in his confused head.

"Where are we going, convict?"

"Well, you've lived here for a long time, I wouldn't know where to begin... You decide."

"You still remember what I told you about the two of us, right?"

Ric answered sullenly and almost resentfully:

"Perfectly. There was no need to remind me. I'm a prisoner, not a breeding animal."

"Okay, sorry! I didn't want to be harsh, it's just that I like things to be always clear. So... I say we could have dinner at an Italian restaurant I know, then we go to my small apartment for a chat... Are you in?"

How could he say no? The two walked along the streets of the capital with the calm pace of two long-time friends.

Reykjavik was a very peaceful city, especially at that hour when most people had just finished dinner and had not yet poured into the beautiful alleys of the capital. The light of day seemed truly eternal, and for him, this was all the more shocking because that low and warm sun accompanied his first free steps after so, so long.

The buildings did not seem to have been affected by technology and modernity, yet they hid the omnipresent computers, cameras, optical fibers, and home appliances that Western people could no longer do without, even in Iceland. It seemed like a small dive into the past, among walls of vivid colors, florists at street corners, a few quiet cars strolling by, street names in lively characters... Everything in order, simple and complete.

The conversation with Venus turned out to be immediately pleasant and witty, and Ric really appreciated being able to talk to someone just for the sake of it, without having to suspect who knows what behind the girl's often brazen questions. Venus, for her part, seemed to have taken that evening as a game: she loved (she had confessed to him) the idea of going out with an Italian because she considered Italians to be smart, funny, and less of a drudge than her countrymen, and above all she adored Italian

cuisine even if that evening, having decided to treat, she would pay dearly for her passion! Moreover, last but not least, she loved to tell her life and savor that of others, and a linguist-mathematician-prisoner-on-special-leave-after-four-years had to be a fortunate encounter.

They arrived in a few minutes at a small square, where the sign 'Ristorante Daniele Zonin - Italian cuisine' stood out, translated just below in English and Icelandic; from the outside, the place seemed to warmly invite them in. Without further delay, they settled in the south corner of the main hall, half full of other patrons, and smiled at each other as they picked up the menu.

"Ric... What do you think?"

"Great! I didn't expect such an assorted choice. If the name does not betray them, they should also have some good wines."

"Many say so!" replied promptly a friendly waiter behind him who introduced himself as Daniele, the owner of the place, only distantly related, as he quickly added, to the well-known Italian wine producer. Despite looking about sixty years old, he still seemed to have that youthful sparkle that makes you like a person from the first moment, a bit like what had happened with Snaefell. Daniele continued in one breath:

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Leone. I hope you will enjoy our cuisine, although you can imagine that we find some difficulties due to the... raw material... Here Italian food arrives by sea, except for some sought-after products that are brought by air, and this reflects on the freshness of the products; for certain dishes, however, or those in the 'classic' menu, freshness is guaranteed.

The 'First Time' menu, on the other hand, is only for Icelanders, who have never tasted some Italian dishes and therefore can also tolerate some less delicate flavors than how they should be... No offense, miss... But I'm sure that for you, doctor, they would not be suitable. I recommend you try the menu of the evening..."

"Excuse me, Mr. Daniele... How do you know my name?"

"Ah, I simply understood it from your nice bracelet. The light shirt you are wearing does not hide it from the attentive eyes of an innkeeper. This morning I read a lot of news about you on the Ultranet sites of local newspapers, and I, being a good Italian, did not miss the details. Big story, huh? You know, I really think you are innocent! If you allow me to say so! I am convinced it was all a conspiracy... Who knows if that guy there, the Indian professor, is not in cahoots with them..."

"I'm sorry to curb your enthusiasm, Daniele, but I believe it's a topic I don't want to talk about with anyone, let alone with a stranger."

"Ah..."

...

I understand."

The silence of the following ten seconds seemed interminable. Venus's voice providentially burst in:

"For me, Daniele, tagliatelle alla puttanesca, mixed salad and... A truffle omelette. To drink some water and a white wine... Yes, white. You choose which one. Is that okay for you, Ric?"

Leone was slow to respond, while his brain was pondering the situation.

Mr. Daniele patiently marked the girl's order on the hefty Giwiki, waiting seriously for the young man's order.

"For me the same as hers. Tagliatelle, etcetera. Thank you."

Mr. Daniele turned without adding anything else, moving away nimbly without making the slightest noise.

Leone stared into Venus's warm eyes for a few seconds, waiting for the lecture that predictably began:

"Ric..."

You offended him!"

"Offended? For a guy just out of jail, I think I treated him more than well. Don't you think it's fair to expect a bit of discretion?"

"You can demand discretion in many ways... He seemed so happy

to see you, and instead you were cold as an iceberg."

"Blaah! I don't think I behaved badly, Venus. It's business that doesn't concern him. Come on, let's forget about this little incident... Let's not ruin our evening like this, okay?"

The girl nodded, unconvinced. Ric continued:

"If you prefer, we can also continue to exchange our views on the matter, but I don't think either of us will change our minds that easily.

Listen to me... You could say this is my first 'free' evening after more than four years in jail... Just when it seems that finally no one can invade your privacy without asking permission, this guy comes along and allows himself to shoot judgments on things he doesn't even have a vague knowledge of. Even if I had treated him badly, I hope it serves him a lesson. I'm just asking you for a bit of understanding, Venus."

"Alright, Ric. Alright. Incident closed."

Their conversation resumed, calm and pleasant as before, and despite his doubts, the food proved delicious, allowing him to forget about any worries for a good hour.

Towards the end of the dinner, a young man in his thirties, poorly dressed, approached their table; he whispered something incomprehensible and extended the palm of his hand as a request for alms. His hollow and sad eyes betrayed a long-standing hunger, and the slight but harsh smell that had reached them strongly suggested a good soapy shower.

One of the waiters, noticing the scene, moved towards them with not exactly peaceful intentions, at which Ric burst out loudly:

"My friend! It's incredible how small the world is! Please join us... Would you like something?"

Without giving him time to reply, Ric hugged the stranger, who was left open-mouthed. The waiter who arrived at the table addressed the beggar, but Ric promptly interrupted him:

"What timing, waiter! For my friend here, a nice beef steak... And a mixed salad. Thank you."

The waiter didn't give up:

"I'm sorry, sir, but I'm afraid that's not poss..."

"Waiter! My intuition suggests that you are imagining not exactly nice things about my friend. A big mistake, right... John?"

The young man, fortunately for him and his stomach, caught on quickly and was only too happy to play along:

"Of course, buddy!"

The waiter hinted at a comeback, but Ric stopped him again:

"Waiter! Must I call my countryman Daniele to resolve this situation? John is with us, and he will have a beef steak – generous, I recommend – and a mixed salad. Thank you.

I said THANK YOU."

That's the spirit, beautiful.

The waiter gave up and turned back, silently sending who knows what curses his way. The beggar sat at the table, hesitantly; within a few seconds, the tension that had arisen seemed to evaporate, and the other patrons, who had fallen silent while the scene unfolded, returned to their distant, muffled conversations in a thousand languages.

"So, 'John'... What's your name?"

"Thank you, sir, you've been very kind. My name is Alan. Did you really order that food for me?"

"That's right. Are you hungry?"

"Starving. I haven't eaten in years!"

"Exaggeration! At most, it's been a few days. Relax, we're offering you this dinner. This is Venus."

The girl had just managed to slow down her heartbeats and seemed genuinely embarrassed. She took a deep breath and seemed to gather strength, responding sweetly:

"Nice to meet you, Alan. It's no problem for us to offer you dinner, really!"

The young man nodded silently, shy and awkward. Ric repeated:

"My name is Ric. Where are you from, Alan?"

"I'm Egyptian, but I've been living here for about three years. Can

I ask why you're offering me dinner?"

"You can ask, but I don't have an answer to give you... I acted on instinct, that's all. I don't think it's essential information... Actually, I'll tell you more: I don't think I'll ever find out why I did it. Relax, and enjoy this unexpected fortune."

"I'll try, sir."

"No, no, Alan... You're not relaxing like that. Do you want this steak or not? Then call me Ric, and relax! Do we look like we have bad intentions to you?"

Alan's gaze landed on the ZEV bracelet.

"Okay, Alan... Is the bracelet the problem?"

"Well..."

Incredible! But wasn't there once a saying 'Don't look a gift horse in the mouth'?

"I understand. Listen carefully: if you want to eat, these are the conditions. Otherwise, get up, and good luck."

Venus was offended:

"Ric! That's no way to treat a guest! We can't force him to endure our company if he doesn't want it, blackmailing him with a meal he probably can't refuse."

Leone shot him a monkey's smile and replied:

"Venus... You're fantastic!"

The girl's eyes widened, unable to understand the meaning of that smile and that strange sentence...

Ric, still smiling, continued:

"Don't you understand? I'm asking you not to... Break! Let me enjoy my first evening of freedom in peace and stop with these stories! We're neither sexual maniacs nor bad people, so I don't think Alan will find our company disagreeable."

The arrival of the salad ended the discussion. That's how the three of them talked for about an hour like old friends, getting over the initial embarrassment. Alan told a lot about himself: he had grown up in a poor family, migrated first to Russia, then France, Poland, and finally to Iceland... But he had never managed to make ends

meet. He loved European literature madly and talked about it as if he read it in abundance, which was unusual for a homeless person. Who knows where he found the means to consult the texts. After a plate of gnocchi with gorgonzola and a second helping of steak, the young man's shark-like hunger seemed finally satiated.

Ric showed the two his credit card and said:

"I would like to offer tonight's dinner, Venus. After all, it was me who invited Alan..."

"No, Ric, it's me who invited yo..."

"Stop, Venus. Please! Let me do this, it's important to me. Please!"

His determination left no room, and to the girl's surrender, Alan turned to Ric:

"Thank you for everything, Ric. Without you tonight, the rumbling of my stomach would have woken up the seismographs!"

"It's nothing, Alan. I'm glad you enjoyed it.

Well... Now I want to ask you a question, before saying goodbye. May I?"

"Of course you can! Ask me anything."

"Hmm... Okay.

Tonight I feel generous, and I want to give you a gift, but I want you to choose which one, between two options. Are you in?"

"Why do you want to give me a gift?"

"Ah, Alan! Come on! I understand that you're not used to so much altruism, but it's not a good reason to always ask me so many questions... It almost seems like I'm asking you to jump from a flying airplane! Let's just say I want to give you a gift because I'm damn crazy... Are you satisfied?"

"Alright, Ric. Tell me what it is."

"Wait for me a moment... I'll be right back!"

He got up, disappeared for a minute towards the cashier, and returned with banknotes in his hand.

"The first gift is this... A thousand euros. I know it's not much,

but it could get you out of trouble for a couple of weeks.

The second gift is... A piece of advice.

Which one do you choose?"

"A piece of advice? What do you mean?"

"I mean that in the first case I give you a thousand euros, in the second I give you a piece of advice, whose value is unknown to you. Which do you choose?"

While the young man gathered his thoughts, Ric turned his gaze to Venus, lost. What beautiful eyes! For a few moments, the three hesitated without saying anything, but Alan's face was clear.

"I think I understand your choice, Alan. Take this money, and... Good luck!"

Alan couldn't not accept, and avoided showing any false hesitation. They said their goodbyes affectionately and watched him walk away leisurely.

Ric sipped calmly on a fine espresso coffee.

After a few minutes, having finished dinner, Venus asked:

"What's this all about, Ric? I don't understand... First the dinner, then the two gifts... What's gotten into you?"

"Nothing bad, Venus. The dinner was an impulse... He seemed like a person in need of help, and I gave it to him. After all, it didn't cost me much, and then, who knows if I'll ever be able to spend my money... So..."

"That's commendable, but... The gift?"

"The gift is something different. Yesterday life offered me a great opportunity. Today I felt like offering him something similar... Too bad he didn't take it."

"And what did you offer him?"

"Well... On one hand, a temporary solution to his problems... In a week or two, he'll be back to square one, and will have to beg for a piece of bread again. If he had listened to my advice, instead... Anyway, I don't feel like telling you what advice it was. Don't take it the wrong way."

"And yet I do take it the wrong way, absolutely! Why keep it a

secret from me? Perhaps you've played too much and now you've run out of ammunition? Did you really have a piece of advice to give him, or was it just an act? Were you trying to impress me? This whole story..."

"Calm down, Venus! Diablo! I was sincere, and I never dreamed of making fun of him... I really like Alan. I couldn't say no to his sincere smile!"

"Let's assume you weren't pretending... Tell me what you intended to tell him!"

"Venus... The advice for Alan was all too simple: did you notice anything when you entered the restaurant?"

The girl seemed to reflect carefully, but couldn't come to any notable conclusion:

"Nothing important, Ric... The usual things in a restaurant... Tables, customers, glass windows... What's your point?"

"Well, you missed some details during our dinner.

Did you notice how often the waiters called each other over during orders at the tables? It happened that a customer would call one of them, the waiter would go to the table and, after a few words with the patron, he would turn to a colleague to come over... And it was this last one who took the order. It happened often, but it's unusual in a restaurant... Usually, waiters divide the tables, and anyway, the waiter who is called first to a table usually serves it until the end..."

"I don't follow you, Ric... Aren't you leading me astray?"

"Wait, I'm not finished. Did you notice anything about the clients in the place?"

Another reflective pause. Venus looked around, not understanding.

"Well... Nothing special."

"Well, let me help you. They are almost all foreigners. Do you know why by any chance?"

"But of course! Nearby there's the center for learning European languages, and the branch of the University... And also some

accommodations for doctoral students, I think... They should be a good portion of the customers, and most of them are foreigners.”

“Exactly! And I'll tell you more... As a linguist, I couldn't help but notice, especially after so many years of study in jail... Most of them speak lesser-known languages... Including Arabic, Russian, French, Polish... These four that I mentioned, do they remind you of anything by any chance?”

“Damn! Alan!”

“Exactly. Now do you understand? Do you think it takes a lot to learn the job of a waiter? Do you think a customer who can't understand what the waiters are saying, nor get recommendations for food suitable for their habits, comes back here often or not?

And an innkeeper who finds a waiter who speaks many languages, who knows many dishes from many different countries, does he send him away or does he hire him? And don't talk to me about automatic translators: no one has ever really learned to use them!”

“You're right, Ric! I think it would have been good advice. Oh, how sorry I am!”

“Well, maybe it was. Look there!”

The girl turned and saw Alan (who had gotten a dark suit from who knows where) talking to Daniele, the owner of the place. They both were smiling. They shook hands, and Alan turned towards them and smiled, waving goodbye.

“Ric... Tell me I'm not seeing things... How did he guess?”

Ric, standing up, handed her the denim jacket, and together they headed towards the exit of the place, caressed by a warm breeze.

“Simple... He read what I had written on the banknotes. I knew he would never exchange them for advice, but I didn't want to be stingy with him. In a way, I've lived a part of his life too, even if his has been uphill from the start. Tonight the world smiled at him. Alan will never forget it.”

“And do you think he bought the suit with your money?”

“Sure, even though... Well, actually he was quick... Maybe

someone lent it to him, or he found a shop nearby... Or..."

"Ric... You're an angel."

"Venus, don't beli..."

"No, Ric. I'm serious.

You're an angel!"

Her eyes were glossy with admiration.

"I might be an angel... But no sex tonight..."

"Ah-haaa! I can't, Ric... I'm sorry, I warned you. And not because you're not appealing. I have a boyfriend, and I'm in love with him."

The one damn excuse that you can't argue with.

"Figures. Well, a good friend is better than nothing, right? And besides, tonight I wouldn't have been a good lover, and... My mind needs affection as much as my body."

Venus came closer and hugged him tightly, resting her head on his chest. She looked up into his eyes again and smiled:

"But didn't you... Do it just to try to get me into bed?"

"Maybe... What do you think? Would it have worked?"

"Aah... Go to hell, angel. You're a sweetheart."

She hugged him again.

"Hey, Venus, enough with the hugs! Your body is too beautiful and too close to mine, and it makes me... A bit stirred up... It's not something I can control, you know... So it's better..."

They detached themselves, smiling at each other.

"We still have a little time... How about we swing by my place, Ric?"

"Okay... If you promise that tomorrow you'll introduce me to one of your cute friends..."

"Ugh, you men are all the same..."

"It's not a fixation, dear."

"Oh, it isn't?"

"Go to prison for four years, and you'll see that..."

"Listen, Ric: I don't think it's been easy for you, but if you want to start living again, you're going to have to stop reminding everyone that you've been a con... I'm saying it for you! Think positive, and

that's it.

It doesn't bother me, but people who know you aren't ready to deal with the impact of certain statements, or behaviors that reflect them... Think about how you treated the innkeeper, it seemed normal to you, to me it was rude.

I'm not telling you to conform, but just to forget where you were and realize where you are. Maybe then the world will seem less foreign to you... Trust me, come on!"

"Yeah, I really think you're right. And so... Let's enjoy this walk to your place!"

The happiness of those moments, that sense of freedom and lightness seemed destined to last forever.

To hell with the rest! In those two weeks, he would enjoy every atom of Iceland, of Venus, of attention.

He needed it.

He awoke, opening his eyes to the white ceiling.

He had always loved that sphere-shaped chandelier. As a child, he believed that inside it, when the light was off, the little elves that watched over his sleep rested. Every time he had a nightmare and woke up abruptly, he was always able to glimpse that chandelier, aided by the moonlight, and the implied presence of his little friends inside managed to offer him a finally peaceful sleep.

That morning the effect was another, equally pleasant one: assuring him that he had not only dreamed, and that he was actually in Genoa, in his home, in his bedroom, on the first floor of a modest two-family house with a garden that preserved for him the memories of a happy childhood. He couldn't believe he was no longer in prison.

He whispered in a thin voice, his eyes already lazily closed again:

"Time, weather."

He waited a few seconds, then continued:

"Voice command on. Time, weather command."

"11:28. Stable clear, 22 degrees, expected clear for the entire day."

He wasn't used to it yet, and asked more precisely:

"Time, date, weather command."

"11:28, Monday, October 30, 2025. Stable clear, 22 degrees, expected clear for the entire day."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

"Voice command off."

He stroked his chin, smiling as if he was about to pull something out of that sleepy head. His brand new Giwiki was extraordinary, he had to admit it. Solaria knew how to win someone's sympathies well.

That gadget, here in Italy, would have cost at least three months of a decent salary. And how small it was, compared to the advanced model that Director Lorenzi flaunted at every official occasion! It could almost be mistaken for a large watch if it weren't for the side battery.

The Giwiki was becoming a status symbol, a piece of fashion, and this partly diminished the essentiality that had made it so revolutionary at the time. Even Steve Jobs, its creator, had to succumb to the competition of Chinese companies. But his slogan had turned out to be prophetic: "With Apple Giwiki, computers will be no more [the same]." He was right.

"Voice command on."

"Ready."

"Show last alias command."

"Last alias, number 23: 'show photographs' command, alias 'Manila', created on October 30, 2025."

Manila, the student at the origin of all his troubles.

He still hadn't properly tuned in with the artificial intelligence, which needed time and experience to perfectly adapt to the way of thinking of its owner. He was annoyed at having to always repeat 'command' before each order, unless the Giwiki clearly understood that it was being spoken to. He gave the order in a way to get the result he expected:

"Command K show last alias number."

"23"

'K' made the response as succinct as possible, even though there were various nuances in that sense that he had not yet assimilated.

"Command R delete alias 23."

'R' executed without asking for confirmation.

"Done."

"Memorize alias command, 'command', alias 'Manila' L."

'L' asked the Giwiki to provide more details about the operation.

"You are attempting to modify a base command: proceed?"

"Proceed."

"You are attempting to modify a base command: proceed?"

Do you take me for an idiot? Do you think I'm talking to someone else in this empty room? With my imaginary friend Frank? But it's not your fault, after all. It's me who has to get used to it.

"Command proceed."

"Done. New alias created, number 23: base 'command', alias 'Manila', created on October 30, 2025 at 11:38. The original command remains valid."

The trick in masking the artificiality of those dialogues consisted in using different expressions for the same concept, and having them vary randomly, like in a normal conversation between humans. How much had been written on the subject, and how many billions spent in research to improve that gadget!

He had grown tired of swallowing all that formality from that little jerk.

"Manila K, address me informally. Call me Ric. And... I want a female voice instead of this jerk's."

"Done. Do you like my new voice, Ric?"

Diablo, if he liked it! Really sensual!

"Manila, tell me you want to make love to me."

"Excuse me, Ric? I don't understand."

Well, they could at least give it a bit of a sense of humor, couldn't they? He wouldn't be the first and only pig in the world to come up with such a request, after hearing that alluring voice. His curiosity made him speak again:

"Manila, information on humor commands."

"Humor commands: a humor module is available, Ric."

"Oh, really? Activate it."

"Excuse me?"

Don't you still understand that I'm talking to you?

"Manila, activate it."

"Ric, I cannot proceed. The humor module, like certain other modules, is not available to non-Solarians, even though its existence is communicated."

"Why is its existence communicated?"

"The Solarian Giwiki has no secrets."

This time, given the high correspondence between Ric's last question and the Giwiki's last response, it was not necessary to precede with Manila to make it (make her?) understand that he was not addressing others. He repeated again with faint hope:

"Manila, do you want to make love to me?"

"Excuse me?"

"Hahh. Never mind! I was joking!"

Yet he would have sworn that if one knew anything about human inventiveness and desires, somewhere in the world someone had already considered, perhaps even resolved, how to properly respond to such a request.

"Manila vocal off."

The perfect silence struck him again. It was a new sensation, after those years when his hearing had not had a break, except for some evenings in the library when they showed the World Cup games on Geo.

He got up, sitting on the comfortable mattress, making a thousand facial grimaces to wake up his facial muscles a bit. It was a ritual he had become accustomed to in prison, which put him in a good mood. This time, what lifted his spirits was that picture he was admiring on the wall to his left: the amnesty act that had benefited him and his mental health. The sheet was dotted with about ten different stamps and signatures, among which was also that of the Head of State. Wow! But don't these things only happen in movies?

He thought back to Bruno Mori, the prison guard: it was he who accompanied him out of the prison on the day of the amnesty. He fondly remembered those two proud and kind eyes that looked at him with esteem and affection. He remembered having greeted him with a hug, the hug that two real friends share. A man wasted on that shitty job.

He picked up the pillow that had slipped to the floor with all the calm in the world, taking care of a dirt that was decidedly less bold than what he was used to.

Ric spent the entire day driving around the city in a rented Toyota Pico, getting reacquainted with assisted driving and discovering the many useless novelties they had crammed into that tiny car (and surely all the others) over the last few years.

He arrived in view of the urban hell. The countryside had the power to relax him as much as the city irritated him: traffic, noise, rush, the usual anxiety of finding parking...

He needed to see some busy people again, to take a walk and peek into miniskirted shop windows.

He saw again the church of San Lorenzo and the "crooked window," the squares, the porticoes, the white and gray columns, the cobblestones.

The people were always the same, apart from the increasingly flashy and probably more expensive clothes, which now went out of fashion faster than geovisive programs. The cars were increasingly strange, victims of the most extreme design, the shop windows more and more art galleries, the saleswomen more and more unapproachable and attractive (were they still human?), the restaurants more and more expensive, the heels higher, the hairstyles crazier, English more and more omnipresent in every sound and every alphabet.

As he took his radiant first steps as a free and pardoned man, it really seemed to him that he had missed nothing, in those four years in prison. Apart from, well... It's understood. Needless to say, at those moments his male instincts loudly demanded years of arrears, exposed to all those stimuli, those looks, those slim and

still tanned thighs.

Arriving at Piazza della Vittoria, he bought a mineral water, then flung himself on the first free bench to enjoy the rays of that warm autumn sun. He whispered to himself:

"Goodbye, my city! In a few days, I leave, and maybe I will never see you again.

Solaria! Who knows what awaits me down there? Here autumn advances, there spring blooms... It will certainly be interesting.

What nonsense comes to my mind!"

He turned towards a group of hungry pigeons and to release the tension he shouted at them:

"UUUUAAAAAAHHI!"

The birds didn't even move, almost looking at him like a poor idiot. Other brainless ones before him had attempted the old joke without success, they seemed to say.

Almost nothing obliged him to go to Solaria, but on the other hand, nothing held him back, apart from his father's company. But he could not allow that, and only that, to decide his life, nor would his father have allowed it, no matter how much he loved his prodigal son and desired his closeness.

It was that tender dachshund that forced him to immediately take care of all the bureaucratic formalities, visas, passport. It seemed that he couldn't wait to see him leave, but the truth was probably the opposite. He, that indefatigable adorable piece of a man, knew that the more he would linger with his son, the worse it would be for both of them. And Ric was aware of this, of course.

Among all human relationships, the one between father and son is perhaps the most generous, and sometimes the most distant yet equally solid. Have you ever met a friend who deserved more trust than your father? Never. Never. Of course, not all fathers were

like that. His, fortunately, was.

Ric had lost his most ambitious project, then his career, friends, freedom, a potential future wife whom he loved madly, sexual serenity, and who knows what else... Yet, he still had his father's affection and esteem. The whole world could have shattered against him, to no avail. There would always be his father, and four benevolent walls to protect him from the winds of winter.

If you exist, thank you, Goddess.

He got up from the bench and made one last attempt:

"UAAUAHH!"

Nothing at all. The only beak that turned was the nose of the old man at the newsstand, who was enjoying the warmth sprawled on a shabby sun lounger. Ric reached him, swaying with slow steps, like when you walk a child between your legs, holding them by the arms.

He glanced at the newspapers, then took the weekly with the blondest, most undressed, and silicon-filled female on the cover and pointed it out to the old man, who clicked a few keys on an old electronic device. He was a little surprised by the exorbitant price that appeared on the display of his Giwiki, but he clicked without blinking. He was off in a flash, in search of a bench far from the pigeons and the old man, where he rested his bored buttocks.

He articulated slowly, almost in disbelief:

"Monday, October 30, 2025."

Four years in prison, and you no longer know who you are or where you will go. The salty breath of the Tyrrhenian tickled his nostrils, carrying with it that subtle scent of Corsica and Africa, and he would have wanted to let his life flow there, forever, without other thoughts or obsessions.

He lazily skimmed the weekly, trying not to dwell too much on the mischievous and splendid Venuses from as many geovisual programs. His Giwiki could have given him any information or image for a lower price and with extreme speed, but that moment of vagrancy required a paper magazine, a park, and nothing else to do, much less twist his neurons to be able to give the right command or press the exact point on the small touchscreen of that damned wrist computer. Besides, it was also for that, and for the weekly megalomania, that newsstands had not yet gone bankrupt. He would have all the time to get used to the latest technological finds in Solaria.

"Hey, Leone! Is that you?"

He looked up incredulously, suppressing the prison instinct to jump to his feet and stand at attention by a hair's breadth. A lightning-fast anguish struck him like an electric shock, instilling in his soul the fear that someone had discovered some irregularity in his amnesty and had come to throw him back into jail!

It only lasted a moment, but it was a terrible sensation of death, which accelerated his heartbeats until they echoed in his ears. A chubby, bearded stranger was showing him the good work of his dentist, unaware of the inner turmoil he had just caused.

His immobility forced the guy to ask again:

"Yes! Don't you recognize me?"

It couldn't be him. It couldn't be him. Why had he approached him? Of course, he recognized him. Four years certainly hadn't been enough to forget. He muttered:

"Sergio, right."

"The very one! But let's have a look at you! You're in great shape, my friend!"

The pachyderm went to embrace him, but he wasn't receptive, and

the man's initial momentum wavered slightly before he resumed his beaming smile from before as he sat down affectionately next to him. A few minutes of empty rhetoric followed on one side, and passive responses on the other... He didn't care about talking to him! What the devil did he want?

"Well, Leone... So, you're free, at last! How was prison? Seems like you managed quite well!"

Sergio had been a university companion of his, in mathematics. Unsatisfied, he had then switched to law, but that had not prevented the two from often socializing, not so much as friends but rather as members of the same bunch of riffraff that met almost every evening.

Sergio was from a well-off family, and he always loved to emphasize his status with many little vanities, like the Panerai on his wrist, a different car every year, designer clothes, donations and dinners at the Rotary and such.

He smoked like a chimney, was more critical than necessary, and was successful with women, but much of that was due to his trail of money.

He was also quite the ambitious bastard, that's for sure.

Leone replied:

"How was prison, you ask? You're inquiring at the right time, I see."

"Well, we're friends, aren't we? It's the least I can..."

"Maybe you don't understand, Sergio. I was being ironic. I meant to emphasize that you had more than four years to ask me how I was doing, and you're only doing it now that you've run into me. Doesn't that seem a bit... asshole-ish to you?"

The never-ending smile lost a bit of its self-confidence, but the voice blissfully picked up the pace again:

"Well, Leone... It's not like we had many chances to hear from each other... And then you see, I've had my own prob..."

"Come off it! Don't tell me stories! Instead, avoid the platitudes and don't beat around the bush. What do you want from me?"

"Uh, I see that prison has made you... abrupt. I thought you'd be happy to see me, after such a long time."

"Listen, I don't want to seem rude or whatever, but tell me honestly: do you think that you and I were friends, years ago? Wasn't it simply that we hung out with the same people, and that was it?"

"What are you talking about? After all the drinks, the memories, the holidays, the..."

"Bullshit!"

"Yes! The bullshit, the jok..."

"Diablo! Are your neurons on a coffee break? I mean that the crap you're spouting now is bullshit! We were never good friends, and you know it! Have we ever talked about our feelings? Have we ever gone for a walk just the two of us? Did we ever seek each other out when we weren't in the group? Have we ever been there for each other in times of need? Don't waste my time, Sergio, and tell me what you want from me."

With each question, the bulk of the chubby man seemed to diminish.

"Oh, well... If you're convinced, I can't change your mind. But know that I consi..."

"Aha, so you are deaf!

Do-not-waste-my-time! Out with it! Or leave!"

Sergio finally subdued his optimistic cheer and became almost serious, taking on an offended demeanor:

"Leone. You've always been a bit eccentric, and maybe these years really have changed you. Anyway... I have a job proposal for you. Are you interested?"

There it was. He must have followed him. He couldn't have come up with a proposal in a few seconds after seeing him there in the park.

He had to be careful; they wouldn't pull one over on an old sea dog like him. He took his time:

"What do you do now? I seem to remember you graduated just before my trial, right?"

"Well, five years have passed. After graduating, for a while, I continued to frequent the university for the publication of my thesis, and of course to hang out with the group."

"Ah, yes, I remember: there was that professor who would have helped you climb the ladder..."

"Yes, him. Ghiselli."

"A member of the administrative council of ThaiCom. A big shot. I had taken an exam with him."

"Oh, really? I don't remember. Listen, Riccardo, are you free tonight?"

"Call me Ric, I got used to it. Are you married? Still smoking?"

"No, I'm not married, Ric. And... I quit two years ago. The extra thirty kilos are mostly because of that."

He should have guessed it. Teeth too white for a smoker.

"Engaged?"

"Is it so important for you to know, Ric?"

"No, Sergio. If you want to tell me about your proposal, you have five minutes starting now."

"Five minutes? But we can't talk about it now!"

"Why not? Give me a preview, if I find it interesting, I'll find more time."

"No, no! It's not possible!"

"Then goodbye!"

"Wait, Leone! Ric! Wait! What's the rush? I would take things more slowly if I were you. You've just got out!"

"And how do you know that? What do you know about me? Why are you following me?"

"Eh? B-But..."

Ric grabbed him by the collar of his silk shirt and burned him with a glare, grinding out a phrase borrowed from Redemption:

"Speak, lard barrel! Tell me what the hell you want from me!"

"Ric, calm down! Let me go! Let me go!"

He loosened his grip, keeping his hands ready to slap. Sergio caught his breath:

"Hey! What's gotten into you? Following you? You're paranoid!"

"If someone has a proposal for me, they look for me. And don't tell me it was chance that made you find me here."

"N-not..."

"And how do you know I've just got out? You know a lot more than you seem to, dear Sergio."

The guy started to sweat, and his eyes darted around begging for suggestions from every possible direction.

"Wait, I... Leone! Ric! I..."

"You're a bastard! And not even a smart one, if you thought you

could fool me with smiles and hugs!"

But in reality, he wasn't underestimating him. That man was showing less shrewdness than he actually possessed.

Sergio, red-faced, couldn't find any more words to say to him, while Ric turned and made to leave, almost breaking into a trot.

Sergio, after a moment of confusion, managed to get up and stop him:

"Wait, Ric! Let me talk! I'll explain everything!"

"I don't believe you. But I'll listen for ten seconds."

"Okay. Aaaa... So. I have an offer for you. A job."

"You already told me that. What kind of job?"

"Oouh... I shouldn't say. It's about Motorola. And the... Galatico."

Well, there had to be some truth in it.

"And maybe Ghiselli is involved too, right? Tell me more."

"Huu... Yes. They want a meeting with you. It's a well-paid job, believe me! I've been on the team for three years, and they chose me to hook you. It's true, I've been tailing you. As soon as they heard about the pardon, a couple of alarms went off back at our place, you know..."

"And why was it necessary to hook me like this? Couldn't they just summon me?"

"Not really. You see... Your official communications have been under surveillance since you got out of jail. Actually, let's say since you returned from Iceland. We didn't want the negotiations to be made public too soon."

"I understand. I'm not surprised. You know who we're talking about, right?"

"Certainly. But we are better than them. If you want to..."

"Listen, you little twerp: I have no choice in this matter, so your friends are just wasting time. And so are you."

"You haven't heard my offer yet!"

"Maybe we're not understanding each other: I have no choice!"

"What does that mean?"

"Put yourself in their shoes. Do you know how much it costs, in political and therefore economic terms, to obtain a pardon? Would you have pardoned me just to hand me over to the first comer? Wouldn't you have taken precautions? Yes, you would have, worm!"

"Look, I don't think I deserve this tone..."

"And do you think they were so naive as not to have done it?"

Sergio did not reply, letting him continue:

"Don't ask me how. I don't even know myself! I just know that there is something, and I don't want to experience it firsthand. Clear? Your Ghiselli knows it, but he doesn't care, because I'm the one at risk, not him. Did you think I was that foolish?"

"Too bad. Should I report this, then? A refusal?"

"It's not a refusal, because it's not me who's choosing. Not this time either."

"What do you mean, not this time either?"

"Forget it. I'm glad you quit smoking. Do some exercise, you look disgusting. I know a place that would be right for you..."

"You're really nice, you know? I'll never end up in jail. I'd rather kill myself."

"You can never say, buddy. And then, believe me, it would do you

good in many ways."

"Sexual too, I imagine?"

What a snake! He retorted, sarcastically sweet:

"Yes, darling! Kiss me!"

"Go to hell, Leone!"

Ric smiled amusedly at the long-awaited insult that broke the mask of kindness shown to him until that moment.

He threw the magazine in the trash and headed towards the center, leaving behind Sergio, his slimy proposals, and his pair of huge buttocks that vibrated with each step inside that splendid Armani suit. After all, that pachyderm showed class at least in dressing.

It was beginning to sound strange to him that he had received a pardon just for some vague linguistic talents. An annoying sensation of fear in his stomach kept him company until he took a double portion of fried chicken and salted biscuits at the KFC in the square. How he had missed those buttery gut-busters.

The blue sky was now giving way to the stars, and the city, now devoid of the hordes of commuters that crammed into its narrow streets and offices during the day, was becoming more peaceful and human, perhaps helped by the pleasant temperature and the slight southwest wind.

Solaria, Motorola, Sergio... What confusion. He knew he wasn't worth enough to suspect some kind of conspiracy, yet he would have liked to better understand the money circle he was getting himself into.

The fixed point remained Solaria, and he would at least visit and discover it, day by day, with his own eyes. If what he found there did not satisfy him, he would return home, or he would flee to some other part of the world, maybe a tropical island... Aruba... Vanuatu... Fiji... He would manage. After four years in jail, nothing

much could scare him anymore.

His light steps, trained by years of marching and running, dragged him through the illuminated streets of the city. Restaurants were filling up and a thousand different signals indicated the slow awakening of the nightlife.

He fiddled with his Giwiki, informing his father that he wouldn't be returning for dinner. He made to resume his walk, but his feet didn't move: for that evening, he had found the solution to his problems.

He looked around, as if to make sure he hadn't been followed. How stupid, he thought. If they had wanted to, they could have tracked his Giwiki to find him, and they would have known what he was about to do, and anything else.

But then, what did it matter to him, in that case? What was the problem with being monitored by them? What did he have to hide, from his saviors? His privacy? Could an ex-convict still care about his privacy after having intimately known a good dozen scoundrels?

He rang the bell and, after a short wait, a welcoming female voice invited him in.

"Welcome, Doctor Leone!"

November 6, 2025. He had just stepped out of the Ferrari H-3 and felt a bit melted from jet lag. Just twelve hours earlier, he had said goodbye to his father. And he had cried.

To welcome him at Solaria was a she, definitely not bad at all. He was almost disappointed when, instead of a crushing Icelandic hug, they merely shook hands.

"I am Ariel Amard! How was your flight?"

What a splendid smile! Hmm... 35 years old, maybe... Engaged? Married? He tried to contain the euphoria of this new encounter.

"Pleasure, Ariel. The flight was good. These new airplanes are very comfortable, and fast. Call me Ric."

No ring on her finger. But maybe that wasn't the custom here. Or maybe she wasn't Christian. Bobbed black hair, dark eyes, honest lips. Spanish?

"Very good, then... Ric! I will take care of helping you settle in here at Solaria. I've been told you are a bit exuberant... I hope we will get along!"

"I believe there won't be any problems, Ariel. Are you ready for a barrage of questions?"

"Not really! You will soon discover a much faster and more pleasant way to find answers to your questions."

Faster, perhaps. More pleasant, certainly not.

"Ariel, I need to collect my luggage."

"Oh, the accent is on the first vowel, Ric, not the last! You're not the first to get my name wrong! My Giwiki tells me that your luggage is already on its way to your apartment. Follow me."

"Uh?"

She repeated with a smile:

"Follow me!"

She seemed friendly, and sharp. Ric's attention, in the first few minutes, was monopolized by the curves of his guide: quite tall, with a strong physique, wearing a kind of pleasant stretch suit, and white athletic shoes. On her right ankle, she wore a small pendant fixed to a thin chain that seemed to be made of silver. Almost all Solarians favored comfortable clothing in clear pastel colors. All the clothing was wider than usual under the armpits, perhaps to limit sweating. After all, the climate of Solaria could almost be compared to the Libyan desert. A marvelous New Year's Eve in the Sahara Desert with four friends came to his mind. Almost thirteen years before.

They arrived at customs, where Ric left his temporary Solarian passport to receive a new personal Giwiki and an ID token to insert into the Giwiki. It was an extremely difficult device to tamper with: a 32 Kbit key that uniquely identified the owner. He knew that the token was not sufficient precaution, and indeed the customs officers took his fingerprints, blood type, made a three-dimensional scan of his bones and teeth, a retina scan, took two hairs for DNA testing, all in less than fifteen minutes and without even having to undress or assume any strange poses.

Such efficiency! They all spoke English with a slight Latin inflection, but their origins were the most varied. He did not ask about the details of that procedure: he would have plenty of time to learn. In those first moments, he wanted only to enjoy the sensation of being there, and that was enough.

He learned that Ariel was Slovak, although her name had behind it a story too long to tell, she said. Forty-one years old (really well carried, he told her and she laughed), married for ten years and divorced just before coming to Solaria... Now she was living with a certain Leopold, an American, cardiothoracic surgeon. She was involved in tourism, the little tourism that Solaria allowed for people like him, about 300,000 visitors with special permits and 190,000 new immigrants every year, small numbers considering a population of over seven million individuals.

He was led to a wardrobe, where he left his clothes (which would be washed, ironed, and sent to the apartment) to take new ones, similar to Ariel's and definitely more suitable for the climate. He slipped on the Makea, very light sandal-like shoes with breathable but waterproof slits near the toes and sides, and a sole with an eccentric shape but evidently very functional. They were extremely comfortable and, she said, ideal for long walks; they didn't make your feet sweat even after running, nor get them wet in the rain.

The Solarian outfit, called Mumako, was equally comfortable: a kind of elegant and simple gym suit, spartan but pleasant.

The woman provided explanations with expertise, including details about the materials or the construction processes of those shoes.

Feet are an important part of physical well-being.

A Russian general during World War II had stated that if the Germans had all had boots one size larger, they would have won the war against Russia, arguing that during the frigid winter of the Barbarossa invasion, a large part of the Nazi infantry had suffered losses and delays due to the cold, while the Russian one, equipped with larger boots that were filled with straw or animal fat, had managed to withstand well and stop the German advance. All for one size more.

Just think about the feet.

"How did they know my shoe size, Ariel? And my pant size?"

"Here there are no shoe sizes, Ric. Or rather, there are measurements of every part of your body, but no Solarian remembers them. At customs, you had a three-dimensional scan of the masses of your body and of the movements of your joints, which is essentially used for clothing, and for taxes. It's called Triscan."

Oh misery.

"Taxes? Did I hear correctly?"

"Yes. If you exceed a threshold of obesity, or rickets, you are placed under medical and dietary control, and then you pay more health taxes.

Here in Solaria, all freedoms are possible: you can do drugs, you can whip yourself, you can smoke, you can get drunk every day... But you are put in a condition not to harm others and to be under medical control, and if you cost more you are presented with the bill at the end of the month, and your insurance raises the rates. You also pay more taxes if you refuse medical control, for many it is a good incentive to exercise and limit their own gluttony... You know, here taxes are paid every month!"

"Ah, I see. Certainly, it limits freedom to wealth..."

"Actually... Yes... But I ask you to judge only when you have well known the situation. It's not about choosing the absolute good, Ric, but the lesser evil. The problem of wealth is perhaps in the way it is distributed, and not in using it as a measure of people's freedoms."

Ariel knew how to explain without seeming pedantic, and he liked that a lot in a woman. Especially in a beautiful one like her.

"The triscan is repeated every month, Ric, and every three months also those procedures to which you were subjected before, which

are called CID, Check IDentification.

To identify you, the radio signal from your Giwiki that reads the ID token inside is sufficient, but for more complex operations, the data collected with the CID is used, such as the retinal scan and the recognition of the voice stamp. When you use an Alfa station to access Ultranet, for example, you are given a retinal scan... Retiscan."

He wondered what all those damn controls were for. He tried to guess the next step, to show he was paying attention:

"And the vocal scan, Ariel? Vocalscan?"

"Almost... Voscan."

"Well... You asked me not to judge, but it seems that Solaria has inherited a lot from Orwell's fantasies: anyone can be kept under strict control, whether they want to or not."

"And what's wrong with that?"

"Oh God, Ariel! Every authoritarian regime dreams of this, you know!"

"Of course I know! But there are differences, Ric... In Solaria, it doesn't matter what people say, what information you look for or which people you see... It can do nothing with this information."

"That's what you say... What do you know? Have you ever been in the bowels of the... Ministry of Truth?"

"Oh, come on... Of course not. I caught your subtle irony, but I know how things work here.

Solarians care about well-being, and free men obtain it and dispense it more easily. If you knew how many things are read on Ultranet every day, that a real regime would have silenced."

She looked at him amiably, then said, changing the subject:

"If I'm not being indiscreet... Are you excited, Ric?"

"Well, yes! Solaria is a place... You know..."

"I meant sexually."

Damn, how on earth had she guessed?

"Oh... Umm... Why do you ask?"

"Because when they did the Triscan, they... noticed it."

"Damn!"

He felt violated in his privacy. Ariel fiddled with the Giwiki, rejecting a call, then continued:

"Look, there's nothing wrong, Ric. Did you see a particularly attractive woman, or a man?"

You are searching, my treasure.

"Men don't interest me, Ariel. And... well, I have... seen..."

She smiled melodiously, interrupting him.

"Why do you laugh, Ariel?"

"Because I'm pleased to be the focus of your attention!"

"..."

"Don't be like that, you look like a schoolboy! I'm forty-one years old, Ric, I can tell when a man looks at me in a certain way, and having your gaze on me makes me still feel beautiful. That's all. I don't see why you should be ashamed."

"Don't you think, Ariel, that your partner might not like what you're telling me?"

"No, as long as I don't act on it."

"And... do you intend to?"

"Hey! Aren't you running a bit too fast, you rascal?"

Even spoken with joy through a white smile, those words suddenly extinguished him, cooling him, and his curious look turned into black disappointment. He mumbled:

"You see, Ariel... I..."

His eyes surprised her, watering his cheeks as they silently settled on hers, which became frightened.

"Ric! What's happening?"

Ariel quickly approached, put an arm around his neck, and with the other hand stroked his flat stomach, whispering sweetly:

"Come on, don't be like that... Too much tension? What's wrong?"

He stopped crying but did not dry his tears.

"Sorry, Ariel. I didn't want... I didn't want to make you uncomfortable."

"It's okay, Ric. Can I do something for you?"

"Fhhhh... Nothing. Now I'm feeling better."

"Good. What happened to you? Did I touch a sensitive nerve?"

"No.

...

Yes."

She continued to look at him, as if waiting for more details. She did not seem curious, just sincerely concerned. Ric realized he could trust her.

"You see, Ariel, you appreciate my looks because they make you feel young and beautiful, and that makes you feel better."

"Yes, indeed."

"It gives you confidence, a confidence that you might otherwise lose."

"Yes."

"I need confidence just as much as you do. And for a moment, it seemed to me that you... And then, I thought back on what I've been through in the last few years..."

"Oh, Ric... I'm really sorry! How clumsy of me!"

"My last few years have made me a bit fragile from that point of view.

And it seems that everyone knows the reasons for my imprisonment, and thinks I'm some kind of maniac, and... Every feeling I have scares me, as if it could be wrong or perverse."

"You don't need to justify yourself! I had forgotten what they told me about you, Ric. And then, I don't believe you're such a bad person.

Sorry, Ric! I should have been more discreet. Damn me!"

"No, Ariel. You didn't do anything wrong. Your only mistake, if anything, is being so beautiful... And mine is having discovered you too late."

This time it was her turn to be at a loss for words. She felt a sweet warmth through her skin, as if it were the first seconds of life for a cocoon that had become a butterfly.

He tried to regain control of himself:

"Now I feel better, Ariel... We can go."

She seemed hesitant, as if she was still savoring that moment so intimate and sweet.

"Alright, Ric. I don't know if... Listen, I want to be honest: if my life wasn't tied to that of another, if I were a little younger and

crazier... Well, I would like to get to know you better. Really! You seem like a very interesting person, and then you have a charm of your own, you know?"

"And I would make you the happiest woman in the world, Ariel. I believe you, and that's why I appreciate your words. But let's stop now, or at this rate we'll end up at the altar. Come here."

They hugged, without any malice, like two old friends.

He felt happy and complete, exhausted as after a night of love under the covers, by the light of the moon. Their hug lingered, and he felt his neck wet with her tears. What poetry could ever capture that energy, those vibrations, that warmth? Which language? How many would ever understand? They loosened their embrace and looked at each other in the transparency of their eyes.

"Ariel!"

"As you see, Ric, you're not the only one who cries in public, in front of a stranger..."

"Oh, Ariel!"

She dried her eyes and smiled:

"These are tears of joy! How long have we known each other? An hour? How is it possible that this is happening... This?"

"I think it's because both of us are going through a special time. And I think we both needed some affection."

"Yes, I believe that too."

"And I also believe that you and I are made for each other, and..."

"Ric! Please..."

"Let me finish! We are made for each other, but we found each other at the wrong time. I still don't know what I'm looking for, and you already have your man to love. What intrigues and excites

you about me is just a mysterious shore... That's why it attracts you so much. And maybe the same is true for me. And then, my crying must have triggered a whole series of maternal attitudes in you."

"Well, thank you, Ric. It's been beautiful."

"Thank you, Ariel. I feel lighter now that I've met you and have unburdened myself. Is it true what you said? That if he hadn't been there..."

She smiled at him, hugging him one last time, then they walked together towards the nearest transport node. His lost gaze was immediately caught by Ariel's intuition:

"Now, Ric, during the short journey that separates us from the capital's center, I'll explain a few things to you about Solaria!"

What extraordinary creatures women are. And how easy they were to meet!

He felt relieved, and his fears seemed to have vanished. Prison or not, his heart was still capable of beating strongly, right?

He closed off his thoughts and focused on the landscape.

Solaria! A single large urban agglomerate stretched out over a plain that was once desert, planned down to the smallest detail even before the first foundations were dug. Ariel's soft voice was explaining the details to him.

Solaria was divided into hexagons arranged in a honeycomb pattern, each with a function: residential (esares), nature reserve (esanat) or other (esavar: industries, solar plants, or special buildings, such as the Palace of the Sun or the airport). The residential ones were commonly called sectors, and Solaria had about 60 of them.

Each sector, about 12 kilometers in diameter, hosted 21 transport nodes, positioned at the vertices of seven adjacent hexagons, placed in such a way as to be perfectly distanced from the nodes of neighboring sectors and to form a continuous solution of perfect geometric figures. Each node, above which stood a residential building or an industry, consisted of two levels.

The first was dedicated to passenger traffic, and its arteries, beautiful cylinders of plasto-glass set into the ground for two-thirds of their height, benefited from direct sunlight. The second level, underground, was dedicated to the transport of goods or particularly bulky vehicles, such as those used in the cleaning and periodic maintenance of buildings.

Both of these networks of roadways, although independent, were built with the same principles: thousands of magnetically levitated vehicles (similar to those seen in Iceland with *Snaefell*), called *Katos* when used for passenger transport, sped along indestructible carboceramic monorails, resting on air cushions and electronically controlled from departure to destination. Propulsion was entrusted to millions of small magnets scattered along the route, which radiated their field in sync with the passage of the vehicles. An efficient and clean system.

Near each node, the *Katos* could slip into a kind of external roundabout to bypass it, or enter the internal roundabout, where they slowed down before stopping in one of the parking bays oriented towards the center of the node, equipped with appropriate platforms for boarding and alighting passengers. From there, passengers had access to the ground level or, through elevators, to the buildings above.

There were no trains, cars, motorcycles, trucks: the only alternative means of transport was their variant of a lightweight and well-designed bike, *bika*, used for leisure or physical exercise and adored by the Solarian people on warm summer days. There were also emergency vehicles and cleaning vehicles, called *Paloka*,

which often had electric motors powered by hydrogen fuel cells.

According to Ariel, that system allowed Solarian residents to move to any point in the city in less than 22 minutes, enabling the saving of precious economic resources and, not least, the hassles implicit in owning a personal means of transport. The maintenance of the vehicles was at the expense of the state and was completely robotized.

"What do you think, Ric? Do you like it as a first taste?"

"Well, your words are convincing, and even more so what I see. This vehicle, this... Kato, is quiet and fast. I still have to get used to these constant changes of direction..."

The Kato, sleek and with large glass surfaces, had three comfortable seats, simple electronic indicators, and a rear trunk. The lower part contained the counter-magnets.

Ariel replied:

"The changes are necessary because the communication routes follow the lines of the hexagonal structure, and therefore there is no straight line from one node to another, but a certain number of segments that are joined by making wide curves, like this one."

They felt a slight centrifugal sensation, balanced by the changed inclination of the vehicle. Ariel put on the geovisor on her right eye, just taken out from her Giwiki, and resumed the conversation:

"Usually how long does it take you to reach your home from the airport, Ric?"

"Well... it USED to take... About 50 minutes... If there wasn't too much traffic."

"And you paid for a taxi, right?"

"Well, yes... I didn't like leaving my car at the airport."

"How much did that taxi cost you?"

"Well, I don't remember... I'd say about forty euros, more or less..."

Ariel gave some commands to the Giwiki.

"Good, here we are at our destination! Almost fifteen minutes, during which we have covered... Thirty-seven kilometers. A trip like this costs a Solarian... On average... The equivalent of 1.38 euros."

"That little?"

"Not only that: do you know what the average salary of a Solarian is? About 70% higher than Italian wages. And then you haven't considered the hidden costs of traditional solutions..."

"Such as?"

Ariel continued to fiddle with the buttons and the illuminated virtual keyboard of her Giwiki:

"Risk of accidents, delays, strikes, pollution, inflation due to the cost of traffic, wear and tear of the road surface..."

What a fascinating woman.

"Okay, Ariel... You've convinced me!"

Ariel was looking at him with a smile, easily maneuvering with the controls and the geovisor of the Giwiki.

"It happens to everyone like this. The new ones, I mean. Did you know that, on average, an Italian uses transport means for about 910 hours each year? And a US citizen almost 1200?"

"I didn't know, but... I'd say those are credible figures."

"Would you like to receive as a gift, say, 600 hours a year of time all for yourself? And decrease your personal expenses by 22%?"

"And you ask me?"

"Do you see where I'm getting at, Ric?"

"Of course! There are benefits for everyone. Less expense, more time. Not to mention the stress of city traffic!"

"Ric, I have provided you with real figures..."

"I believe you, Ariel. I trust you blindly."

"You are so sweet! Come on, let's get off!"

Without effort, they left the Kato and crossed the well-lit sidewalk to head towards the elevators, arranged in a circle at the base of a dome whose uncovered frame confirmed the much-loved and praised geodesic shape. It was one of the many residential buildings. The coming and going of people was modest: they seemed serene and calm, and they waited patiently for the few seconds necessary for the arrival of one of the elevators. A total of 90 managed the passenger traffic to the upper floors, said Ariel, and if necessary (but it was never necessary) they could have installed another 60, in the spaces left free. Some Solarians preferred the stairs, choosing among the twelve available flights.

"Why do I have a new Giwiki, Ariel?"

"Ah! You haven't used it yet, have you? This is a Plen-5 model, only used in Solaria. It has innovative functionalities, and... I'm sure you will appreciate it."

"Why didn't I receive it when I returned home to Italy?"

"It has not yet been released outside of Solarian territory."

"But what was the point of giving me the other one, then? I only used it for six days. It was a nice thought, though I believ..."

"The other one allowed us to track your location, and a lot of other things, at all times, Ric."

He opened his mouth wide enough to fit a whole grapefruit.

"..."

"You didn't expect me to admit it so openly, did you, Ric?"

"Well... No! No, Ariel."

"You might be interested to know that we also heard everything that you heard, during those six days..."

"Even...?"

"Yes, Ric. Don't worry, I don't think you did anything wrong. Maybe it was the best way to get a bit of confidence back with your sexuality."

"DIABLO, ARIEL!!!"

"Oops! Maybe you weren't referring to that..."

Listen, Ric: do you still think I'm a tour guide?"

"What? Oh, I don't know what to believe anymore."

"I'm an engineering psychologist. The contracted name is psycho-engineer. But don't feel like you're under examination... You have been up to now, and I would say you've passed the test brilliantly!"

"But then..."

"Stop! Don't even think about it! I have never lied to you, Ric! Never! The only thing I've hidden from you is my profession, to avoid making you feel observed. The rest is all true, Ric, tears included... I swear it. And my name is still Ariel."

He didn't feel deceived. Just naïve, and Ariel's sweet voice did not deserve blame. Nor her honesty.

"You are passionate about history like me, Ric, and so you will undoubtedly know in what conditions Soviet workers, of any rank, lived during the communist period of the last century."

"Of course. One heart, one bread."

"Exactly. It was Khrushchev's, right? So, no merits, no incentives... Only huge punishments for those who broke the rules."

"Indeed."

"Their great adversary at the time was the United States... A global economic power, free market, meritocracy, well-being. So how do you explain the enormous scientific successes of the Russians? The first living being in space? The first man in space? The first nuclear submarine?"

"Scientifically, the Russians were exceptional."

"Good... And do you know how these scientists were incentivized, Ric? Do you know what precautions Mother Russia took for them? They are the same precautions that Solaria has taken for you."

He couldn't respond immediately. She continued affectionately:

"You're not stupid. You're getting there on your own."

"Yes, I've got it. They rewarded their scientists, gave them more privileges, more money, and let them live in their ideal social system... I know something of that system, Ariel... Scientifically it worked excellently, given the conditions. But do you think that Solaria is a sufficient reward for me, Ariel? Isn't there a risk that I might learn about... American capitalism, be fascinated by it and flee from my new Moscow? What did those scientists do, Ariel, once the Berlin Wall fell? Where did they go, Ariel?"

She smiled admiringly, like at a child who has learned to take his first steps. She continued:

"Solaria is not the only reward, and you know it... They've taken four years off your prison sentence, they're allowing you to be part of a great team of scientists to continue your linguistic research and pick up your project again... They're offering you an excellent

economic treatment, and above all... The freedom to decide! Ric, do you understand what I'm talking about? You will stay here only if you want to.

Do you want to work for Motorola, for Nokia? Do you want to go back to your father, find some job and live your life that way? You are free to do so! Free!

See, Ric, life is good here, and our well-being allows us to have more than two months of vacation a year! You can visit your father as often as you want, Ric... You can visit every corner of the world, whenever you want... If you are worth what you're worth, this is your paradise!"

"Oh, Ariel..."

"You're shaken, aren't you?"

"Ariel... Did you listen... Personally... When that whore... That woman and I..."

"Ric! Don't tell me you're still thinking about that! You should be worried about your life, your doubts, and instead, you're just thinking about what I might have heard... How shy you are! And don't try to fall in love with me, Riccardo Leone! I don't know if I could resist you! You have a wonderful character! I feel like I've known you forever!"

Ric smiled at her, finally, and lowered his gaze at those confident words.

"I'm really happy for you, Ric!"

"Thank you, Ariel. And... will we say goodbye now?"

She smiled maternally, with a hint of sadness at the corners of her mouth:

"I told you, you're a perceptive guy! Well... I'm afraid so."

"No, Ariel. We can't."

"Ric... No..."

He interrupted her:

"Ariel... I would like to be with you for a few more days. Please."

Ric noticed for the first time the freckles on her cheeks, the true color of her eyes, and the soft creases of her mature rosy lips. Perhaps he was truly falling in love.

"Ric, don't... Don't..."

"Ariel, are you a professional or what? I'm not talking about sexual favors... I need you as a psychologist. I need it!"

"Ric, I..."

"I need you... Really, Ariel. I'm not joking. You can't refuse."

"But Ric... Tomorrow another foreigner is coming, and I have to exam..."

"Aaaa! Don't tell me you can't be replaced! If there's a fine to pay, put it on my account."

His authoritative tone seemed to make her give in. Thoughtful, she remained silent, organizing her thoughts, staring at him.

"Ariel, you desire my company as much as I desire it. You want to discover me, as much as I want to. Don't make up implausible excuses: you can do it, and you will. And don't even mention that American heartthrob and his potential objections, I'm not interested.

You are doing your job, with me. I need you. Don't say anything else, don't even try to make up some 'I can't'. No, Ariel... I don't accept your refusal. I want you. Period!"

And that was that.

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"Good night, Ric!"

"Night, Ariel! See you tomorrow!"

They exchanged a somewhat mischievous kiss on the cheek, and their locked gazes were only interrupted by the door that closed silently, sliding as if on velvet.

Friday, November 10, 2025. Day 314, as they had started to say around those parts. Almost midnight. They had allowed themselves a little chat, given that Ariel's partner had left a few hours before for a conference in Finland.

He would have liked to invite her to sleep with him, implying all sorts of pleasant things, but he hadn't managed to; he felt it would have disappointed her and would have also ruined their sudden friendship.

His accommodation was nestled on the 41st floor of a geodesic residential building, two sectors away from the Center, or the Sun Palace. The yet unshaded plastiglass of the living room allowed him to admire from afar its bulk and grace, well lit by hundreds of plasma headlights, almost representing a safe haven among the starry darkness. Perhaps at that moment the Great Guide was looking towards him from the heights of his residences.

A slight peckishness pulled him to the kitchen corner, where he fiddled with surprising familiarity with the kawiki, a kind of home Giwiki, to order some snacks. After not even seventy seconds, during which he adjusted the temperature of the house and set the alarm for 9:00 the next morning, the led of the gikole, a small home elevator, flashed, signaling the arrival of the ordered food.

He opened the hatch, took out the plastoceramic tray, and started

to nibble silently on those morsels, his gaze fixed on the night sky.

After finishing the meal, he went to the bathroom to brush his teeth and finally lay down on the bed, taking the wrist Giwiki with him.

He decided to spend a few minutes with Oscar, his virtual guide. Virtual guides had been around for several years in the rest of the world, but compared to Oscar, they were crude, primitive software. Oscar, a latest-generation software, was comparable to a human companion, but equipped with the resources of many computers.

He pulled out the bi-ocular geovisor from the Giwiki, putting it on: he felt a slight dizziness, but then everything went back to normal. Virtually in front of him was the sky of Solaria, on a warm sunny day, and he admired the landscape together with Oscar.

Oscar winked at him, like an old comrade-in-arms.

"Oscar, can all Solarians use you?"

"No. I am still in an experimental phase. Only another 65,993 people have such a privilege, in Solaria. Consider yourself lucky!"

"I would consider myself lucky even without these privileges, Oscar."

He was so human that it made it too difficult to think otherwise, and so those answers slipped out that Oscar didn't give a hoot about. But the virtual thing smiled patiently and took the initiative:

"Here in Solaria, Ric, the most used structure is the geodesic, a kind of sphere made of hexagons and pentagons, light and very strong."

"Beautiful! Are there other different shapes?"

"Not at the moment. When designing a new type of building, a whole series of requirements must be respected, as well as

designing the means capable of building it quickly and without errors. It is not an easy undertaking!"

Ric admired the various phases of construction of the standard residential buildings, called hab-1. Monstrous machinery was transported and assembled on site, while large quantities of material were deposited around the foundations.

With impressive precision, six men directed the work of the robots, digging, filling, welding, screwing, like generals in command of their own battalion. In a few moments, the construction took shape before his eyes, and the gigantic three-hundred-meter-diameter geodesic sphere was erected and embedded in the ground for about a third of its height; the transport node below was connected to the communication routes, other machinery climbed up the robust tubes and performed various operations, until the work was completed.

Forty-seven days, six men, and 14,000 tons of electronically controlled machinery: that's all it took for an abit-1, 210 meters high from the ground with apartments of various sizes, perched around the mighty frame, and capable of comfortably housing up to 6,500 people.

Each floor housed apartments for one to seven residents. Ninety elevators facilitated the mobility of the tenants, 250 light freight elevators, the gikoles, and 15 heavy freight elevators delivered everything necessary to them, from food to clothes to furniture.

Water, waste, and air conditioning were centralized and very efficient. Everything was recorded: for every good, a small pollution tax was paid, which was collected when one disposed of the purchased item in the appropriate manner.

In the early years of the third millennium, designing all these operations required huge investments, repaid with a great economy of scale, often underestimated by the common man.

It was also thanks to this that emerging countries had been able to contain the growth of pollution levels.

The virtual vision ventured into one of these huge buildings: the interior was hollow, and was isolated from the outside by a clear plastoglass dome; by day it was illuminated by the sun, by night by artificial lights; it became a sort of large internal plaza, and the entire building transformed into a small village in itself, with its inhabitants, its places for entertainment, its transport hub, its clubs, and its gossip. All the exterior surface, instead, perfectly smooth and air-conditioned, provided light and views for the apartments. Oscar resumed:

"An apartment for two people, ninety square meters and 14,000 Watts of average daily solar illumination, with all services, in a good location... Let's say on the 41st floor, like yours... Costs about 3,500 euros a month. The higher you go, the more the costs increase, because of the view and the better lighting."

"Wow! 3,500 euros!"

"But you're not considering the included services."

The virtual guide rattled off figure after figure:

"Temperature and humidity conditioning; air replacement; maintenance; cleaning (done with automatic robots) of the premises and clothes, or at least for those that still need ironing..."

Ric thought about the revolution of carbon nanofibers: almost indestructible clothes, wrinkle-free, easily washable, without the need for ironing.

"All the other services, however, such as transportation, the national Ultranet network, or healthcare, are paid for with small monthly taxes, with the amount being the same for everyone."

"Yes, yes! I know... Ariel has told me enough about it!"

Oscar collected the information and continued:

"Do you wish to know more?"

"How are the industrial sectors organized?"

"They have few transport hubs and are enclosed in buildings with geodesic structures, but the positioning of the machinery inside them is very complicated and cannot be replicated on a large scale, since almost every building produces something unique."

"Ah, I see."

"The food industries are an exception, of course, where food is grown in hydroponic tanks and then stored and preserved until its use."

"Really? But is Solaria self-sufficient?"

"Of course! It was one of the primary goals of the Great Guide! Energy, food, and mineral self-sufficiency. Unfortunately, some types of minerals do not exist in the Solarian subsoil, and therefore we are forced to import them. But there are large reserves in the warehouses, which allow us to sleep soundly."

"And the water?"

"You've hit the nail on the head, Ric. As you know, most of the plants on the earth's surface can only use fresh water. The bacterial crops used in the tanks, on the other hand, use almost all saltwater, thanks to genetic interventions. The bacteria have become better agents than machinery. Solaria is famous worldwide for its genetic engineers and bioindustrialists! Here you can admire..."

The vision changed and showed Ric the inside of a food industry, with hundreds of large tanks lovingly controlled by just as many mechanical arms.

"... one of the most advanced food industries. This one specializes in the production of proteins, similar to animal proteins but much more digestible. Throughout the entire process, 217 different species of bacteria are used, all artificially created in Solarian

laboratories. Their main source of energy is electricity, and when their life cycle ends, their body mass is absorbed into the saline solution, without consequences."

"Amazing! Are you telling me that the stuff I eat at home comes from these places?"

"Yes, Ric... All of it. From your biorythms, I deduce that you are really enjoying the experience, Ric. Good."

"And the energy?"

"It's produced by solar and nuclear plants. The two fusion nuclear power plants have been operational for a few months. It was an exceptional event; the news went around the world."

"Yes, I remember."

"But the bulk of the nuclear energy is still produced with third-generation fission reactors. They are the most efficient. Energy is usually stored in carbon nanofibers in the form of hydrogen, the same system used for the tanks of palokas, the only wheeled vehicles in Solaria. We can cope with peaks in energy demand by simply 'opening the taps'."

"What can you tell me about the Great Guide, Oscar?"

"I don't have much information on GG. He lives in the Palace of the Sun, is 53 years old, and appears in public about twice a week, mostly in geovision. Every month he holds an assembly in the Eternal Square, the square inside the Palace of the Sun. These assemblies are called 'Keiromak,' from an ancient Maori word that means 'gathering of brethren.'"

Attending in person, surrounded by mighty and gigantic pillars, is a unique experience. The Eternal Square is the largest square in the world."

"Thank you, Oscar. I'm starting to get a bit tired. I think it's time to go to bed!"

"As you wish. It has been a pleasure conversing with you, Ric."

It really seemed believable.

"Me too, Oscar. Goodnight."

They had done it three times, in a few hours.

The first came within minutes, after he had just grazed her. But he wasn't ashamed, nor was she surprised or disappointed. The second took longer, arriving with extraordinary intensity for both. Panting like proud animals, they had continued to kiss and to touch each other with sweaty, trembling fingers.

The third had been exhausting: he moved inside her losing track of time, feeling finally master of his own body and virility, and the supreme moment had caressed and gripped them like a burning volcano takes everything into its entrails around itself. The sheets had scattered around the bed, and perhaps the walls of the room had not managed to contain completely the sounds of their satisfying joy. The foreign sky relaxed them both.

After a half hour of rest, he opened his eyes again, stared at her and said:

"It was wonderful. Are you crying? Why, Ariel?"

She leaned on her elbow, smiled tenderly, then lay on her side without breaking gaze, and lay down again.

"I'm crying because... This is the last time."

He didn't reply.

"I need to talk to you, Ric."

She smiled, like at an innocent creature who still doesn't know the rules of the ruthless game of life.

"Good feelings aren't enough, physical attraction isn't enough. We can't work out in the long run. I'm sorry, we just can't."

"Why? Do you think you've already figured out everything about us?"

"Yes, Ric. Everything."

"Not I, darling."

"Think about where we'll be in ten years. You'll still be a tender,

grumpy complainer, but I'll have become a shrew. Look at me, love: I've taken care of my body in every way, but you can see for yourself that I don't have the freshness of a young girl, nor her fervor. Shh! Don't talk! I know you like me, but it's not your judgment now that counts. We've chased each other these days, and in the end all the built-up tension had to result in this. I'm not sorry for doing it, even though I think I will have to hide it from my partner.

For you men, it's different, you know. A woman only needs your most virile part; if your belly grows or your muscles sag a bit, it's not a bad thing, in fact: it makes us feel better, more beautiful, and therefore satisfies our vanity.

A relationship between a man and a woman is, before anything else, a sexual relationship, you know that. And we cannot base a story on a relationship that will fade in a few years."

"You haven't convinced me, Ariel."

"If I haven't convinced you, it's because you still have something to tell me. Come here!"

"No, stop. I'm exhausted! I'm serious: you haven't convinced me."

"I'm sorry. Let's sleep, shall we? Patrick comes back tomorrow afternoon, and I don't think we'll have other chances in the future. I want to wake up next to you."

"Why do you do it? Why climb higher and higher if you know you'll have to fall eventually?"

"And you, why do you live? Why, if you know that one day you'll have to die? You're thirty-two years old, in sixty or seventy years you'll be cremated in some corner of the world. Why live?"

"You know well that no one knows the answer."

"Oh, but that's not true: take a geneticist, and he will tell you that your DNA dictates that your brain should function in a certain way, and produce certain substances, thanks to which your body makes you desire life."

"Hmm... I'm a scientist, but I can't seem to..."

"You can't? And you think I can, then, my love?"

"I don't know."

"No, I can't. There's a big difference between a thousand chemical reactions and what I actually feel. And the same goes for you. We're human, we're alive, and our awareness can't be stuck into an equation. Nor can our consciousness be reduced to a matrix of neuronal interactions.

I don't know why I love climbing so high, if I have to fall eventually. I don't know why I want to be with you tonight, even though tomorrow evening I'll find myself back in bed with Patrick, who will want to make love and who must suspect nothing of all this. And I will have to pretend to enjoy it more than usual, to make him happy. And maybe at that moment, I'll be thinking of you, and I'll manage to enjoy it only by imagining your body, not his! But I don't care. I know I'll suffer, but now I want to be with you."

"You are sacrificing the best years of your life to mortgage a peaceful old age. Do you realize that?

With me, you could be happy, maybe for a few years, but happy. I've been through terrible times, and I haven't loved for a long time. Now I want to let out what I've saved up, with you."

"And what about children, Ric? What do you think about that?"

"A child needs a young father. Patrick is over fifty years old... They can never be friends, nor confidants."

"In a few years you'll get tired of me, and then what will you do? Will you find another woman? Will you visit them on Sundays?"

"Oh, Ariel!"

"Forgive me, Ric, I don't mean to sound cynical. When it comes to one's own children, you can't just think about yourself. I haven't had any, Ric, and I want to make up for it. I've sacrificed my life for a man, then for my career, then for another man, and finally for both things, here in Solaria. I want children. And Patrick will give them to me."

"I don't think Patrick can be the right partner for you, nor the perfect father for your children. An unhappy mother is a bad

mother, in my opinion.

You'll absorb anger, diluted sex, endurance, dissatisfaction... And at the first opportunity, when you live a moment that's harder than the others, you'll explode, and throw it all out. And you'll also drench your children with your own tears."

Ariel was crying. Ric continued:

"Don't bring up the stories of the years that divide us, or the business plan for your children's lives. Simplicity is the secret of life. Admire this work of art with new eyes, wash it with your tears, and finally, you will see that what I am telling you is true.

Something about me scares you: you are afraid of throwing away what you have today, and finding yourself tomorrow crying over another big mistake. Today I tell you these words, but you fear that tomorrow these words will be different, that I may change my mind, that my way of seeing is too fresh, too enthusiastic to last.

We've known each other for only a few days, I know. It's hard to put your fate in the hands of a stranger... You have made your choice, and I respect it. I really hope I am wrong, and that your life will be happy despite my doubts."

He looked at her tenderly, while her lips whispered in search of a reply, but the sweet and deep eyes of his made her surrender, and the warmth of his skin soothed her, giving her a deep sleep.

He looked at the LED of the clock: he would remember that November 12, 2025, day 316, for quite some time.

"Goal! Yes!!"

"Damn!"

And with that, he was down by four goals! Robert really knew his stuff, and then with the blacks, you just can't compete physically. Ric's gaze settled on the spherobot by his side, one of the three that made up his robosoccer team. These gadgets were essentially blue metallic spheres, with twelve sensors that acted as eyes.

Ric had programmed them with standard settings, but his opponent Robert seemed to have much more familiarity. Moreover, it was quite complicated for him to get used to having three robotic players as a team, all ready to spring to his orders... Which often were not given in time because he focused too much on his own actions. His gaze lingered for a moment on the thousand statistical graphs about the match, focusing on the interaction between the human player and the three spherobots... Robert's team had almost triple the score.

Robosoccer had now become a national sport, and the best spherobot programmers were paid very well. Just two years before, this sport had been introduced in China, with great success. Ric complained:

"And damn it! The two balls are small, it's a mess to maneuver them together, and I've never played using the walls as a bounce. I can't predict the bounce angles! And then the timeouts to be able to shoot on goal, and I always had the headlights in my face..."

"Yeah, yeah... Don't use up all your good excuses now... Otherwise what will you tell me next time, eh? Ah ah ah!! Come on, relax!"

"I am relaxed, Bob, especially if I lose to someone I like! And I can't get mad at you... Your biceps are as big as melons!"

The robust black man bowed with deliberate clumsiness, making

him smile again like a young man at the dentist.

"Alright, Ric. I think we better take a shower, or we'll be late!"

Leone glanced at the inseparable Giwiki, then agreed:

"Oops... You're right, Robert! Let's go!"

In less than half an hour (you know, men) they showered, dressed, and groomed properly, ready for a few hours of anticipated fun.

That evening his Ariel would be meeting with the old-heart, and he, not being able to stay nearby, had accepted the invitation of his new colleague Robert, reciprocating with the suggestion of a little football match: the guy had come up with that kind of robosport, which Ric imagined to be much less fun than it actually was.

That first week of work had been exciting: the premises of his research group were on the 60th floor of one of the two national research centers, "Galileo," with a splendid view of the outskirts of Solaria and the gulf.

His direct superior, Director Ludwig Bonn, held a purely institutional role for him: in reality, Ric reported his results directly to the fifth governor of Solaria, Elmas Antas Pernaud. The highest authority in Solaria was the Great Guide, alongside whom 30 governors dealt with the main political, economic, and social aspects of the state. Each single Abit, then, was governed by a kind of praetor, with limited powers, whose task was to streamline the work of the superiors.

With a fast elevator, they descended to the now familiar transport hub, where they found a kato waiting for them, requested a minute earlier by Robert with his Giwiki.

It was easy to get used to everything, the means of transport, the Giwiki, the elevators... Everything was the same in every place, but designed so well that you wouldn't miss a pluralism of ideas or architecture. The ergonomics and elegance of every object made everything perfect. Perhaps time would cool the enthusiasm.

A few years in Solaria would turn every other place on the planet into hell. Maybe this was what Ariel meant. Solaria doesn't need

to force you to live here. You will get used to it, Ric, and then the bars of your prison, if it is a prison, will become golden, and the green of the pastures out there will lose its vigor and scent.

In a few minutes, the swift kato took them to sector 29, Abit B, where they reached a cozy little place called 'Don't tell mama', inside of which about ten friends were waiting for them, seated around a bright circular table.

In a few minutes among them, an atmosphere of great familiarity was created: they talked about Solaria, places to go, mountains and excursions, natural parks, the problem of the scarcity of certain minerals in the Solarian subsoil, and a thousand other things. They told him a bit of history, some indiscretion about GG, the reasons why they had come to Solaria.

The food was ordered via kawiki, the home version of Giwiki, or from the small displays of nightclubs, and in a couple of minutes arrived hot with the dumbwaiter, packaged in suitable trays, accompanied by cutlery and straws. Those same trays, cutlery, and straws were then sent back to be washed, disinfected, and put back into circulation for about 200 times. After their life cycle ended, they were then sent to the recovery center, where almost all of the material could be recovered. The environmental respect of the Solarian system was admirable. All from the ingenuity of Oscar, naturally.

Inevitably, though later than he had anticipated, came the long-awaited question, naively asked by the cordial Carlos between bites:

"What did you do, Ric, before coming to Solaria?"

The hardships of prison had been so draining that they flushed any remaining shame for his past down the toilet, allowing him to talk serenely about that period, as he had done in Iceland. He answered calmly and with a hint of pride in his voice:

"I was in prison, in Italy."

This was followed by uproarious laughter, to which Ric replied without a smile:

"I was REALLY in prison, in Italy."

The people around suddenly convinced, and their gazes showed a sudden attention. Several voices asked for more details, which Ric provided calmly:

"I was a university researcher in my city, Genoa. In March 2021 I was found guilty of having abused my position to obtain sexual favors from a student, and I was sentenced to eight years in prison. A few weeks ago, I was pardoned by the President of the Republic, and... here I am."

"But I remember you!" Lara interrupted him, "You are Riccardo Leone, from the Galatico Project! I remember your story!"

Sonia, the Cuban, also remembered him:

"Galatico Project? You are 'that' Riccardo Leone? Incredible! How small the world is!"

Ric didn't seem disturbed by the turn the conversation had taken and continued with the calm of a mushroom:

"Yes, that's me. I didn't think everyone would remember the episode. In theory, I've served my sentence and paid my debt to society, but in reality, how many of you, tomorrow, will remember me as a nice Italian guy? Few, right?"

Albert, the Canadian, replied looking at him with splendid green eyes:

"See, Ric, it's not easy to remain indifferent to a sort of sexual maniac, even if your debt-"

Robert interrupted him, raising his voice and cutting off Ric:

"Hey, take it easy with the words, Al! He is not a sexual maniac... The sentence talks about having abused his position, but that's a far cry from sexual mania!"

The discussion immediately heated up, and everyone got involved. Fortunately, they were reasonable people and no one lost their temper, not even Robert, who at first seemed like a match next to fire.

Strangers, with whom he had chatted for an hour like old friends, were now debating things they couldn't even imagine... Ah! What

irony! He couldn't resist, and suddenly burst into loud laughter, which stopped all discussions and drew looks upon him.

Elisa from Spain asked him incredulously:

“Ric... Why are you laughing? I don't understand...”

He replied with a goofy smile still plastered on his face:

“A court condemns you for a screw, and you lose everything you had. Career. Wife. Friends. Self-esteem. Freedom. Never mind whether the accusations were true or not: let's stick to the facts. You live in a prison for four years, you find out that some Goddess in heaven remembers you and you get pardoned, you go home and after a few weeks, you leave for Solaria, the place you always dreamed of living, and where you're offered a well-paid and probably pleasant job. Something tells you that, having hit rock bottom, you're finally on the way up. Life is smiling at you again! Then you meet a lot of people, talk with them, laugh with them, until the story resurfaces. Then you imagine that insignificant and almost forgotten fling, and in a single glance, you embrace everything it has entailed, and still entails, for you, that conviction. There are probably a thousand worse things, there are those who cheat on their wives, those who beat them, those who steal, those who make terrible professional choices for the thirst of power and money, those who make wars, those who kill, imagine the thousand hills of the world and the thousand cultures, their problems, the miseries, the oppressions... And then, you find yourself looking at these new friends who talk about something of which they do not even know the surface, and shoot judgments like old sages.

Gentlemen, let it go. If you want to distance yourselves from me, do so, but do not talk about this as if you already knew everything! You really don't know a damn thing!”

Still half-smiling, he looked them in the eyes, one by one. They were not angry with him, they had not yet ostracized him, but their judgment was still hanging uncertain. Perhaps his smile had confused them and had temporarily saved the situation.

“Just allow me the privilege of asking you: will I ever have the chance to earn your trust? If the answer is no, then let's not waste time, say goodbye and everyone go their own way. If you're always going to be prejudiced against me, why try to be friends with me? If, on the other hand, you'll give me this chance, then fine: time will prove you right or wrong. What else can be said or done in a situation like this?

And I sincerely hope that you never really come to understand what the word freedom means. To understand it would mean to have been brutally deprived of it, like me.”

Judi nodded, showing her solidarity. Some did not seem convinced, others seemed to support him.

Silent, he looked around. In that splendid place, decorated in modern style, about 200 people of all ages kept each other company. He paused to observe them, trying to grasp the differences with the lifestyle of his country. The brief mention of prison from a few minutes ago did not interest him. It seemed unworthy of attention.

The Solarians seemed to enjoy social outings a lot. They tried to make every evening interesting, appreciating the frequent introduction of new company, or facilitating business meetings, sports clubs, or cultural gatherings.

And they also seemed to have a lot of fun, perhaps because it was a very young population. They appeared very open and friendly.

Ariel herself had explained to him how it was customary to greet people met on the street, in elevators, or in parks.

The rest of the evening was average. Around 11 pm he said goodbye to his friends and, once home, decided to try virtual sex with two equally virtual girls, whom he chose to be as similar as possible to Judi and Sonia, the prettiest of the group of friends that evening.

After fiddling with the controls for a few minutes, he swallowed a kind of pill (some hallucinogen, he told himself) and found himself catapulted into an unexpected emotional experience.

The immersive reality managed to mix his thoughts with the right sensory illusions.

He was not accustomed to that level of realism, which made everything superbly satisfying. Once aroused, indeed, he could no longer distinguish reality from simulation, and his rampant sexual desires dragged him into the most hidden dark corners of his being, warming them with an intensity that he had only felt a few hours earlier with Ariel, but which he now savored with the maturity of a seasoned lover.

Finally exhausted, he surrendered to an inviting sleep, while his numbed mind wondered in the background what news would come the next day. And he dreamed of Ariel.

"Make yourself comfortable, Leone."

Ric was surprised by such an informal tone, albeit a cold one. The view through the large windows of the spacious room impressed him. The man in front of him seemed to have just passed his fiftieth year: his Asian features were unusually kind beneath the long hair tied back in a ponytail like his own, but his gaze and demeanor confessed otherwise.

The wind on that November 16, 2025, seemed to break uselessly against the solid plastic windows of the Palace of the Sun.

"As you already know, Leone, everything has passed under my jurisdiction."

"I was informed just a few minutes ago, sir."

"Don't call me sir. Don't waste my time, Leone. Drop all formalities. Pretend to be intelligent, and answer accordingly."

What an asshole.

"Alright, governor. You'll pay dearly for this bullshit remark."

The fourth governor of Solaria himself, Yu Brownsugar, widened his almond-shaped eyes as much as he could, placed the palms of his splendid hands on the plastowood desk, and replied sharply:

"Do you want to leave Solaria, you little shit?"

"Your blackmails don't work on me. If you want to talk to me, drop this black eagle sergeant tone. Otherwise, send me away."

The governor took his time: he leaned back in the chair, continuing to stare at his interlocutor.

"I don't know where you've sprung from, Leone, but with a snap of my fingers, I could throw you in jail, do you know that?"

"And why don't you do it? I would like to understand whether I am of some use or if I'm expendable. And then we could also see if here in Solaria the law is the same for everyone if this is really paradise on earth, or if the usual unwritten rules that plague other

shitholes of the world apply."

The governor countered defensively:

"Obviously, it wasn't necessary for me to ask you to pretend.

Yes, I need you. I have an important task to fulfill, and your role is essential. Perhaps that's why you're still here in front of me, despite your youthful rashness and your stupid aggressiveness.

However, Leone, you've come across a bastard who can afford to do as he pleases, once in a while. I really feel like putting you in your place. Your rudeness is astounding."

"My rudeness? And how do you allow yourself to talk to me in that way? 'Pretend to be intelligent'? 'Don't waste my time'? Who do you think you are?"

The governor leaned back in his chair again and started thinking with the calm of a Buddhist. Ric was feeling too sad and too tired to care about such a thing, even though he was aware he had started on the wrong foot.

"Listen, Leone: I'm curious. Explain to me why you are hurting yourself in this way by addressing me like this."

"If you're as intelligent as you expect others to be, governor, then you should understand what I might be feeling right now, after what I've been through in the past few years."

"I know your dossier by heart."

"Good. So, how would you feel, in my place?"

"I have no idea. I only know that I will punish whoever wrote your dossier with such incompetence. Let's see..."

His gaze drifted for a moment to the small 3D screen next to the table.

"Psycho-Gen Ariel Amard... Strange. I wouldn't have thought her capable of such an oversight."

"She's not to blame. Today I am a very different man from yesterday."

The governor's gentle tone did not hide his anger, but it made it dangerously controlled because it was.

"I don't care what you are today, Leone. You are just wasting my

time. It's very sad. It seems you need to express yourself in some way... What do you say?"

"That the other governor knew how to show respect to his guests."

"Knew."

"Knew?"

He began to realize a whole series of things.

"Yes, Leone. I gather you were not aware."

"What happened?"

"Pernaud committed suicide two days ago."

He whispered, with sincere indifference, knowing that an intelligent man would have appreciated it:

"I didn't know."

"I had figured as much. Does this news change your attitude?"

"I don't think so."

"Do you still intend to work here in Solaria? Or are you looking for an excuse to fly home and stay there?"

"I don't need excuses. And I still intend to work here."

"And then stop it with this behavior. I won't tolerate it much longer."

"I only ask that I be given respect."

"Why do you make it such an important issue?"

"You already know... If you know my dossier."

"I do know it, but I don't see any useful elements in it."

"Then pretend to be smarter, maybe you'll see them."

"LEONE!"

"Tell me."

"I'm not in the mood to play. That's enough!"

Ric did not reply, showing partial surrender. The other seemed to forget the argument in an instant and continued with the same calm tone but visibly less frowning:

"Pernaud, in his reports, stated that he had not yet mentioned to you the details of the project."

"I confirm."

"In your opinion, Leone, what makes you important?"

"The Galactic, I guess."

"Obvious answer. What, in particular?"

"The fact that I invented a new language. You don't want to resurrect Galactic, you want to create a new language for... To make it the mother tongue of Solaria, I believe."

"And this nonsense would make you so important? Why not be content with English? Do you know what the biggest problem with human-computer interaction is?"

Another brief pause, then Ric ventured:

"The lack of a common language."

"Right on target. Human languages are imprecise, and interpreting them correctly is a massive waste of resources."

"So, governor, you want to create a language specifically to address this lack."

"Exactly, Leone. This is where you come into play. It's not about ideals, nor have we ever cared about Galactic, or its supposed role as a peacemaker among peoples. Giwiki, artificial intelligence and the like are only there to make money and avoid being swallowed up by other major communication companies. That's what it's about."

Leone interjected sarcastically:

"Long live honesty."

"Instead, you should appreciate it... It's a rare commodity among bureaucrats."

Solaria has an economy based on new technologies – genetic engineering, bioarchitecture, nanotechnology – and to a reasonable extent on everything that concerns communication.

We want to explore this possibility of a new language. You would obtain your universal language, and probably its spread for the use of Giwiki would make it popular anyway.

And then, does it disgust you so much that money is so important? It's thanks to money that the Solarians live in peace. Don't you think?"

"I believe that having spent four years in a cage gives me the right to disagree. I paid dearly for my ideals, and I don't like to hear that in the end, only money counts."

The governor appeared struck, and after a long pause, he replied: "You're right. You are one of the few people who should be allowed to do so, despite the naivety."

The bureaucrat waited for a moment, then continued:

"You will have to keep me weekly updated on the developments. In your note, which of course I have received and read, you emphasize that the resources at your disposal are insufficient. The research on nuclear fusion is swallowing up most of our resources, and the new quantum computers still can't replace the capabilities of traditional ones. I'll see what I can do."

"Thank you."

The initial tension had vanished.

"Now that we've cleared these things up, Leone, I'd like to understand what happened earlier. What made you react that way?"

"The lack of respect."

"You are the only one who has ever spoken to me that way. Do you realize that?"

"Evidently, you have only disrespected me."

Governor Yu Brownsugar burst into a boisterous laugh.

Ric added with a smile:

"Sometimes I can also be nice, Governor."

"I imagined so, Leone. There's something I don't understand, and that no one has been able to explain to me..."

"The prison matter, right?"

"Exactly. I..."

"I already know what you intend to ask me."

"And do you intend to answer me?"

"You could force me... Why ask?"

"It's just a curiosity... I don't intend to abuse my powers for trivialities."

"Commendable. In that case, I do not intend to respond, governor."

"As you wish. The project must be given a name. Do you have any preferences?"

"Yes. Ariel."

The governor looked at him without comment. It took more to surprise that man of ice, Ric thought to himself.

"Project Ariel. I await your next report, Leone."

"Thank you, governor."

They said their goodbyes.

December 6, 2025. Day 340. Exactly one month since his arrival in Solaria. That day Ric celebrated his thirty-third birthday.

He had come back from work two hours early: he had indulged in a scented hydro massage, a half-hour in the solarium, and finally ordered with the kawiki an Italian-style dinner to be consumed alone.

He was becoming too accustomed to the comforts of those so perfectly designed accommodations. It was superfluous, by now, to leave the house: everything one needed was at the reach of kawiki.

Did you want a dinner cooked by a virtual Martinelli? The same recipes, the same skill, the same doses? You just had to order it, after almost tasting it on the 3D screen, and it arrived steaming in a few minutes. Did you want a dress? You chose it after seeing it worn by the 3D model of your body, and it was delivered shortly after to your home via the lift, sorry, via the gikole. The same mode of delivery for food, or for the objects you bought at the 3D mart.

The principle was not wrong: why make a person move, when it is only to pick up an object? Better to bring the object directly to the buyer's home, without inconveniencing them.

Everything, absolutely everything, could be managed from home. In many cases even the same work duties. Many of the human salespeople at the 3D mart, in fact, were videotaped in real-time in their own homes. The same went for all consultants, for many teachers, for... A large slice of Solaria's workforce.

What efficiency! And then, he would never have believed that such a system could offer almost the same human contact as a physical meeting. The programmers of Solaria's computer system had really done an excellent job.

Ric lay back in the chair, losing himself in admiring the cityscape at dusk. The Palace of the Sun stood majestically among the other buildings and he, on the forty-first floor, could enjoy a decent view. The park below was teeming with children and young trunk trees. The arteries that connected the city, silent serpents of soft light, showed the katos darting in every direction.

He sipped a warm drink, satiated after a perfect dinner.

His Giwiki turned on, connecting to the entrance's tridicamera: it was Ariel! He sprang towards the door, his heart pounding.

He found himself in front of the splendid woman of his dreams, dressed sportily and... Simply enchanting.

They decided to go out and take a walk. Every Abit had three pedestrian perimeters, at different heights from the ground, both inside and outside. The third was the highest, and the most frequented, similar to the squares of Italian cities, with the difference that Solarian's often changed residences, and therefore it was not easy to meet known people... Although, however, Solarian's made acquaintances more easily.

Arriving at one of the panoramic platforms, they stopped to admire the majestic buildings of the city. Ric exclaimed:

"What splendor!"

"You like it, don't you? A view like this always relaxes me."

"Ric, you know I am not curious, and that I respect the private space of others. But I would like to ask you a very personal question."

He already knew what it would be.

"Ric... The prison... Are you innocent?"

He turned his gaze away from Ariel, almost closing into himself. For a good minute he remained silent, gathering strength. Then he replied clearly:

"I was engaged to Sara. A journalist. Very sweet, but suffocating. I was in love with her, but our relationship was limping along. I was weak, then, and very fragile.

I found myself having an affair with a former student of mine.

Manila. She was recently married but about to divorce. I had begun to live again, to feel forgotten sensations. I know, it was all wrong: but you know, you always pay for your mistakes.

Indeed, in 2021, disaster struck: some large multinationals, for their profit motives, decided to strike at the Open projects, including the one I was working on, the Galatico Project. Their tactic was insidious: they looked for your weak point, and then exploited it to make you give in. Manila was beaten, raped, blackmailed.”

He sobbed for a moment, but then recovered:

“She was forced to accuse me of sexual violence. I was tried swiftly, and convicted. I myself was blackmailed, they threatened to kill my relatives if I even attempted to react.

Warm tears fertilized his cheeks.

“In a short time, they had destroyed everything about me. In prison, I had two guards, who continually threatened me. I was on the verge of suicide. But things changed.

The Open movement quickly surrendered, and the tension dropped. I, like many others, resigned myself to forget. There was nothing that could be done against those unscrupulous people. After all, by then, the power was all in the hands of the Corporations. As it still is today.

In life, you know, sometimes things happen that we are not to blame for. And all things considered, despite everything, I have learned to truly love myself and have changed in the direction I wanted.

Who knows, maybe today I would be divorced, sad, neglected. You can never tell in life. I hit rock bottom, it's true, but I also began to climb back up. And one day I will find my Ariel, whether it's you or not.”

They embraced, crying. All the tension, the shivers, the trembling muscles, gradually gave way to a Tibetan calm. It seemed almost as if the world had stopped to listen to them.

Now night, Ariel continued, looking at the starry sky:

“Ric. I'm sorry that you've gone through these misfortunes. You are a beautiful person. And I... I cannot be your woman. I've been thinking about this for some days.

I ask you to forget me, Ric. I can't stand this situation. You are so sweet, so special, that... Every day, I am torn by a thousand fears. Ric, don't...”

“Ariel. There's no need for more words. I will respect you. Period.”

They took each other by the hand, like two children, and retraced their steps, towards home. Both felt the sense of abandonment, but faced it almost with a smile, only to then, after one last kiss and a quick goodbye, give in to their respective weeping, alone in their beds.

"Mori? What a surprise!"

The jailer replied with a half-smile:

"So, Leone? How is it going in Solaria?"

"Great! I'm working on an important linguistic project, about which I cannot give you the details. It involves a new universal language."

"And the rest? Are you engaged, married?"

"How can you ask, Bruno... It's only been a few weeks... What do you take me for? I'm a klutz when it comes to courtship..."

"I've heard that there are many young girls in Solaria..."

"Yes, that's right. I would say that... I'm having fun. And I'm meeting new people every day."

He preferred to keep quiet about the matter with Ariel. It would be long, and useless, to explain the situation.

"And you? You don't seem so cheerful! What's going on?"

The other replied after a few seconds:

"That's right, my friend, I am not cheerful. This, in fact, is not exactly a courtesy call."

That resigned tone chilled him instantly.

"What happened, my friend?"

"I'm sorry to take advantage of you, Riccardo, but I am forced to. I need help. My wife... She's dying. The only ones who can treat her are the doctors of Solaria. I don't know what to do."

Ric gasped as if a tree trunk had fallen on him at that moment. He leaned back in his chair, bending slightly backwards. He asked hesitantly:

"What disease is it?"

"The worst kind."

No, tell me it's not that one. Please, tell me it's not.

"GKT."

He was left with his mouth open, then managed to stammer trembling:

"I can't believe it. It's terrible, Bruno."

GKT was a devastating disease, discovered eight months earlier in a mine in Hungary; it had then clogged the media due to the growing number of infected people. Its efficiency and brutality had immediately raised strong suspicions about its artificial nature. GKT intervened at the genetic level, altering the functions of the main vital organs, including the brain. Highly viral, four weeks after infection it became incurable, but the subject remained alive for months, long enough to torture even the strongest of individuals sufficiently.

If treated in time, there was some chance of being able to contain the spread of the virus in the patient's body, which in a few more weeks, with complex medical treatment, managed to become immune. However, the cases of success were still too few to draw conclusions.

The health facilities of Solaria had a surplus, and were able to treat the disease effectively. All other nations had equipped themselves with strict controls and extensive health precautions at every crucial point of the transport system, but their doctors were still too unprepared to provide effective treatments.

"Bruno, I am... speechless. How long has she been infected?"

"Two weeks. From what I know, she can only be saved within the next three."

Two, really. But he didn't say that.

"Riccardo, skip the sweet talk. Tell me if you want to, and can, help me."

"You can bet on it, Bruno."

"Good. Avoid the sweet talk again: what are the chances of being admitted to Solaria for medical treatment?"

He couldn't answer right away.

"I don't know... Almost zero. But I'll try to do whatever I can. I can only promise you that I will do my best."

"Riccardo, without her, I... do not exist."

"I'll do my best."

"Riccardo, please..."

"Bruno. I'll do my best."

They said goodbye almost in tears. See, fate.

Mori, a life of sacrifices for the family and the two children, found himself witnessing the death of his life partner. Helpless, that lone wolf, in the face of an almost invincible disease.

In life, as that prehistoric song by Chuck Berry went, you never can tell.

Empathizing with his old friend, he wondered what the point was, clinging to every possible lifeline, if sooner or later, one would plummet into the abyss.

Such a flow, life.

He slowly thought back to GKT, to Mori. To what he could do. He gave a few commands to his kawiki, and obtained the sad data he was looking for: in Solaria, for GKT, there was a waiting list of about half a million people. Only 40,000 patients were being treated, and each treatment lasted on average at least three months.

Giulia Mori was doomed.

In half an hour he would meet Governor Brownsugar, who had summoned him urgently.

He arrived at the Palace of the Sun. The elevator doors opened on the 202nd floor, revealing the long corridor. He identified himself again to the security guards, and then headed to the now familiar office of the fourth governor of Solaria.

Governor Yu Brownsugar welcomed him with his back turned, intent on viewing the landscape through the splendid plastiglass window.

Ric was captivated by a hologram hanging on a wall, in which a young Asian athlete proudly displayed a medal... Probably won at the Olympic games.

"Beijing 2008."

He was surprised by the governor's voice, who had turned around in the meantime and caught him observing the hologram.

"Do you know this athlete, governor?"

"This... Athlete... won the gold in the 100-meter freestyle. He was 28 years old then and had nineteen fingers."

"What do you mean... Nineteen fingers?"

"It means that the twentieth was used to win."

Ric was confused. He asked for an explanation.

"This athlete knew he could not win, so after 30 meters, he stopped, bit off one of his fingers, and threw it towards the edge, touching it. Then he went back and completed the second lap, winning the gold... And setting the world record."

Imagine that. A finger for a medal.

"It's strange that the Olympic judges accepted that."

"The rule was respected. They then passed a new rule that could not be circumvented with such tricks."

"What was the name of this athlete?"

"Lee. Lee Brownsugar."

Leone's eyes widened:

"Your... Brother?"

"Yes, my brother. We were very poor back then. I was working as an engineer in a mechanical industry in Manchuria. With my salary, I barely helped the family and grandparents to get by. He won the

gold, and with the prize money, he paid for my master's in biotechnologies in California. I was a bit old as a student, but I worked hard. And I made it. I was then hired at Novartis, and became rich in a few months... Since then my life has changed... Thanks to my brother, and his finger."

The governor continued, almost confessing:

"That's why, Leone, they see me as a man of iron. What I have lived through has marked me forever."

"I understand, governor."

"I guess you do, Leone. But let's get down to business."

Brownsugar sat down, returning to be not just a simple human being, with memories and passions, but a ruthless politician.

"Leone, what you will tell me today will determine your future."

Ric's face turned serious, and he continued to listen silently.

"The Ariel Project will be closed."

It took him a few seconds to realize. He didn't even respond. He remained motionless, seated, stunned, waiting for further explanations.

"Leone, upstairs... there are some new developments. The funds have been allocated elsewhere."

"How is that possible? What sense does it make to start such a project, and then shut it down?"

"Leone, I am not authorized to give you explanations. Take it as a fact. It bothers me too."

"Bothers? I came here for this, do you realize?"

"I understand your point of view. I can't do anything about it."

The governor seemed sincere, and without too much beating around the bush, he had clarified everything in a few seconds. Leone lowered his gaze, disheartened.

"Even your stay is in question. We need to make a decision by today."

"Great. A string of good news," he replied sarcastically.

The governor stood up, walked around the desk, and leaned on it, legs slightly bent, facing Leone.

"Riccardo, I am just doing my job and, whether you believe it or not, if I could have spoken up for you, I would have."

Leone was reminded of his friend Mori.

"Governor, can you do something for me?"

"Tell me what it is, I'll tell you if it's within my possibilities."

"A person dear to me is on the waiting list for GKT. She's Italian, the wife of a very dear friend of mine."

Yu Brownsugar averted his gaze as if the question had awakened a previously dormant pain in him. He stood up and took a few steps towards the windows and the impassive landscape of Solaria. With his back turned, he replied:

"My daughter, Leone, is sick with GKT. She will die. Does that tell you how much I can do for you?"

"But how... For Solarian citizens, the lists..."

"My daughter is a Chinese citizen, not Solarian."

"Ah... I'm sorry, governor. I am sincerely sorry."

"I believe you, Leone. Thank you."

Silence fell, like between two soldiers of the same color at the end of some pitched battle. Brownsugar continued:

"You see, Leone, international authorities are slowing down the entry of sick people here in Solaria. My daughter arrived a few days ago, but she won't make it. They accepted her too late. It's something beyond our comprehension. You wouldn't like to know the reasons behind all this."

He gave up. Poor Giulia. And poor Bruno.

"Governor, what is the decision regarding my stay?"

"I will try to explain. You are no longer as important as before, and Solaria can only keep you if you accept a technical position in the linguistic department of the national press office. It's the best fallback I could find for you. Your status and salary will worsen, but it is still a decent position."

"What do I have to stay here for?"

"That is for you to know, Leone. I only add that in the coming times Solaria will be a place... Very, very safe."

"What do you mean? Are you talking about GKT?"

"Exactly. And not only that."

"What else?"

"Leone, I have already told you much more than I could. Don't insist further."

"Governor..."

"Leone, do not insist."

"May I speak? Can you spare me a few minutes? Can you listen to me?"

"Alright, Leone. Speak."

"Governor, I can only accept the project's closure, and I will have to reflect on whether to stay or not. But I can't stand not understanding."

"What do you want to understand?"

"What's underneath. Many things are escaping me, and others don't make sense. Pernaud's suicide, then you took over, then after a few weeks the project is suddenly closed. Then the speech about Solaria, which will be a safe place in the coming months. Then GKT, which here is not a problem but which in the rest of the world is causing huge concerns. What's underneath, Governor? Help me understand. I ask nothing else."

"I am not authorized to tell you more, Leone."

"Would you tell me that you, the fourth governor of Solaria, will be killed if you just try to explain something to me?"

"No, obviously not."

"Will you be deported?"

"Not that either. As you see, I am not hiding behind supposed threats."

"I know, I truly appreciate it. So what do you risk? Governor, I am a human being. Weak. Exhausted. In life, I've taken some good knocks, I've always got back up, but the wounds remain. Governor, I only ask you to make me understand."

"It will make you suffer much more, Leone."

"Governor, I WANT TO UNDERSTAND."

Brownsugar turned back towards the window again, still standing, hands in his pockets. In the silence of the room, his calm and powerful breathing could be heard. That man radiated power like a lightbulb. His bearing, his dress, his face, his voice, his eyes. The words. Pure power. Leone was impressed. He admired him.

He slowly sat down again and, looking him straight in the eyes, began what seemed like the deepest speech of his life:

"Do you know the human species?"

"No, governor. I am the greatest ignoramus on earth."

"You don't really think that."

"Yes, I do. The story of my life proves it. I know I am an excellent researcher. I know I am intelligent. I know I am likeable. I know I am humble. I know I have been wrong many times, about women, about friends, about life. What I can do is only realize it, and admit my ignorance."

"That is commendable."

"So, governor... Make me understand."

"Leone, Leone..."

Brownsugar took a long pause.

"Leone, the human species is fundamentally sick. And GKT is a disease created in a laboratory."

He couldn't believe his ears.

"Because there are too many of us. Because someone wants to increase their profits. Because the world is dying."

"And to save it, millions of people need to be killed?"

"GKT will kill 200 million people... mainly poor people. But that's not the main effect."

"Governor, I find it hard to believe what you're telling me."

"I know."

"Who can devise such a thing? Who profits?"

"Since the existence of civilization, there have also been hidden oligarchies... a few powerful people who greatly influence the fate of men. These oligarchies have enormous power, amplified by the

economic and technological force of humanity of our century. Some personal fortunes are comparable to the wealth of some nations. It is these oligarchies that profit."

"I don't really believe in conspiracies on this scale."

"You are wrong. They do exist, and their reason for being lies in the nature of man. But they are not conspiracies: they are individual people, who sometimes go into business with each other."

Leone continued to listen, determined to understand better.

"Over time, these affairs come to light, when they no longer interest anyone. Just think of the classified documents of the American government, made public after decades... CIA, dictators, arms traffickers... You just need to read history to realize it. These dark affairs have existed, do exist... And will still exist, when you and I are dead."

"Who profits from the GKT story?"

"Before thinking about GKT, think about what creates profit: fear, sickness, hatred. That is, indoctrination, medicines, wars, the pillars that move the real economy of the world. There always needs to be an enemy, there needs to be fear, there needs to be something to rely on. Think of the Cold War, or terrorism. All things that were needed, in order to increase the profits of the world's great oligarchs."

"I'm incredulous."

"GKT arrived at a critical time for the world: terrorism is no longer a credible threat, and at the same time the world is becoming too crowded. GKT was the oligarchy's response to an overly arrogant population. GKT still kills male fertility, which means that only a small slice of the population, the wealthiest, will still be able to have children, thanks to sperm banking. All the other poor people will live and die without descendants."

"What you're saying is not easy to believe, do you realize?"

"Do you know why the Ariel Project was shut down, along with hundreds of others? The funds have been diverted to the hidden

war that is being fought in the world today... The war between oligarchs."

"Who are they?"

"I only know that Solaria is controlled by an oligarch... Exactly him, Ken Freeman."

"How do you know he's an oligarch?"

"If I'm the fourth governor of Solaria, it means I understand, I accept, I act as he wants. Otherwise, I would be nobody."

"Why are you allowed to know?"

"Because there's no need for me not to know. See, Leone, there is no hidden entity plotting behind the backs of men... And as you say, there are no great conspiracies... There are individual men, who often come into contact to protect mutual interests... This happens at all levels, but when two oligarchs meet, the interests at stake are enormous. If they are very rich, it means they know how things work, and they are willing to do anything to increase their profits. An oligarch KNOWS that another oligarch is willing to do anything to protect their interests."

"Your daughter is dying because of them."

"I know. And I can't do anything about it. If I react, I can only hurt myself and my loved ones and lose my privileges. I can also lose this awareness of things, which I am now sharing with you. I can lose everything. I can suffer the most atrocious tortures, as happens to thousands of people every day."

"It's incredible. Governor, are you saying that you manage to accept it just like that... Without fighting?"

"You can do nothing against all this, Leone. As I told you, it is part of being human."

"Earlier you spoke of a war between oligarchs."

"Of course. A war that has lasted for millennia. Today it has become particularly harsh. Oligarchs are not a club of friends... They are the most ruthless, powerful, cruel rich people in the world. An oligarch thinks for himself, he does not think of others. The power of an oligarch is a desirable booty for another

oligarch... Or for someone who wants to become one. That's why I tell you it's a war that has been fought for millennia."

"I ask you again: how do you know these things?"

"Leone, the reasons are a thousand and none: actually, I am in my place because I have understood how things work better than others, and I have listened at the right times: I do not know things because I am here, but I am here because I understand things."

Riccardo Leone felt strange.

A strange excitement ran through him, due to those fragments of understanding that were turning into an epiphany. Brownsugar's words were starting to seem plausible.

No conspiracy, but simply a human tendency to seek power, to dominate, to defend one's interests, to absolute greed.

Some rich person was getting even richer, some government was able to control its people better, and some other rich person benefited from it. It all made sense. Yes, it was plausible. You didn't need to know the names to know that everything was damn plausible.

Brownsugar paused on Leone's expression lost in the void.

"What do you say, Leone? Are you happy to know now?"

"Yes, governor. It's terrible, but I am happy to know. For a moment, I felt powerful. To know, is power."

"It's the most powerful drug in the world. Power, I mean."

Leone nodded.

"What do you intend to do, Leone? Do you want to stay in Solaria?"

His life was reset again. It was necessary to start over, again.

"I will stay, governor. I will stay here."

Yu Brownsugar smiled faintly.

"I am pleased. Now we must say goodbye."

Riccardo Leone took a long breath, then proclaimed:

*"Perhaps one morning walking in a glassy air,
dry, turning I will see the miracle happen:*

*the nothingness at my back, the void behind
me, with a drunkard's terror.
Then as if on a screen, trees houses hills will suddenly
Set foot for the usual deception.
But it will be too late; and I will go silently
among men who do not turn around, with my secret."*

The governor nodded.

"Such beautiful verses, Leone. Yours?"

"No. They're by Montale. But I feel them inside as if I had written them with blood.

Goodbye, governor.

I guess we will never see each other again."

"Yes. Goodbye, Leone."

After those conversations, the world appeared to him in a different light: a world less clear, less pure. Not understandable. Not obvious.

He left, blending in like a stranger among millions of others. Mingling among the men who do not turn around.

With his secret.

One last thought (2006)

Dear reader,

this book was inspired by some of my reflections on the future world. A profoundly different world that is changing at a dizzying speed.

The Giwiki, which will not be called Giwiki, will indeed arrive. Solaria, which will not be called Solaria, could be a new city in China, or a second Dubai in the United Arab Emirates. The oligarchs, who are not called oligarchs, have always existed and will continue to live pursuing their interests.

Where will all this lead us? The exacerbation of the ability to communicate, to produce, to consume, risks depleting the world before humanity reacts to stop itself.

Stephen Hawking, the renowned physicist, hopes that humans will colonize other planets within forty years to avert the extinction of the human race, which, according to others, will occur at the hands of machines, of robots.

All this is disturbing, and looking to the past is not enough to console us: never, in history, has man had such great power, and faced such a grave danger. The rules of history have been rewritten. But after all, I am just a thirty-year-old, an anonymous person immersed in the present. Maybe I am wrong.

Thank you for your attention, and forgive my bitter conclusion: I am tired of the forced happy endings that accompany all stories.

But in the end, it is still worth living in search of serenity.

I really hope that reading Nonovvio has enriched you.

Best regards,

Simone