

# **Singularity**

**The Second Chance**

**John Papalas**



The hamster had just come back from the other world! It started to move, more like a spasming someone would say rather than a normal movement, but what can you do? And it's no wonder! Someone gets home from a plane trip and feels tired, sore, and fatigued, so I imagine coming back from the other world is way worse.

John watches the monitors displaying the vital signs of the resurrected hamster and smiles contently under the sterilization mask he wears. All went well. He just managed to kill and then resurrect a hamster shortly afterward. Most importantly, for the few minutes the little rodent was dead, its brain didn't stop with its secondary functions. The fact that the brain ran out of oxygen very quickly doesn't mean it stopped functioning, and that's John's great achievement. He wanted to study medicine from a young age, not to save lives, but to give. That's why he got a master's degree in biotechnology.

John has been obsessed with death from a young age. He listens to Goth music, dresses in black, and likes zombie movies. Besides, he's always been a practical person.

When he got into medicine, he thought, *"Why try to cure so many different and complex diseases? Why try to find new methods of dealing with accidents, strokes, and burns? When a person gets sick or injured, dying is inevitable."*

So John decided not to bother himself with the particulars of diseases and injuries that lead to death—after all, many of them are not even treatable—and instead to deal directly with humanity's greatest problem: death. He believes that we never actually die. For example, ask anyone, and they'll tell you that they refuse to believe that Einstein's intellect was vaporized after his death. Of course, like all the scientists on the planet, John isn't certain about what happens after death. But he thinks he'll solve it by experimenting.

One might say that a hamster is one thing but the man quite another. On the one hand, this fact is undeniable, but on the other hand, it's a very good start. And what better way to start than John's, who picked up secondary signals from the dead hamster's brain. This simply means that the rodent's brain could and did receive impulses while it was dead and without oxygen. It was *seeing*, *hearing*, and *feeling* something. The question is what it was and where it came from.

"That's why the experiments have to continue unabated and with more complex test subjects. We're very close to something very big," John murmured under his mask in a very formal tone, amused by his own thoughts.

The hamster is now up and eating. Death must be tiring. John turned off the machines one by one. Before turning off the lights and leaving the lab, he gently took the hamster in his hands to put it in its box home.

"We need to get you a name. In all probability, you'll outlive the last few. That means I have to call you something. I know it's a cliché, but I'll call you Lazarus. Well, if you come up with a better idea tonight, you can tell me about it tomorrow.

He put the hamster back in its place and took one last look around before leaving. He closed the lights and the door behind him. Stepping out into the hallway, he put on his pandemic mask.

Peggy flipped back her blonde hair and put on her mask. Before she left her campaign office, she noticed a car driving in reverse down the main avenue. This move is very dangerous, and the other cars barely managed to avoid it, scraping past it and blasting their horns in dismay. But that's not what struck her as odd. It was the uncanny sense that she had seen this not-so-ordinary scene somewhere before.

So she stayed at the window, watching the car's mad dash. She wasn't worried about the incident. She's sure she's seen it before, and she knows the outcome. A police car

will show up in a few seconds, the vehicle will be stopped, and the driver will be arrested.

Ah! There's the police car! Picking up her purse, she opened the door and got into the elevator, waving at the operator. The guy was barely twenty years old and kept looking through the mirror, stealing glances at Peggy. She's picked on the kid's crush on her, but she never acknowledges it. Instead, she busies herself with her phone, checking her messages. The elevator arrives at the underground parking lot, and the operator opens the door and bids her goodbye with his raspy voice. Peggy waves to him mechanically and walks to her car without taking her eyes off the cell phone screen.

Now she walks past the police car she saw a few minutes ago from the window. The rogue car has been pulled over to the side, and its driver is already in the back seat of the police cruiser.

*Teo, prepare to crash! Teo, prepare to crash! Teo, prepare to crash!*

"Goddamn you, motherfucker," Teo exclaimed and leaned back in his chair, frustrated.

Sighing, he gave his chair a little push and found himself in a horizontal position, staring at the ceiling.

For months now, he has been working on his new program that would gather information from all the computers on the network. And when we say all of them, we mean *all of them*. Even from the computers Nasa has in orbit or on its vehicles on Mars, as long as they are connected to the internet. But that's where he always has a problem. There's always something Teo can't see—or at least identify—and that stops him from rendering his whole new project.

It might be some clever bug or who knows what other devil enters the program, and every time, at this exact point, it screws everything up.

He can barely restrain himself from pulling up his reclining chair and smashing his computer to pieces. That's how angry he is. But the files he has on this computer are more important than his anger, so disaster is averted for the present.

He lifts up his chair, and instead of breaking his computer, he just shuts it down. It's too late anyway. He gets up from his desk, gathers his things in his bag, puts on his mask and leaves.

Catherine gets up from the couch and opens the door to her room. Two men and a woman dressed in white protective suits are standing before her. They look like astronauts, a feeling further intensified by the protective glass in front of their face.

Apparently, the woman was the one who knocked because she immediately gets the floor. "Good morning. Your quarantine days are over. We're going to run some tests, and if everything comes back negative, you're free to go."

"Good morning! I've been expecting you. Please, come in," Catherine says, opening the door wide to let in the doctors who specialize in final post quarantine testing—hence the nylon virus-proof "armors."

The kindergarten gang, as they like to be called, are all gathered in the hotel café.

Peggy, John, and Teo are enjoying their coffee when they see Barbara, the other member of the group, running towards them. Immediately, the well-trained group gets up from the table. John takes the two coffees from the table. Peggy takes hers. Thank goodness they haven't brought any water!

"The carpet, the carpet!" they all shout towards their friend.

Barbara looks down on the carpet, which is indeed slightly raised from the floor in the front corner. Smiling brightly at her friends, she steps foot on the carpet and immediately stumbles, falling into the safety of Teo's arms, who has already walked towards her.

And soon, the trained party is back at their table, and the other patrons are none the wiser. Everyone is sitting now and the coffee cups in place.

"Has she come down?" Barbara asks her friends anxiously.

Peggy shakes her head. "Not yet."

"Thank God! I was afraid I'd be late."

"You *are* late," Peggy says with a huff. "But it's not the first time, nor will it be the last. There's nothing new here!"

"What are they doing to her?" Barbara asks conspiratorially.

John laughs. "What do you think they're doing to her? Lobotomy, of course."

"Haha, very funny! Can I have my coffee now?"

"Nope! We haven't got much time. She should be coming down any minute now," John says.

"All right, I'll take yours," Barbara says.

"Be my guest," he says, turning his empty cup upside down.

"Seriously? You didn't leave any for me? You knew I was coming."

At that moment, Catherine appears in their line of sight.

The group turns excitedly towards her. Barbara claps enthusiastically, but Catherine doesn't seem to share the group's enthusiasm. Frowning, she walks quickly towards them, as if something is going on.

"Pay up! We're leaving. Now!" she orders the group the moment she is within earshot.

They all get up without a second word.

"We've already paid," John says.

"Great! Let's get to your cars and go to my place," Catherine says.

They all rush toward the exit, trying to follow their friend.

Less than half an hour later, they're all seated in Catherine's living room, waiting for her to come out of the kitchen. It takes her a few minutes, but when she emerges, she's holding a nylon bag in her hands. She reaches her friends and, without speaking, grabs her cell phone and puts it in the bag. Then she takes Peggy's cell phone.

"What exactly are you doing?" Peggy asks, perplexed.

Catherine puts her index finger in front of her lips, urging her friends to be quiet. They obey, and Catherine, after gathering all the cell phones into the bag, opens the balcony door, leaves them on the porch and closes the door firmly behind her.

"Here we go with the conspiracy stuff again," John says, laughing.

"That's why you didn't say a word on our way here?" Teo asks.

"Yes, that's why," Catherine says, sitting next to her friends. "I have to talk to you about something very important. You're the only ones I can trust. No one, whatever the reason, should ever know about this. Okay, Barbara?"

"Why are you only addressing me?" Barbara asks her affronted.

"Because what I'm about to tell you would become a bestseller in a heartbeat. So don't get any ideas!"

"Why don't you start by telling us what this is," Peggy says. "This whole secrecy has started to give on my nerves."

"Alright! So this is it: As you know, I went to China for research on Covid-19. Well, there, I discovered that the virus is not natural."

"Meaning?" Barbara asks.

“Meaning that it’s artificial. Someone created it and maybe released it, although I’m not sure about that last part.”

“And who made it?” Peggy asks.

“I don’t know.”

“Are you stupid?” Peggy bursts out.

“I’ve told you time and again not to call me that. It gets on my nerves. The whole thing is very confusing. I have evidence that someone ordered the virus to be made. I have all the details. Which company and which division, but I can’t find the person who went ahead with it. Of course, the investigation is still going on, but this has never happened to me before. It’s like hitting a wall. As if someone is hiding or rather as if no one knows him, while he—or she, I don’t know what *it* is—is running things.”

“Are you sure?” John asks.

“100%. The question now is, who made it and why?”

“Let’s start with what we know,” Peggy says.

“Let’s see... we’re in Athens, and we’ve known each other since kindergarten—”

“Barbara!” Peggy interrupts her, irritated. “What are you talking about again?”

“I’m telling what we know.”

“Peggy meant what we know about the pandemic,” Catherine says.

“Moving on,” says Peggy. “We know that this whole thing started in Wuhan, China, so we know that the virus is man-made and not natural. We’re almost certain someone released it into the world, but we don’t know who.”

Teo sits up. “And how can we find this?”

“I don’t think there’s much we can do,” says John. “Labs that can create such viruses have high-security protocols and very limited information flow.”

“Yes, but I have to find out at all costs who it was and whether they released it on purpose,” Catherine says. “It’s my job. I’ve promised my editor-in-chief an exclusive story anyway. So if I can’t find out who did it, I’ll lose my job! But aside from my professional perversity, I’m also curious to find out who made this virus and why. Don’t you want to know?”

“That’s the million-dollar question right now. The whole world would like to know who’s responsible for this pandemic, wouldn’t they?” asks John.

“And what are you thinking to do?” Peggy asks.

“I won’t be doing anything. *We* will!”

“What do you mean *we*?” asks Teo puzzled.

“You’re going to help me discover who caused this pandemic. I told you, you’re the only ones I trust. Besides, like John says, everyone is curious to know the truth. So are you.”

“So what are we going to do?” asks John.

“We’ll go on a trip to Wuhan!”

Barbara clapped her hands, laughing. “I’m going to China! I’ve never been there before!”

Peggy cocks her head on the side, puzzled. “What do you mean we’re going on a trip to Wuhan? We can’t just leave.”

“What? You won’t help me?” Catherine asks.

“Hey, we have our own jobs here,” says Teo.

“Count me in,” Barbara says excitedly. “I’m ready to leave today if I have to,” says Barbara excitedly.

“You can’t leave me like this. I need all of you. The matter is complicated. I’m a journalist. I need John who is a researcher biotechnologist, Peggy who is a politician

and knows how the strings are pulled, Barbara who is a writer and has a great imagination and of course Teo for whatever computer and network we find in front of us and need to hack it, dismantle it or just turn it against its owner.”

Teo chuckles. “I don't know if I can do all that.”

“And how exactly do we get to Wuhan? What will be our cover? asks John.

“As everyday tourists from Greece. Nothing more, nothing less. We don't go there under any capacity, so we're mere tourists.”

“When do we have to leave?” asks Peggy.

“As soon as possible. Next week at the latest,” says Catherine.

“And how will we manage to get inside the labs and gain access? We're not even Chinese,” says Teo pessimistically.

“I don't know this yet. When we get there, I'll improvise, but FYI most of the people working in these labs are European and American, not Chinese.”

John shakes his head. “We'll improvise! Nice plan.”

“What can we do, pal? My job is not like yours, where everything is thought out and planned beforehand. Us journalists have to be a bit spontaneous and deal with each situation as it arises.”

“I don't know if you've heard of Chinese prisons,” Peggy tells her. “But, trust me, you don't want to know.”

“It'd make a wonderful novel, *Prisoners in Wuhan*. Not to mention that whatever happens to us will be for the sake of humanity. It's worth the sacrifice,” Barbara says.

“Hello, Batman,” John says, laughing.

John is sitting in a café near his workshop. Soon after, his girlfriend Christina arrives and gives him a kiss and sits down.

“Hey, baby! How are you today?” she asks, taking a sip of his water.

“I’m fine! How about you? You’re not working today?”

“No, I took time off for a few hours for some medical exams I wanted to do. Where were you? Is Catherine back?”

“Yeah, she’s here. We picked her up a little while ago at the airport and went to her house.”

“How’s she doing? How was China?”

“She had a good time. As much fun anyone can have on a business trip anyway.”

“Did she get anything she wanted for her story?”

“It’s a little more complicated than that. She’s found something, but the search is ongoing. And now she’s asked for our help.”

“Whose help does she need?” Christina asks, perplexed.

“Mine and the rest of the group.”

“And how exactly are you gonna help her?”

“She doesn’t know that either. All she knows is that next week she wants us all to go to China together.”

“China? What are you gonna do there?”

“To the city of Wuhan, to be exact. We’re going to help her with the research for her report.”

“You? I don’t see how you and your friends can help her.”

“It’s a little confusing. I’m afraid I can’t tell you much.”

“So are gonna start having secrets between us?”

“Come on, don’t be like that. It’s not between us, it’s between Catherine and me, and I have to respect it.

“Even for me?”

“There are no exceptions to confidentiality.”

“And how long will you stay there?”

“A few days, I think, but it’s difficult to say yet.”

“The point is that—one way or another—you’ll be with your friends and not me.”

“Are you gonna make a scene now?”

“No, of course not. Besides, I’m used to it. Remember when the whole gang was stalking Peggy’s boyfriend, who she suspected was having an affair? Or when we staked out outside Teo’s house to see who was blowing out his tires because he hacked their computer. And what about the time we went on holiday to Paros, and you spent a whole night looking for Barbara’s little dog, which wasn’t found in the end? You have to admit, it’s always one thing or the other with your friends.”

“Okay, I can admit that, but it doesn’t mean I’m going to give up on Catherine now that she needs me.”

“Exactly! They always need you, but you never need them.”

“Yeah, but when I need them, they’ll be there for me. That’s what friends do.”

“And can I ask whether this thing you’ll be doing there will be dangerous? You’re clueless. And ok, Catherine’s a journalist, she’s doing her job. What are you guys doing getting mixed up with stuff you know nothing about?”

“Catherine is an experienced reporter. I trust her. She’s not going to put us in any danger. At least, I hope so.”

“I see. I should go now. I’ll have to get back to work. Have fun in China!”

“We’re leaving in a few days. Won’t we meet until then?”



“I don't know John, I have to ask my friends if they need help with anything. Someone might need help moving, be their nurse, someone might even want me to wash their car. Who knows? We all have our needs. You do what you have to do, and I'll see you when you get back. Have a good day, baby. Bye!”

Christina gave him a quick peck on the lips and disappeared behind the corner.

Barbara opened the door and entered her apartment. With a sigh, she put down the large hobo bag, containing her whole life, and has been dragging it along ever since she was a little child. She put her keys on the table by the door, picked up Milo's leash, and caressed it affectionately. Ever since she lost her little dog in Paros, every time she enters the apartment, she picks up the leash and remembers Milo.

She went and sat directly in front of her old typewriter. Barbara has never used a computer or a cell phone. She writes everything on a typewriter or by hand with a pencil, not even a pen.

She put a new blank page into the typewriter, weighed it, centered it, and wrote in bold letters **SPYING IN WUHAN**.

Coming out of the bathroom, Peggy goes straight to the computer at her desk. Her hair is still wet and dripping on the keyboard, but she always leaves it like that, never drying it completely off, just passing the towel once or twice.

Like always, her computer is on, full of emails, but her attention is caught by one sent from an unknown recipient. She clicks it open.

**THIS TRIP TO WUHAN WILL BE THE LAST OF YOUR GROUP**, she reads in capital, bold letters and pulls back a little startled by what she's reading on the screen.

Immediately, she calls Teo's number.

As she relays to him what's happened, she wonders how and who found out about their impending trip and plans since they didn't tell anyone. Not to mention that their phones were outside the whole time. Teo asked her to go into her computer remotely to allow him to look where this mail had come from.

She happily obliged.

Catherine sat down opposite her editor-in-chief.

“Well?” Makis asked, one of the most seasoned and hardcore reporters from the old guard. “How did our story go?”

“Pretty well.”

“When are you gonna send me the piece?”

“When I get back from China.”

“But you just got back.”

“I mean, when I get back again,” she told him with a soft smile.

“Why? Are you going back?”

“Yeah, in a few days.”

“What for?”

“Vacation mostly. Come on, Makis, why do we even talk about this? Didn't you assign me a story?”

“Yeah! And I sent you to Wuhan. Now that you're back, I'm waiting for the story.”

“Yeah. But the investigation isn't over.”

“And why did you come back?”

“To regroup before returning there.”

“Good! Can you tell me what you've got so far?”

“No. I'm afraid I can't tell you this.”

“Why not?”

“Because it's classified.”

“What classified and bullshit are you talking about? We're going to publish it.”

“Exactly! But until we go public with the story, it's classified. What don't you understand?”

“Okay. If you want to play like this, fine. You have ten days. If you don't come back with a story, don't come by my office again. Go straight to the accounting department. I'll let them know.”

“Will do,” Catherine says and leaves his office.

Peggy is waiting over the phone until it rings.

“Hello, sweets!” Teo says.

“Come on, Teo. I'm going crazy here. What have you got?”

“We're in big trouble, my friend.”

“Why's that?”

“Because I have no idea who sent this, not even from what country it was sent. This email is so well encrypted and protected. I've never seen anything like it. And you know how many emails I've been able to track down.”

“So, has someone targeted me?”

“And he's very good one at it.”

“We need to let the rest of the team know.”

“Yeah. I'll tell them as I'm telling you now that there can't be communication by phone or computer regarding our matter. Only in person and not anywhere either. Only in controlled areas. Our houses are off-limits.”

“Why?”

“I'll tell you in person. What are we talking about?”

“Okay, bye.”

“Bye.”

After feeding the pigeons, Barbara neared one of the two Tsolias in the Greek Presidential Guard. She didn't go to him by accident. He's far better looking than his colleague. She's sitting in front of him and stares at him. She's staring at his clothes, the foustanella, and his shoes, the tsarouchia, trying to calculate how many skirt-like foustanellas can fit in a normal closet of an Athenian apartment. Probably not even one.

Someone touches her shoulder and startles her, interrupting her thoughts. She turns and sees Catherine right behind her, along with the rest of her friends. They greet each other and leave. They enter one of the cafes in Syntagma Square, and Catherine leads the group into the loft of the establishment. They sit down and order.

Catherine goes to speak, but Teo interrupts her. "Let the order come in first, and we'll talk later."

"Why all this secrecy?" Barbara asks.

"I'll explain in a moment," Teo says.

Now the group sits around wordlessly. Sometimes they look at each other and sometimes out of the window at the perpetual traffic of downtown Athens. Catherine stands up and discreetly gathers their phones into her bag. She puts them all under another table just as the waiter comes up the stairs with their order. Catherine sits back down. The waiter puts their drinks on the table and leaves.

Barbara lights a cigarette.

"Woah, Barbara. It's been forbidden to smoke indoors for years," Peggy snarls.

"I know, but we're alone in here," Barbara replies and takes a long drag from her cigarette.

"What about us?" John asks.

"You are my friends, and you'll put up with me," she says, laughing.

"We didn't come here to talk about Barbara," Teo says, taking the floor. "For starters, this is the last time we meet, and we have our cell phones with us. Peggy received this."

He pulls out a piece of paper that is a printout of the mail Peggy received and shows it to everyone.

"Peggy received this email," Teo continues. "All morning, I've been trying to find out where it came from or who sent it or any clue. I couldn't find a single thing. The bottom line is that someone knows we're going to China and obviously knows what we're going there for. I don't know who it is, but judging by the level of encryption, he could be someone dangerous. We need to be on guard. So here in Greece we will meet again at the airport with our phones off. And in China, we will have them in another room, or we won't be talking if there's a mobile phone in the room."

"I told you things are serious," Catherine says. "My editor-in-chief has given me ten days to bring him the story finished."

"As long as we're not finished," John says and laughs.

Peggy snorts. "Very funny!"

"I'm booking the plane tickets now," Catherine says. "But we'll book a hotel there, on the spot. We'll try to find accommodation that accepts cash only, no credit cards and no electronic records."

"We need to move under the radar," Teo agrees.

"So conversation's over then," Catherine says and stands to fetch her bag.

Riffling through her bag, she puts everyone's phone on the table. Lastly, she picked up hers and started booking tickets.

"We fly to Beijing tomorrow at 10 am. At 8:30 am, everyone at the airport. Deal?"

Everyone nodded their assent.



The taxi races between the tall buildings in the center of Wuhan. Barbara is sure she was in the Chinese quarter of New York since it has many skyscrapers like in America, only the people walking around are Chinese. So she was sure, even though she has been to New York many times. Catherine, Peggy, Barbara and Jay, Catherine's man in the town, were in the first taxi. In the taxi following theirs were Teo and John, along with Barbara's 15 suitcases.

The two taxis were speeding through the center of Wuhan, heading for the outskirts of the city. Both groups— except of course for Barbara—have remained silent throughout the journey, after Teo's express orders.

“The bug is a device whose great advantage is that you do not expect its existence. So yes, everywhere is suspicious. In cafes, in taxis, everywhere. We have to be very careful.”

After 40 minutes of driving, the taxis stop in front of a hotel that looks like a wreck. They get out, Catherine pays the cabbies with dollars, and they all enter the hotel together. The Chinese man at the front desk is dozing off, and Jay takes care of the paperwork. A few minutes later, the gang has settled in their rooms, and they're all together in Barbara's room, except Jay who left. The cell phones are left in Catherine's room.

“Well, now listen to what we'll do next,” Catherine began her briefing of the group. “Jay's about to bring us a car.”

“You've rented a car?” John asks.

“Do you think I'm a rookie? I gave Jay some cash, and he's letting us use a cousin's vehicle for ten days. No paperwork, no credit cards. Same with the hotel. I prepaid cash for the ten days. They know we are in Wuhan—since we've flown in—but they can't find out where we are. Our cell phones will be turned off. If we need to turn on one, for whatever reason, we'll have to move away from here so as not to give away our location. And, of course, turn it off and take out the sim card before we come back. As soon as the car arrives, I'll get John and Teo, and we'll go to the main labs. Teo and I will be the carefree pair of Greek tourists, drinking coffee across the street from the labs. John, who we'll have left farther away, will go and apply for a job.”

“Excuse me?” John jumps up in surprise. “What do you mean I'm going to apply for a job?”

“You're a biotechnologist, aren't you? Those kinds of people work in there?”

“So you're gonna put me in the lion's den while you're sipping your coffee outside? What if they find out about me? What if they already know we're here and what we're here for? The e-mail Peggy received confirms exactly that.”

“And that's why Teo and I will be sitting outside. For safety.”

“Ah, so if anything goes wrong, you and Teo are going to pull out your bags of assault rifles, bazookas and grenades and break in to get me out?”

“I didn't say that,” Catherine says hesitantly.

“Then you'll go in with your coffee cups and an ashtray in hand... Wait, do they smoke in Wuhan's cafes? I don't know, and you're going to throw them at their heads to let me go? Do you understand what we're up against?”

“I guess we don't understand what we're going to do,” Peggy says in frustration. “It seems as if we're setting ourselves up for fail.”

“There's no time for negative thoughts,” says Catherine, trying to boost the group's morale. “That's how all great stories are made. And what are we to have assault rifles? Some kind of seals or something?”

“But *they* are,” counters John.



At that moment, there is a knock on the door. Catherine pulls a few dollars out of her pocket. Opening the door, she hands the money to someone the others don't see since he is behind the door. She closes the door and returns to her group, holding a set of car keys.

"The car is downstairs."

"We're in China, aren't we? Why are you the one who's been exchanging dollars?" Barbara asked.

"When you're a tourist, you use local currency," Catherine says. "But when you want to uncover something, wherever you go on the planet, you want dollars."

A woman's cry of pleasure from downstairs tore through the air. It was like a banshee whose baby is taken away.

"We'll have entertainment from local amateur performers as well, it seems," Teo says with a laugh.

"If you want a hotel that doesn't ask for a credit card, the only alternative is the hotels by the hour. They're the only places you can stay anywhere in the world discreetly."

The woman is now screaming again, but not once. Rhythmically she shows that she is in torment, that she is suffering.

"Are we sure the girl doesn't want any help?" Barbara asks anxiously.

"Poor girl, how long has it been since you've been with a man?" Peggy asks, amused.

"Guys, listen up," Catherine interjects. "In this hotel in particular, and in the area in general, if we find someone who needs help, we won't give it to them. The area is notorious, and we don't want to get into a fight with Chinese pimps. We have a job to do here. Teo, John, get ready. We're leaving. You girls stay here until we get back. And don't forget. The cell phones will stay locked in the other room."

"And how will we know you're okay?" Peggy asks worriedly.

"You won't know because if you find out, others will find out who we don't want to know."

After the engine took a few backward turns, the old, unidentified European car was turned off, shaking the whole vehicle and its two passengers.

“That’s some car,” Teo says, laughing.

“It is some car because it doesn't have anything electronic embedded in it. Not even a lighter. So they can't trace us. Let's leave it here. We can't go to the café as tourists in a car which definitely belongs to a local. Let's go,” Catherine says and exits the car.

The two friends rounded the block and arrived at the café across the street from the lab’s main entrance. They have sat down, but both of their minds are on John 200 meters away from them at the outpost of the lab gate. They see him waiting to be allowed entry.

The two friends do not speak, just watch their friend anxiously. Now and again, John glances over them, but his expression doesn’t give away anything.

Half a cup of coffee later, the guard gives John a little tag which he clips on his lapel and passes under the bar the guard raises.

Teo and Catherine look at each other but are more concerned than pleased. Catherine reaches out and grabs Teo's hand. He clasps her palm with his own and strokes her tenderly, trying to dispel her worries.

It's still morning, and people are on the move, going about their business. Everyone is wearing masks for the pandemic, but anyway, many were wearing them before for air pollution or because they were afraid of the common cold and various other germs.

Back at the hotel, two other women have taken up the baton of quick and sharp breathing. They scream and stop abruptly as if someone has cut off their air passage.

Barbara looks at Peggy anxiously. "Are they fucking them or killing them?"

"I don't know, but I'm really worried."

"Are they in the same bed? Or are we hearing them from separate rooms?"

"Judging by their timing, there are two women in a bed with one man," Peggy says.

"And how do you think he's getting them both at the same time?"

"It beats me."

Suddenly, multiple slapping sounds fill the room. The women's voices become loud. Screams of pain and pleasure intertwine and fill the ears of the two women.

"Should we call the police?" Barbara asks.

"Yes, try calling and explaining to them in Greek all that we've heard and what we suspect," Peggy says and bursts out laughing. "And for starters, what's the police number in Wuhan?"

"You're right. There's nothing we can do."

Three hours, three coffees and four glasses of juice later, John reappears at the lab gate. He hands his visitor's pass to the guard, and after glancing at his friends, he begins to walk alongside the high wall with the barbed wire at the top, walking away from them.

Catherine and Teo pay and leave as well.

The car is still stopped where they dropped John off a few hours ago. He gets in the back seat, and Catherine starts the car.

"Bull's eye," John says.

"What's up, man?" Teo asks him impatiently.

"I should have played the lottery or something."

"Why, what happened? Do we have to torture the truth out of you?" Catherine asks.

"I've been hired as head of pandemic crisis management."

"You're kidding. How did you do that, you beast?" Teo asks.

"Let me start from the beginning. They're in a state of panic there."

"Why is that?" asked Catherine.

"Well, whatever happens on TV and the internet all over the planet because of the pandemic is happening there by tenfold. I went into the labs. No one is walking. Everyone is running. They're being accused by everyone that they manufactured and spread the virus on purpose. I knew that when I walked in. At the entrance, I really didn't stand a chance. They could barely find someone who spoke English to communicate with me. But he was telling me that they didn't need any more staff, that if I wanted to come back another day with an appointment with HR for an interview and such. Finally, after a lot of persistence on my part, he called inside and once he mentioned them my name and status, they all but rolled out the red carpet for me."

"The red carpet?" Catherine asks.

"Well, in a matter of speaking. It was just obvious that whoever picked up that phone wanted to meet me badly. And when I walked into his office, and after the first few words, I understood. The Chinese director of the Wuhan laboratories is married to a Greek woman from Thessaloniki."

"Ah, good ole Greece, you always get us out of trouble," Teo says with a laugh.

"And when the guy saw my studies and qualifications, he was thrilled. You see? I was the person with all the necessary academic credentials on the one hand, and on the other hand, he trusts me simply because I'm Greek. He's very fond of Greece, and every summer, he vacations with his wife and her family in Halkidiki. And the best part? He's fluent in Greek. So, in a nutshell, he told me they need a European so he can talk to the EU institutions and the W.H.O who are after them."

"Did they make the virus?" Catherine asks.

"He didn't tell me, and I didn't ask in case I aroused suspicion. Anyway, I'm starting work tomorrow morning, and I'll be briefed."

"Please be careful," Catherine tells him anxiously, looking at him from the rearview mirror.

"You be careful, and make sure we make it to the hotel in one piece. Everyone is driving like crazy here. And I didn't tell you the best part. The guy will give me access to a laboratory and assign three assistants to me to continue the experiments I haven't finished back in Athens."

"What are they about," Catherine asks.

"Ah, that's classified, my friend."

"This is classified too? By the time all this finishes, we'll be secret agents," Teo says.

“This is really classified, not like Catherine's secrets the whole planet knows. No one has any idea about what I've been experimenting on for the last few years. If my suspicions prove true, then not only will the planet change but life itself.”

“You speak to us in riddles, old man,” Catherine adds, and they all laugh.

“How is their security?” Teo asks.

“I was scanned at the entrance for weapons and electronic devices, and I was strip-searched. But I *did* see a female employee, who was probably coming back from a break or, for some reason, arrived later. She didn't pass through security.”

“Tomorrow, you're going in naked,” Teo says

“You have a very extreme approach to undercover missions,” Catherine comments with a laugh.

“I mean stripped from any electronic devices and such. You'll see what kind of check you'll go through as an employee, and the day after tomorrow, I'll give you everything you need for copying hard drives, network jammers, etc.”

“We might become secret agents, after all.,” John Says.

The three are all smiling when they enter Barbara's room. Peggy stands as soon as she sees them. She looks relieved as she grabs John and proceeds to smother him in kisses.

"Don't be like that. I didn't go to war," he tells her but does nothing to stop her caresses and kisses.

Amidst cries of pleasure from the other rooms, the group recounts to Peggy what exactly happened. She is very happy that John made it and doesn't believe their luck, finding in Wuhan's workshops a genuine Halkidiki lover. The plan is going better than even the most optimistic predictions.

Suddenly what seems like the barking of hundreds of dogs interrupts the conversation and even covers the Chinese cries of pleasure, which haven't stopped since they arrived.

John goes to the window. "Come and see. You won't believe it."

The other three get up and approach the window. The sight is surreal. Hundreds of dogs run like demons down from the hotel and disappear around the street corner, along with their voices. There may be over a thousand of them. They're all running in the same direction. From wolfhounds to Chihuahuas. All sizes, ages, and breeds. The four friends are left with their mouths open, looking at each other in wonder.

Now some fifteen Chinese men and women with scarves in their hands appear and try to catch some of the dogs. But there are too many to catch them all.

"Other country, different customs," John says mockingly and sits back down on the couch.

"Peggy?" Catherine asks suspiciously. "Where's Barbara?"

"She went for a walk to get some air."

"I don't know if it's wise to leave her wandering around alone in a foreign country, especially in a place like this."

"And what did you expect me to do? Forbid her to exit the room? She's an adult, and after all, it's not the first time she's gone abroad alone."

"Barbara has never reached adulthood, and that's why we love her, but we must also look after her," Catherine Says.

The door to the room opens, and a small Jack Russell dog enters the room alone.

"I hope the other dogs we saw aren't behind it," Peggy says, a little worried.

The dog immediately makes itself at home and gets comfortable on the couch.

"Nice," says John.

At that moment, Barbara enters the room with a triumphant look on her face. "I found Milo. I found Milo!"

"Are you out of your mind? Which Milo are you talking about?" Peggy snaps.

"The one we lost in Paros. He's been here all this time. 'Darling,'" she says and throws herself on the dog, who basks at the attention.

The group is stunned. John takes the floor, trying to make sense of the situation. "First of all, can you tell us where you got it?"

"I'll tell you everything, but first, I want a glass—or rather a bottle—of water."

Teo brings her a bottle of water, and she downs almost all of it.

"Were you running?" Peggy asks her.

"Among other things, yes. At first, I went out of the hotel to see where exactly they were torturing these women all day. I wanted to be sure, so I walked around the block. I listened and looked at the windows one by one. But when I got to the back of the hotel, I heard dogs crying from the back of the street.

"So you decided to leave the people and save the dogs instead," John says.

“Not exactly. I thought I'd go and see what all that barking was and then come back and check on the women again. So I followed the dogs' cries, and a mile or so down the road, I saw Milo.” While she talks, she hasn't stopped playing with the dog in her lap. “There was a basement with hundreds of dogs. The window was closed with thick wire. I approached the wire, and that's when I saw Milo. He had his little paws on the wire, and as soon as he saw me, he started wagging his tail and jumping up and down like crazy. I walked over and gave him my hand. He gave me his. I recognized him, it was Milo. Then I took the cutter out of my bag, cut the wire—”

“Excuse me, do you carry a wire cutter in your bag?” John asks, surprised.

“Do you even need to ask?” Teo asks him. “Have you ever tried lifting that bag? It weighs a ton.”

“I always want to leave the house prepared. And what's it to you that I have a cutter? Besides, it came quite handy. As soon as I cut the wire, Milo jumped into my arms, I picked him up, and I brought him here running.”

“And what about the other dogs? Did you let them loose?” Catherine asks.

Barbara arches a questioning brow at her. “What other dogs?”

“Oh, boy!” Catherine says. “Didn't you cut the wire in that basement with all those dogs you described?”

“Yes.”

“And what did you expect? You'd cut the wire, and the rest of the dogs would stay there?”

“Did they leave?”

“Just leave? Hundreds of dogs in a state of frenzy passed outside our window, and the Chinese owners chased after them with butterfly nets to catch them, but to no avail.”

“Good. All the puppies are safe. And now I have Milo.”

“And how do you know it's Milo? This dog is just the same breed,” Catherine comments.

“Look,” Barbara says, leaving the dog on the floor in front of her.

Milo stands and looks at her expectantly. She calls his name, and the dog hides his muzzle playfully between his front legs.

“My sweet little love!” Barbara exclaims excitedly and takes him in her arms. “Here's the proof. Only Milo did that.”

“And how did Milo get from Paros to Wuhan, Barbara?” asks Catherine.

“Do you remember how many Chinese tourists there were in Paros? Someone must have taken him and brought him here to make dog kebabs. But I found him. My little Milo, my boy, my love!”

“I guess this isn't China after all,” Peggy says, shaking her head. “We just stepped out into a different dimension. Who wants to go out for a drink? I could use one or three. Come on, get up, let's go.”

Catherine stands. “I could do with a drink, too.”

“I think I saw a bar of some kind just down the road here,” Teo says.

“You're leaving Milo here, aren't you,” Peggy says to Barbara.

“Why?”

“Because we don't have a leash. You don't want to lose him now that you've got him back,” she tells her, winking playfully at the others.

“Does Milo follow me with a leash? Did I have a leash in Paros?”

The group of five heads for the bar. Milo follows Barbara... without a leash!

Early on, John's three assistants are waiting for him, standing in the lab which the chief ordered to be set up for John in one night. They are all women, all three of them under thirty, they look like triplets, but they're not, and all three are called Lee.

John greets them in English and thanks them for waiting for him. He inspects the lab with them. They show him all the equipment at his disposal and a great number of hamsters that will be the test subjects. John looks pleased. He gives instructions to the assistants, and an hour or so later, and after he's instructed them for what needs to be done, he leaves and goes to the briefing room. There he finds the Greek admirer unit manager waiting for him. He politely asks him to sit down, inquires whether John has a cell phone with him. John replies that he doesn't, and the manager nods, satisfied.

The manager sits across from him, activates the electronic bug deactivation mechanism and says, "It would be nice to be on a beach in Halkidiki right now."

"Can't think of anything better," John replies.

"We'll go when we get this situation untangled. I need your attention for a while."

"Of course. You've got my undivided attention."



Peggy has just woken up. She's had her morning shower and is now taking a sip of the coffee she ordered from room service. The taste of mud and seaweed fills her mouth, and she can barely keep from vomiting. She runs to the bathroom and spits in the sink. She drinks a glass of water and abandons the idea of coffee altogether.

Various women from different rooms in the hotel are screaming either because they like it or because they are paid to, how can you know anyway. Peggy nears the window and looks out into the street. Fifteen or so dogs are still strolling around outside the hotel. They must have stayed behind after Barbara's big rescue mission. Peggy looks at them and smiles. But something else catches her attention and makes her back away a little. Now she makes sure she can see the street undetected.

A tricycle with two very portly Chinese men inside is parked a little further away from the hotel entrance. The guys look so heavy that the front of the vehicle is straining under their weight.

Peggy notices, unbeknownst to them, that they are facing the side of the hotel. It might be nothing, but it might be something. Who knows?

Peggy decides to go out for a cup of coffee. She gets dressed and leaves. She walks and passes quite close to the tricycle. Now that she's on the same level as its passengers, she can see their faces, which were previously concealed by the vehicle's roof and the angle of her bedroom window.

Peggy is wearing sunglasses so dark that you can't see where her eyes fall. She looks discreetly. And fear settles at the pit of her stomach. She continues at a normal pace, trying not to arouse suspicion and –more importantly– not to show that she suspects them of anything.

A few minutes later, she is seated at one of the outside tables of the café. The coffee here is good, nothing like the hotel's laundry water they serve for coffee, but the air is so polluted it burns your nostrils. So when she's not sipping her coffee, she prefers to just sit there with her mask firmly in place, which is for the pandemic, but it's also good for the pollution.

“We'll get cancer in this place. I shouldn't have listened to that crazy friend of mine,” she murmurs.

Catherine's waiting outside the office of a Chinese MP to interview him. The appointment was set a few days ago, and it wasn't the easiest thing in the world. The politician greeted her politely in his large office. Catherine started the interview with general questions. Anyway, the purpose of the interview was officially to tighten the ties between the two countries: Greece and China.

When at some point they got to the topic of the pandemic, the MP seemed to be agitated, and the Chinese don't really show their emotions. Catherine realized that this little agitation of his was obviously hiding something much bigger.

The MP did not reply. All he said to her was: "When the river is deep and has the current strong, don't try to cross it. You look for a bridge."

Catherine pressed him politely but to no avail. So after the interview was over, she politely said her goodbyes and got ready to leave. The MP offered to walk her to the exit of the building, which surprised the young journalist.

When they both stood just outside the door and while they were greeting each other with the familiar pandemic "punch," he came a little closer and whispered, "Look out! You're in danger. Get away from Wuhan and from China immediately!"

And he turned and briskly walked toward the building. Catherine was momentarily stunned. She never expected a high-ranking Chinese official to make such a 'confession' to her, even though he was rather cryptic and didn't elaborate further.

After half an hour's drive, Catherine found herself in the café outside Wuhan's central laboratories. That's where she left Teo this morning.

He had two jobs to do. First, he was John's backup, who had gone to work, and the second was to watch and make a note of who was coming in and going out. Not that he knew anyone, but you always have to keep an eye on your target. You never know what will "pop up" in front of your eyes when you least expect it.

Catherine sat down next to him. "Well?"

"It's been quiet here. How about you?"

"Me? It was a bit weird."

"How so?"

"It started as an ordinary interview with a government official, but in the end, he politely told me to get the hell out of China because I was in danger."

"I see. The whole thing gets more interesting by the minute."

"Exactly."

"So what are we gonna do? Leave?"

"Are you out of your mind, Teo? No way. We'll just wait for John to come out, we pick him up, go straight to the hotel, and see what he's learned."

Peggy walks past the front desk and smiles sweetly at the owner, who looks at her suspiciously, possibly because of his professional perversion. In one hand, she holds her purse and in the other five coffees for her and her friends since those at the hotel aren't drinkable. But she makes sure to hide them from the owner, and she succeeds.

"And why am I hiding?" she asks herself, as the old and creaky elevator slowly carries her up to the fourth floor where their rooms are located.

"The coffee here is a biohazard. But what can you do? If you don't speak the language, you can't communicate, and in the end, you risk being at fault."

She opens the door of Barbara's room and sees that her friends have just arrived.

"At last! Coffee!" Barbara exclaims and holds out her hand in anticipation. Peggy hands her the coffee, and Barbara takes a big sip. "Okay, I've had better," she says and lights a cigarette.

"We didn't come here for the coffee," Catherine tells her as she too takes her coffee from the table.

They all watch Peggy as she sneaks over to the window and looks out.

"Is something wrong?" John asks her, concerned.

"Maybe, maybe not," she says, not taking her eyes off the road. "They're still there."

"Who?" John asks.

"Two Chinese mountains."

"I think the pollution is going straight to your head," Catherine says, laughing. "Two Chinese mountains?"

"And Chinese ones at that," Teo adds jokingly.

"There's a strange tricycle parked down there since this morning, with two huge Chinese in it. These guys are beasts. They're like sumo wrestlers."

"Oh, they *are* Sumo wrestlers," Barbara says.

"And how do you know? Did you talk to them?" Peggy asks.

"Oh, I talked to them, and they talked to me."

"I'm sorry? How? Where? When?"

"Earlier. As you know, I'm an early riser."

"Come on, Barbara, stop with the stalling," Peggy urges her impatiently.

"Anyway, I took Milo down for a walk. I saw those guys sitting there. The driver saw Milo, and he got down and started petting him, talking to him. At first, I was afraid they were going to try to take him away from me again, but the guy is a total animal lover. So we introduced ourselves. I don't remember their names, so don't ask me—they're Chinese anyway. I told them I was a tourist, and they told me they were Sumo wrestlers. Well, they didn't have to tell me. They must be the biggest people I've ever seen."

"And in what language did you say all these?" Peggy asks again.

"In sign language! They showed me some pictures on their phone of Sumo Wrestling."

"Oh, Barbara..." John groaned.

"What have I done now?"

"What are you doing, sitting on the street and making small talk with everyone? We're here to do a job that's classified, and we don't want to be found out. It's very possible these two guys are watching us. And you go there and strike up a conversation?"

"For starters, they talked to me first. What did you expect me to do, start running away from them in fear? Wouldn't that be even more suspicious? But now, like a carefree tourist, I strike up a conversation with the locals and delve into the cooler local."

“Okay, let's not think of the worst,” Teo says. “It's a bad neighborhood, so what's more normal in a place like this than two pimps sitting in the street be on the lookout. Maybe it's not for us.”

“Maybe,” Catherine adds. “What can I say?”

“How did it go with the politician?” Peggy asks, changing the subject.

“He told me, not threateningly, rather more like advice to pack up and leave both Wuhan and China immediately.”

“This thing keeps getting better,” Peggy says, deep in thought. “We're doing well. Is the news from the big front of the Coronavirus better at least?”

“The news is very strange indeed,” John says.

“Meaning?”

“As I told Teo and Catherine, they have no idea. Nor about who made the virus, nor who spread it to the general population of the city.”

“You're joking now,” Peggy tells him worriedly.

“Not at all. That's what I was thinking when the head of the labs started talking to me. I'm inside the conference room of the building through which the virus was proven to have escaped or released. Thousands of people are dying every day all over the planet, and the person in charge sits me down and tells me how much he likes Halkidiki, and how nice it would be to be there now. After the small talk, he puts on the counter-surveillance systems and confirms to me that the virus was created and started in their labs, but they have no idea who made it or even who ordered it, nor who is responsible for the virus being outside the lab for the last few months killing people.”

“Great!” Catherine says, frustrated. “So we're back to square one.”

“Fortunately, things are not quite like that. The head of the unit, Dan-Si, has taken a liking to me and trusts me like crazy. While we were talking, he had a flash of inspiration and told me that he wanted to put me in charge of the undercover investigation on the case. The argument he used is that I'm new, so I'm going to look at the situation with a “fresh set of eyes,” as well as that I have no preference or emotional involvement with the employees there since I don't know anyone. He told me they've looked into everything, and even the Wuhan police administration is involved in the investigations, but nothing so far. According to him, I have the scientific training to recognize the mechanics behind the creation and spreading of viruses, but I'm a foreigner, so I'm bound to be objective. He told me that I might see something that's been right in front of their eyes the whole time, and they missed it.”

“Dan's thinking right,” Peggy says.

“And did you accept?” Barbara asks.

“Of course he accepted,” Catherine jumps up. “Would he let such an opportunity go to waste? We're here to find out who made and spread the virus, we're put—that is John—in charge of the official investigation, and he'd say no? We're very lucky.”

“Let's see if we can find out anything. Tomorrow I have a meeting with the head of security at Central Labs. Let's see what comes out of this.”

“How'd you do with the security?” Barbara asks.

“Very well, I'd say. I'm the director's right-hand man, and word must have been out because the rest of the team won't even look me in the eye. I have top-level access.”

“Good. Tomorrow I'll get you everything you need,” Teo says. “Take it and lock it up somewhere in your office. Is there a safe place?”

“I've been given a small safe.”

“Excellent. Lock up the equipment there, and as soon as you find something you need to copy, you can easily do it.”

“The plan continues as normal. John’s in the lab. I’m meeting with some sources, and I might get some answers. Teo’s sitting outside in the café backing up John. Peggy, I want you to go to an internet café and look up some stuff I’m going to give you. Not from your cell phone or your laptop.”

Early in the morning, John is in his office. The three Lees have made sure all the detailed reports from the previous day's series of experiments are on his desk, along with his coffee.

John looks at the results. He opens his bag. He looks and fills in his notes, looking very puzzled. He gets up from his desk. The three Lees continue the sequence of experiments and actions to be taken. He approaches one of the subjects of the previous day's experiments. He takes the hamster out of its cage and gently takes it in his hands. He brings it close to his face. Now they are staring into each other's eyes.

“Where did you come from, little guy?” he whispers.

He puts the hamster back in the cage and leaves the lab, heading to the conference room. Dan is waiting for him there and introduces him to the building's security officer. He leaves them alone and closes the door.

Barbara is sitting in her room with Milo in her arms. She is watching the news. The death toll around the world is rising, and scientists are trying to find vaccines, drugs, or anything that can stop the killer virus's progress forever.

Peggy sits next to her and paints her nails. "I hate this waiting."

"I rather like it, though," Barbara says.

"Why?"

"Because I can sit quietly on the couch, play with Milo and think."

"Think about what?"

"Anything. I just like to have time to myself, so I can organize my thoughts."

"People need time to organize their actions. The actions take up most of the time, not the thoughts."

"It might, for some, but not for me. I want to think very hard before I do anything. So much so that when I do it, it takes me less time than it took me to think about it."

"And what about this trip?"

"What do you mean?"

"The trip will last ten days, and you found out two days before we left, so you're not getting the balance right. Based on your logic, you should have thought about it for at least eleven days and then come back for a ten-day trip."

"What can you do? There are occasions when you have to get out of your schedule and habits. We can't always get things right. Sometimes circumstances force us to make exceptions."

“The food in Wuhan is excellent,” Peggy says as she chewed her delicious duck.

The group has sat down to dinner at a very nice restaurant. They have found a relatively secluded table, away from the other customers, helped by the distance due to the pandemic.

“It's all good,” Teo adds. “But it's not like the ribs or swordfish in Pasalimani.”

“You're just obsessed with Greece and won't allow your mind to accept other cultures and flavors,” Peggy says, taking a few sips of her wine.

“Perhaps, but I know Chinese, Germans, French, French, Americans and many others who have gone on a 15-day holiday to Greece and stayed there, permanently. The only Greeks who have stayed in the countries I just mentioned went there for work. I've never heard of a Greek going on vacation somewhere and liking it so much that they stayed permanently. So I am not the stuck-up one. Greece is a very nice country. And what I'm telling you is completely objective since it's not based on the judgment of Greeks, but on the judgment of subjects of other countries who at some point decide to make Greece their home.”

“Guys,” Catherine says. “Greece is nice, but as in every country in the world, you have to have a job to make it nice. So let's stop talking about ducks and ribs and see what fish we've caught today. I'll start with my sources. I went all over Wuhan today and found nothing. That leaves us with Mr. Scientist.”

“Guys, things are still weird,” John says. “I spent over two hours today talking to the lab security officer. He's given me a full spatial and temporal report. Here.”

John opens his briefcase and pulls out some documents, which he hands to Peggy. She looks them over with Teo, who is sitting next to her, while at the same time listening to what John is telling them.

“We know where the virus was made,” John says. “It was in lab 54. We also know who the first host was. His name was Lee-Xin. He got sick and died two months ago. He was patient zero. But we still don't know who created Covid-19 inside lab 54. And that's where the weird stuff starts. Lee” Xin was not a member of the scientific staff, just a maintenance worker. An electrician who was called in by the system to fix a burned-out light bulb in this lab.”

“The head of security pointed out to me, and Dan confirmed it, that lab 54 hasn't been and isn't in use. It's fully operational and ready for people to work, but they have it as a spare lab. So if they had some visiting scientists, they would have them work there, or anyway, if one of the regular labs couldn't work for whatever reason, the experiments would continue there. Lab 54 has remained closed and inactive since the whole facility was opened. It is a backup lab.”

“Yes, but someone must have been in there and created the virus,” Teo muses.

“As you can imagine, in facilities such as this, there's a very high level of security. All the labs are under camera surveillance 24/7, and the videos are never erased.

“Do you have the videos?” Teo asks excitedly.

“Yeah! Everything's in here,” says John, tapping his briefcase. “There's a late night at the hotel tonight, so we can watch them. Get ready.”

“And watch what?” Barbara asks, disappointed. “The footage from security cameras monitoring a lab no one has ever stepped foot in?”

“Only one electrician went,” Catherine says. “And he's dead and can't help us.”

“The video will be very boring,” Barbara whined. “I'm already yawning.”

“This is all strange, but we have to investigate,” says Peggy. “Anyway, the duck is fucking great!”

“Let me tell you. If we're gonna stay up all night, we should get a drink, a beer, some chips. How are we gonna pull it through?”



“We'll get whatever you like,” Catherine says. “Thanks to the newspaper paying for everything. No problem.”

“There's another serious matter, though,” John suddenly interrupts their plans for the night.

“What is it?” Teo asks. “Are you afraid we won't find anything open at this hour to buy beer?”

“Haha! That's hilarious! The problem is with my experiments, which I remind you are also classified, Barbara,” he says, looking at his friend.

“Mum's the word! Besides, as you can see, I'm too stuffed with my duck, and I can hardly talk, let alone listen to you.”

“I have no problem with you listening to me, but I don't want anyone else to find out about this. My research has been going on for years. I don't want to bore you with technical details, but the research revolves around death and near-death experiences. I've told you about some things before. Anyway, through complex processes and specific sequences of experiments, I've gotten to a point where things are getting weird. I was trying to figure out whether the subjects I was using in my lab were dying or not, so I decided to try stigma detection of the subject. What I mean. You see the subject, you touch it, it's right there in front of you on the lab table. But if we take myths and beliefs into account, then every living being has a soul, which, as the unproven theory of religions and myths says, does not die. In order to exclude the slightest possibility of error, I decided to prove the existence of the subject quantitatively. So that I can be sure that no kind of energy, matter, etc., escapes the measurements, thus affecting their accuracy. So what I discovered is that my experimental subject is not there in front of me on the lab table. What I discovered, in short, is that the hamster that died in front of me and was resuscitated so that we could measure its brain functions during its artificial death, does not exist. And when I say it does not exist, I mean that I cannot prove in a clear scientific way and by mathematical calculations that the hamster is there in front of me. My calculations find it in another place and time.”

“What place and time?” Barbara asks with her mouth full.

“Don't laugh, but the hamster is in Brussels, and the time is 2,635 AD, and you, Barbara, swallow first before you speak.”

“I'd be lying if I said I understand any of this,” says Barbara, downing her wine.

“Can't blame you! Even *I* find it hard to understand, and I have all the facts at my disposal,” says John.

“Have you confirmed it?” Peggy asks with interest.

“Numerous times. The problem is that I've confirmed that all my test subjects come from the future, from various dates, which are all from 2400 AD onwards, but I can't mathematically prove what my eyes can see, which is that the hamster is on my lab table today. I'd call it a problem.”

“And what is your explanation?”

“None. I really have no explanation. And do you know what's the worst of all? I can't even give any possible explanation. This whole thing is completely inexplicable. I've done the calculations over and over again in every possible way. Nothing. Or rather, exactly the same.”

“And what's their common denominator?” asks Catherine.

“The only thing all subjects have in common is their spatiality. All of them, by calculation, are located in Brussels.”

“And why don't you go and find them so you can prove if your calculations are correct?” asks Barbara, who is now beginning to muddle her words with wine, but she doesn't stop filling her glass.

“Because, Ms. Know-it-all, the calculations show that they are not *now* in Brussels, but in dates after 2.400 AD. So if my calculations are correct, the only way they can be confirmed is for someone to travel into the future or for me to find a way to live until 2.400.”

“So another 380 years?” Catherine asks and answers on her own. “Now, with the pandemic, we don't know if we'll be alive next month. 380 years seems like a very optimistic scenario to me.”

“I, for one, don't plan to die any time soon,” says Barbara, downing yet another glass of wine.

“I think it's time to leave,” says Peggy. “If we stay a minute longer, someone will have to carry Barbara.”

“Are you calling me fat?”

“I think she's calling you drunk,” Catherine says, laughing. “Come on. We've got the videos to watch.”

At the hotel, they all sit in Barbara's room. John looks at the dates and searches the TV for the relevant videos. The others have settled into the small sitting area, eating snacks and drinking beer.

“Why shouldn't I have a beer?” Barbara grumbles.

“Because you fell in the marmite when you were little, like Obelix,” Teo teases her.

“Mhm, hilarious!”

“Let's do this,” John says and stands up.

“What are we looking at?” Teo asks as he opens up and hands his friend a beer.

“We're watching the camera overlooking the reactor.”

“Very interesting,” mocks Barbara.

“We start a few days before the electrician comes in. We're watching the reactor in fast forward, of course.”

“Thank God for small favors!” Barbara says. “I'm bored already.”

The static shot has no interest. So they start chatting, occasionally glancing at the TV. That is, except for John and Catherine, who don't take their eyes off the TV.

Forty minutes and several beers later, Catherine springs up excited. “What is that? What's he doing there? Since no one has entered the room, why does the reactor seem to be working? Is it working, John? What the fuck is it doing? I don't know anything about it.”

“It's working, but how is this possible? Who gave the order?” John wonders as he stares at the TV wide-eyed.

“Can someone operate it remotely? And if so, who and where?” Catherine asks. “We need to find out where it's connected and to whom.”

“It's stopped. It's not working anymore. He's done,” John says excitedly.

“Done with what?” Catherine asks.

“The virus. He made it, and now the reactor has stopped working.”

“What happens now?” Peggy asks, puzzled.

“Normally, qualified personnel with proper equipment come in and remove it from the reactor safely. But that hasn't happened here. The reactor was somehow instructed to create the virus. And after it created it, it didn't inform the system, to which it is permanently connected. And yet no one was informed.”

“Whoa. Pause it there,” Teo says.

Now the group sees a technician entering lab 54 in fast forward. John puts it into normal speed, and everyone watches with bated breath.

“Poor guy,” says Barbara. “He has no idea.”

“Unfortunately, he doesn't,” John confirms.

The Chinese technician enters the lab. The door closes shut behind him. After making sure he's alone, he looks at the cameras overlooking the perimeter of this particular lab, making sure the surrounding hallways are clear. He sits in the chair behind the desk, puts his feet up, takes a cigarette out of his pocket and lights it. He has also opened a small nylon bag and holds it upside down like a parachute. The cigarette smoke gets inside the upside-down bag and stays trapped in there. The technician blows into the bag with every puff.

"I imagine he does it for the smoke detectors," Catherine says.

"Exactly," John confirms.

After a moment, the technician stands up, ties the bag tightly and gently puts it in his pocket so that he doesn't push it too hard, and the smoke comes out of it.

He now approaches a light bulb that seems to not make very good contact and flickers. He picks up a stool, steps on it, tightens it a little and now it shines unhindered. He gets off the stool, dusts off his palms, and is pleased that he has successfully accomplished his task. At that moment, a green light begins to blink on the reactor and catches his attention.

The electrician hesitantly walks over to the machine and examines it carefully.

The group of Greeks has climbed onto the couch, onto chairs, Barbara has climbed onto the table. They are yelling all together, like the chorus in an ancient tragedy: "Don't," "No." "Get the fuck out of there. You've fixed the fucking bulb."

The electrician pushes the button, and the reactor door opens wide. The group stands still like statues and watch as the electrician approaches his face to the reactor opening. After making sure it is empty, he closes the door again. He tests the lamp, switching it on and off a few times. The lamp works fine. The technician leaves lab 54. The pandemic has begun. The date on the video is 17/9/2019. 15:32 local time.

"It's tragic to think that as soon as his shift was over, he went home and hugged his family," Barbara says in a low voice from the table she's on.

"It's very tragic," John adds, "Especially because he didn't know anything."

"Okay, the guy opened a door and saw there was nothing inside. How could he know?" Peggy asked.

"Well, that's all good," says John. "But what do we do now? And, Barbara, get off the table. The video is over."

"I like watching you from up here. I think I'll stay. Do you know how they call this shot in the movies, John?"

"No."

"Hat shot."

"That or pussy hat?" Catherine asks, and the whole group bursts out laughing.

"Come on, guys, we need to decide our next moves," John says.

"And here is where the hacker comes.." Catherine says, pointing to Teo.

"Well, things are simple." Teo starts. "Tomorrow, you'll go to lab 54 and hook up the reactor to what I've given you. If all goes well, it'll have recorded in his memory what it created and what process it followed, as well as where it got the command from."

"Okay, then. Tomorrow, the mystery might be solved."

A cry of pleasure tears through the air.

"Here we go again!" Peggy says dryly. "Caligula's orgies."

"Why does it bother you, baby girl? Are you jealous?" Barbara asks mockingly.

"Jealous to be in bed with some sweaty Chinese guy who's been eating mostly spices all his life? I don't think so!"

It's midday the next day and John walks briskly out of the main lab gate. He shoots a conspiratorial glance at Teo sitting at the café. Teo pays, gets up and goes to the car to meet John. His friend gets in and sits in the passenger seat. Teo drives off.

"We have a problem," says John.

"What happened?" Teo asks worriedly.

"I connected the central processing unit to that of the duplicator like you told me."

"And?"

"And the unit that replicates the virus creation sequence worked fine. It completed the replication at 100%. So we have the blueprint of the virus. But that already exists. Of course, I have to study it because it's one thing knowing what has been officially announced and quite another what actually happened in the lab."

"I agree. What happened with the other duplicate?"

"The one that was supposed to show us the route of the order?"

"Yeah."

"That's the problem. Not enough space. I've been trying to do it all day, and it always gives me the same message."

"That's not possible."

"But it is."

"The data in the virus blueprint is definitely much more than the command. It's really, really weird."

"I know. That's why I'm telling you we have a problem."

"Once we're at the hotel, I'll hook it up and see what's going on because by talking, we don't go anywhere. We need to look at the data."

A short time later, Teo is in his room trying to see what his friend managed to copy from the lab's computer unit.

The rest of the friends are gathered in Catherine's room chatting, except for Barbara, who is taking her afternoon nap.

"I talked to an old friend of mine who worked for many years at the Greek embassy in Beijing," Peggy says to her two friends. "So my friend told me that the easiest thing to do in China is to find out who ordered something. They're so detailed in their bureaucracy that there is a signature even for the supply of a small rubber."

"Yes, your friend's right," Catherine says. "And I agree. Except in our case, the order is nowhere to be found. We know that the virus was created in lab 54 and was transmitted by ignorance through the electrician. But no one knows who gave the order to create it."

"It's really peculiar," John says. "And the weirdest thing of all is what's going on with the computers. It's like someone is trying to hide something."

"What does Teo say? Peggy asks.

"What can he say? He's next door, in his room, trying to figure it out. And he thinks it's all weird, too."

"It is strange, for someone who has nothing to hide," Catherine says. "But for someone who has something to hide, all this silencing is to be expected."

"Yes, but the Chinese are claiming that the virus was not part of some covert operation, and that its escape from the lab was just an accident."

"At least that's what the video proves," John says.

Catherine shakes her head. "The video proves nothing."

"But we saw the electrician. He obviously didn't know anything because if he did, he wouldn't have gone to stick his head in the reactor."

"He might not have known, but others might have," Catherine says.

"That doesn't make sense, Catherine. If I wanted to spread the virus, I'd send an expert, a scientist who knows how to handle it."

"And what would you do in his place?"

"I would remove it from the lab in a safe package so that I could first protect myself. Then I'd take that package somewhere outside, to a subway station, to a flea market, where there are crowds of people in general. I would take a deep breath, unlock the device, release the virus, and get out of the country as quickly as I could. First, remove myself from the site and then from the country."

"Yes," Catherine replies. "But that would mean you would know what this virus is and what exactly means releasing it."

"That's right," John replies.

"So if we assume that I gave the original order to Peggy, my subordinate, but she finds you to carry it out. Right?"

"Correct."

"But in that case, there are immediately three people who know the secret. Right?"

John nods.

"But with a secret such as this, every conspiracy theory pales in comparison before it. How can I make sure it won't come out?"

"How?" John asks.

"If you want something to remain a secret, don't tell anyone," Peggy says.

"Yes, but if you don't tell anyone, anyone, in this case the electrician, how can you be sure he'll open the reactor door when you haven't told him to?"

"You do know that Americans, for example, have brought down governments in foreign countries from time to time, don't you?" Catherine asks John.

“Yes, of course,” John replies.

“So in that case, doesn't an American agent go to the opposition groups in the country, hold a meeting with all the members and tell them that America will support their fight against the government? Never. We may all know or suspect it, but they never do it straight. They do it in many different, but always covert, ways, such that in the end, the opposition leaders are sure that they organized the rebellion by themselves and the money that flowed to that end came from some rich exiled compatriot, who is also often persuaded to give money without knowing the details of the plan himself. So if I want to spread Covid-19 on the planet instead of the previous plan, may I suggest another one?” Catherine asks, addressing John.

“Please do,” he replies, laughing.

“Instead of telling Peggy to tell you, I'm doing it myself. And I'm the only one who knows it. And a secret known by only one person has a good chance of remaining a secret.”

“What about the electrician? How do you know he'll open the door?” John asks.

“Aside from the high position I hold in Wuhan's labs, or in the government itself, I'm also a profiler.”

“What's that?”

“I mean, instead of giving orders to get something done, I predict who might do what I want without them knowing it.”

“You talk in riddles old man ,” John says jokingly.

“Let's say you want to put a bomb in a public square.”

“I do?” John asks in surprise.

“Come on, John. It's only speculation. Since you're a terrorist, of course you want to.”

“Okay, I do,” he replies.

“Suppose you want the explosion to happen at 10 am, but you don't want to be in the surrounding area lest you get caught, either in the act or later from the security cameras' footage.”

“Yeah, it'd have been better if I hadn't been there at the time of the explosion,” John agrees.

“So before you set the bomb,” Catherine says, “You do a site survey and some 'rehearsals.’”

“Being a terrorist is a lot of work,” John says dryly.

“Yes, it does. So there you are, studying the scope before you go ahead with the terrorist attack you're planning. You see that I live on this square where you want to do the hit, and every morning I walk into the garage of my house at 10 am.”

“So, there I come, hand you the remote control and politely say, ‘Can you do me a huge favor and push the red button tomorrow morning at 10 o'clock?’” John said with a laugh.

“You're a terrorist. You don't strike up conversations with people. Maybe this passerby can do what you want then, without knowing it.”

“That's something, I guess! What else can I say?”

“So instead of asking the neighbors stupid questions, you do something else that's much simpler. Before the hit, you set her up with a car near the neighbor's house. You carry a frequency detector and wait. Once she presses the button on her remote to open the garage door, you scan the frequency on which the remote and garage door are communicating. So you simply set your bomb to get a detonation command on your neighbor's frequency. So the next day, she unknowingly detonates your bomb along with the garage door and kills hundreds of people without knowing it.”

“And days later, every time she describes the incident to her friends, she’ll say that the bomb happened to go off just as she pressed the button on her remote control,” Peggy says.

“Exactly! Meanwhile, you have returned to your hideout, showered and sipped your coffee, watching your bombing on the TV news specials.”

“Yes, but this is about an act that happens every day,” John counters. “How could the person who wanted to spread the virus know what the electrician would do?”

“How innocent a scientist you are! That’s what the profiler does. They monitor, collect data, and use that information to their advantage. So let’s get back to the plan. I, who want to spread the virus, obviously have access firstly to the files of all the employees, but also to the security cameras in the building, so I can monitor them. I didn’t know how I was going to do it, but I knew what I was going to do. And while I was monitoring, I saw that when they call the electrician, if he’s alone in the room, he’s having a smoke. He’s also curious by nature, so he usually goes through everything, drawers, cabinets, etc. So that’s how I’ve left the virus in the reactor in lab 54. I’m the only one who knows. Right?”

“Right,” answers John.

“Then I get into the maintenance system and call when I know the electrician who has the habits that serve me most is on shift. Voila!”

“Okay, now you’re starting to scare me!”

“It’s not about scaring you, darling. That’s the way the world works,” Catherine says.

“So we’re looking to uncover a secret that very likely only one person in the world knows,” Peggy says with a frown.

Catherine nods. “Probably, but that’s most likely, since the bigger and more dangerous the secret, the fewer people should know it. A secret that could decimate the population of the planet would make sense if only one person knew it.”

“And we must find that person,” John says.

“Exactly,” Catherine says.

“In China,” Peggy added.

John shook his head. “It’s like looking for a needle in a haystack.”

“Someone set up the electrician’s murder, and we have to find them.”

“And that someone is very clever,” says Teo, entering the room.

“Here comes our personal hacker,” John jokes. “Did you find anything?”

“A couple of things, but one of them is very important.”

“Go on,” Catherine says impatiently.

“The person behind all this had the best idea.”

“What do you mean?” Peggy asks.

“I mean that all the clues lead to the mainframe.”

“Make it a little clearer, hacker, so we ignorant people can understand,” Catherine tells him.

“Gladly! We have the following data we can look for. Someone ordered Covid”19 to be created. That is the one piece of evidence we have. The other clue is that someone gave the order to repair the lamp in lab 54. The orders to make viruses are classified, but orders for simple maintenance work are accessible to everyone. So instead of looking to decode the command to build the virus, which is classified and therefore very difficult to trace its path so that in the end, we can find the original IP address that wrote and sent it, I looked for the simple one. Who ordered the lamp to be replaced.”

“And?” Catherine asks anxiously.

“There’s good news and bad news. Which one do you want to hear first?”

“The good news,” Catherine says.

“Our friend is always optimistic,” Teo comments. “The good news is that I found the order for the lamp. It was given half an hour before the electrician went. And I’m sure the person who gave the order for the lamp is the same person who gave the order for the virus.”

“And the bad news?” Catherine asked.

“Bad news is the result of bad news,” Teo says laughingly.

“Meaning?” Peggy asks.

“I mean, the order to repair the lamp is there, but when I try to follow it to find out who gave it, I run into messages so well encrypted that you’d expect to see in a nuclear program. For such a simple command to have so much privacy security means that the person who sent it is the same person who gave the order to create the virus.”

“So the scientists who worked in lab 54 and created the virus don’t know who they got the order from for all this?” Catherine asked.

“No, they don’t. The orders are automated. Two years ago, the team of researchers working in this lab got briefed to make a virus with certain characteristics, and they did it. When they finished their research, they sent a report of the results to the system. The system was supposed to instruct another team that would be responsible for managing the virus. They would either continue laboratory testing with this virus, or try to develop it into something else, depending on what the system told them to do.”

“And that system probably didn’t send any commands,” Catherine assumes.

“Exactly. No orders were given by the system about the future of the virus, so it stayed in the reactor. The only order finally given in relation to lab 54 was to repair the lamp.”

“Something that at first glance seems to have nothing to do with the virus,” Catherine says.

“And that lamp change was nothing more than the dispersal order to the general population. Just disguised,” Peggy says.

“That’s right,” Teo agrees. “What remains now is to find out whose computer, or cell phone, the order came from.”

“Will you be able to do it?” Catherine asks.

“Difficult to say, but I’ll try, and we’ll figure something out in the end. Tomorrow, John, you’ll take this to work with you,” Teo says, handing him a USB flash drive. “You’re going to run the command path again.”

“But we’ve already done that.”

“Yes, and it reported that there’s no room for making a duplicate of the command, which is practically impossible. So, inside that stick is a nice little program I’ve made that will analyze the path, make it fit, and copy it onto the hard drive I’ve given you. We need to find where the command to either start the reactor or the command to repair the lamp was left off.”

John took the USB and put it in his pocket. “Let’s try that, too.”



John approaches the table where the rest of his party is sitting. He is pale as if he has seen a ghost. He sits in the empty chair next to Catherine and takes her glass, which is full of water, and drinks it in one gulp. His friends look at him really worried now.

“What happened to you?” Teo asks, even though everyone is worried about their friend.

Without answering, John refills the glass and drinks again.

“Hey, what happened? Will you tell us?”

“Who drinks alcohol?” John asks, looking at his friends’ glasses.

“Barbara,” they all answer.

John takes her glass and downs it. He stands still for a moment, suppressing the burn and says, “Order two more for me.”

Peggy signals for the waiter, picking up the empty glass.

“Hey, what happened? You’re starting to worry us,” Teo says.

“Guys, I don’t know what this is, and I don’t know how to explain it to you. Or, to be more precise, I don’t know how to explain it in general, not only to you but to myself.”

“In your own words,” Peggy says, trying to lighten the atmosphere.

“Do you remember what I was telling you about the experiments I’m doing?”

“The ones about the hamsters being from another era?” Teo asked.

“Yes, that. Well, we tested all the test subjects, and all the results were the same. They come from the future, and although they’re in front of me on the table, quantum control confirms that they’re in Brussels.”

“Yes, but you already know that,” Catherine says.

“Yes, but what I didn’t know is that I’m not here either.”

“What do you mean you’re not here?” Peggy asks, puzzled.

“I had the three Lee’s do the experiment on me too.”

“So you died and came back like a hamster?” Barbara asks excitedly.

“Exactly!”

“And what did you see?” she asks again, pulling a pad and pencil out of her bag.

“Hey, Barbara, what are you doing there?” Catherine asks her friend.

“I’m taking notes. What did you expect? I’ve never talked to a man who has died and risen from the dead before. It might be useful in a novel.”

“You don’t respect anything, Barbara,” Teo cuts her off in a huff. “And you, John, are you out of your mind? Why are you doing such stuff without us knowing?”

“I’ve told you again that my experiments are top secret.”

“Yes, they are, but with all the shit you’re pulling, you’ll end up dead,” Teo retorts angrily. “We’re in a foreign country, receiving threats, looking into perhaps the most dangerous case in human history, and you’ve found a way to play the zombie experiment now? And what if you died in there? What would we do? How would we know that you just got your head blown off by your bullshit and that you weren’t taken by the people running this conspiracy we’re investigating?”

“Look, here! I agreed to come with you to help Catherine, but my experiments are at a very critical point, and since I’ve been given the opportunity to continue them, I will. Even if we were on Mars, I would continue if I could.”

The waiter brought the two drinks. John took one of the glasses and downed it again in one gulp.

“What you saw must have affected you a lot,” Catherine says, looking at him.

“You don’t even know the half of it,” he says. Putting the empty glass aside, he took the other one, still full, and took a sip. “Will you give me a cigarette?” he asks Barbara.

“But you don’t smoke,” she says as she hands him the cigarette.

“With what I’ve seen, I might start taking drugs,” he says and lights the cigarette. He tries to stifle his cough and wipe his eyes of the tears the smoke has brought.

“Well, guys, something strange and inexplicable is going on. I allowed them to experiment on me, but Barbara, I’m going to make you sad. I died, but I didn’t see or remember anything from where I went. I didn’t stay dead as long as I’d leave the hamsters. The three Lee’s brought me back much faster than they should have. They were afraid I might die on them.”

“At least there are some people who are aware of the situation,” Teo says irritated.

“Before the three Lee’s put me in a coma, I took all my measurements. And my body and all the energy it produces that we can see with quantum measurements showed that I am here in Wuhan, in the present. Once I came back from the coma, we did the measurements again, and I got the same results with the hamsters. I’m in Brussels, some 400 years later.”

“Since you’re there, there’s this nice perfume shop. Can you get me something?”

Peggy looks sternly at Barbara. “Barbara, that’s enough.”

“He barges in and downs my drink, and it’s all my fault?”

“I’ll get you another drink, dear,” Peggy says. “Now shut up, and let’s see what the man has to say.”

“I’m shutting up,” Barbara says in a petulant tone and begins kissing Milo’s snout.

“What conclusions have you drawn from all this?” Peggy asks John.

“A total conclusion that explains the situation doesn’t exist. I’ll tell you what I know, and that’s not with absolute certainty. Since all the test animals give the same results, and since the same result is obtained when we experiment with a human being, the only logical explanation I can give is that no one lives here. It is a virtual environment that is controlled, “running,” functioning—you name it—in Brussels 400 years after the present time.

“Is such thing even possible?” Peggy asks.

“Yes. Theoretically, you can bend time and transport spatiotemporal animate or inanimate objects. But the energy required to do so is enormous, brutal, I might add. The only certainty is that this energy does not exist, at least on our planet. In a nutshell, science admits in theory that it is something that can happen, but until it does, we have no tangible proof of what we claim.”

“So, we’re not here right now?” Catherine asks.

“In plain English, yes. And if that’s the case, we’re not living reality, but a constructed reality, which we perceive as a real one.”

“I was expecting you to tell us something more impressive. I don’t know—that you’ve seen God or other dead people. That the secrets of how the universe works have been revealed to you. I’m disappointed,” Barbara says and takes two hearty sips of the fresh drink the waiter had just brought her.

“Maybe the secrets of the universe have been revealed to me, baby, and I just don’t understand them. In a nutshell, something really big is happening, and the worst part is that it’s happening right in front of our eyes, and no one is aware of it.”

“I still don’t understand why this could be happening,” Peggy says, puzzled.

“But if it were so simple to understand,” says Catherine. “It’d be obvious to everyone, and John’s experiments would not be needed to reveal it.”

“Guys, I’m really upset. I’m discovering proof that the world we know doesn’t exist. That can’t be good.

“You can’t know if it’s good or bad,” Teo adds. “It’s definitely weird.”

“I don’t feel good when I just get swept out to sea by a small current. I don’t want to be unable to control things. And this experiment showed me that not only am I not

in control, but it's far from certain that what I see, live, and perceive is reality. It is at best one of many realities, and at worst, it's like a computer program, a dream or a nightmare, and we live in it, thinking that this is our life."

"Whatever reality we are in, however, the world continues to die of the pandemic," Teo adds thoughtfully, staring at the bottom of his glass.

"I do have some good news, though. The USB worked and copied the command path to fix the lamp."

"Do you have the duplicate of the command?" Teo asks excitedly

"Yes, the program you gave me on the USB managed to copy it to the hard drive."

"Did you bring the hard drive?"

"You bet!" John opens his bag and takes out the hard drive box, handing it to Teo. "Here, all yours!"

"Come on, man. You should have said that news first."

"Why?" John asks.

"Because that's some news," Teo replies excitedly.

"Let's ask the professional what's news. Well, Catherine? What's the headline? That all that we are living may be a hologram or that a pandemic has been instigated in the hologram, inside the hologram too since it doesn't exist either, and I might have found who gave the order to create it?"

"Of course the former," Catherine answers effortlessly.

"Do you see that, little hacker?" John says, tapping his right lobe.

"Say what you will. Virtual or not, this is where we live. So get up, and let's go back to the rooms and check the command path to see if we can figure it out."

The group got up. All five of them, including Milo, got into the old car and, amidst fumes of burning oil, made their way back to the hotel.

It's night, and someone is persistently knocking on John's door, repeatedly calling his name. John wakes up, gets up and sleepily goes to open the door. There he sees Teo with his laptop open in his hands.

At that moment, behind Teo, a half-naked Chinese woman, dressed in leather BDSM clothes, walks by. Next to her in the hotel corridor walks a wolfhound. Both are wearing a muzzle. In front of them walks a burly Chinese man, dressed in a very expensive suit. In his hands, he has two straps, one for the dog and one for the woman, who's also tied by the neck. They walk casually without paying attention to the two stunned strangers.

Teo enters the room and John quickly closes the door behind him.

"I found where the order was given from."

"Really?" John asked him excitedly if still a little sleepy.

"Yes. It's a computer located inside the lab buildings."

The two men sat down on the couch and Teo, showed John what he found on his computer.

"Do you know what's on this side of the building?" he asks him impatiently.

"Yeah, warehouses," John replies.

"Warehouses?" Teo wonders in frustration. "I thought they were supposed to be offices."

"No, that's where the warehouses are. I'm sure of it."

"Anyway. This camera is inside the labs and shows the exact location of the computer which gave the order to replace the bulb in lab 54."

"But all I can see is a wall," John said in amazement.

"Behind that wall will be our unit."

"And what are we supposed to do?"

"We'll expropriate it," Teo replied with a laugh.

"Good. But how?"

"It's simple. I've hacked the cameras. No matter what happens, they'll keep showing what you're seeing now."

"The wall?"

"Exactly. The wall and nothing else. That means that you need to get dressed to go to the labs. You go in with your security pass and find the unit. Most likely, what we're looking at is a false wall. Or there could be a room behind it. Whatever it is, you'll find it. Now, if it's a small computer unit, you put it in your bag and leave. They don't search you anymore anyway, right?"

"Right."

"If it's a big one, you transfer all the files to that hard drive again and take it with you."

"Okay, but shouldn't we wake the girls?"

"No. There's no reason. No one else can come with you inside the facility, so we don't need another one. I'll drive, and you snoop around. Shall we?"

John thought for a few seconds and suddenly jerked out of his seat. "Let's go!"

Now in Barbara's room, the whole gang is awake. There's a strange device on the table. It looks a bit like a computer from a Sci-Fi movie or an alien movie. It's one of those machines you think can be turned off, turned on or anyway operated by their own will and decision. That in itself makes it quite scary.

"What happened? Why did we have to wake up?" Catherine asked. "And where did you get this thing, and what is it," she continued to bombard her friends with questions.

They are all sitting around the table with the machine in front of them. It's 4 am, and everyone is sleepy.

Teo, who is the only one standing, speaks up, "Dear friends. This is the machine that gave the order to change the light bulb in lab 54. From this, we conclude that the same machine gave the order to make the virus in the same lab."

"What do you mean?" Peggy asks. "What do you mean that this is the machine that gave the order. No machine can give orders on its own unless it's ordered by a human to do so. Who is operating the machine? And what the hell is that, anyway?"

"Dear friends. What you see before you is an AI computer."

"What is AI? Barbara asks.

"If you don't keep interrupting me, I'll explain," Teo replied. "Please control your impulses, or this will take us all night. Well, since we got back to the hotel, I've been trying to find the person who gave the order for the lamp to be repaired, and I finally found him. It's this machine, which was hidden in a specially designed crypt in a wall inside the lab facility. Up to this point, everything would have been fine, so to speak.

The problem is that this unit is not one we know of. It's an integrated artificial intelligence unit. That is, it is a computer that can think, decide, and execute commands that are of its own inspiration. It doesn't wait for an operator or another computing unit to press a button and give it a command. It creates it by itself, considering the parameters it has to complete its task. Don't ask me what its mission is because I have no idea. Also, this unit has no apparent form of energy powering it. It doesn't have an outlet nor solar panels, how could it anyway since it was buried in a wall, but it doesn't have a battery either. In a nutshell and to be clearer, I have seen many computers, even experimental ones, but I've never seen or heard of anything like it.

John and I went on a mission to retrieve it. I don't want you to say much in front of it because we don't know if they're listening to us or watching us with its help. So now I'm going to try to isolate it, although I don't know exactly how to do that, since I don't know how it works, but I'll try."

Teo took the object from the table. He pulled out of his bag a shiny cloth like the ones they wrap burn victims in the hospitals. He wrapped it several times, put it in his bag and took it to the bathroom.

A few seconds later, he returned.

"You left the faucet on in the bathroom," Barbara told him.

"I didn't forget," he replied. "I left it on to make noise and to cover what we say as much as possible."

Teo sat down among his friends too, who were looking at him anxiously.

"I can see it in your eyes that you want to ask me, but I don't know. I don't know who put it there or how it works. I tried to "communicate" with it, but I couldn't find any of the usual ways. It's a plasma-operated unit, I guess. It has no USB sockets, no wires. It's one piece like granite. I tried everything. All the wireless communications I have at my disposal. So I made a desperate attempt and opened the anti-radar app I have on my phone. Don't worry, I got in the car and went far enough to open my cell phone," he said apologetically to Catherine.

"Do you have an anti-radar app on your phone?" Catherine asked, impressed.

“When we say anti-radar program, it’s for traffic, not for the radar that picks up submarines. I’m not Agent 007, although I’ve become one in the last few days with you.”

“Don’t worry, you guys,” Catherine added to encourage the group. “In years from now, when we retire, we’ll sit around the fireplace, reminisce and laugh.”

“If we live,” added Peggy wickedly.

“Back to the issue at hand,” continued Teo. “All I’ve managed to find is a location.”

“So you’ve contacted the device?” Catherine asked excitedly.

“I don’t know. I guess so. I didn’t get a confirmation email, but I think so,” Teo added.

“And what does the location you found mean?” Peggy asked.

“I honestly have no idea,” Teo replied. “Just as I can’t confirm that the address I found came from this device. I told you. It’s such an advanced artificial intelligence device that I haven’t even figured out where it gets its power from. I don’t know if it’s on. I don’t know if someone can track us through it. All I know is that as soon as I turned on the radar device on the cell phone, it automatically connected. I didn’t do enable GPS tracking, but it brought up a first-floor office in the Vladivostok Museum of Military History.”

“Where?” Barbara jumped up as if she’d been electrocuted.

“Vladivostok,” Teo repeated.

“Vladivostok as in Russia?” Barbara asked again.

“No, the one close to your neighborhood in Ano Petralona,” Teo replied ironically.

“There’s Vladivostok in Ano Petralona?”

“Yes, a liquor store called Vladivostok that specializes in vodkas,” Catherine trolled.

“Really? We should go to—”

“Barbara, enough!” John interrupted her. “There isn’t the time for joking.”

“I’m not talking again. I’ll just sit here and talk to Milo. Isn’t that right, boy?”

An incredibly deafening noise tore through the silence of the room. 15 seconds after that, Barbara can’t see anything around her. She clutches Milo tightly to her. Around her, it’s as if a hurricane is passing. It’s dark. The lights have gone out. Objects are hitting her in the face and all over her body. The noise is accompanied by a sucking sound. It’s as if something has sucked all the air from the room. Barbara tries to breathe and understand what exactly has happened. She looks around as far as her eyes allow her to open, the flying debris hitting her furiously from all directions. She can’t see anything, not her friends, not even the very room she’s in. She starts screaming her friends’ names. She knows she is screaming because her body is vibrating from her own voice like a speaker vibrates from the sound it reproduces. And yet. The hissing sound that has flooded her ears is louder than her voice.

Slowly the air returns, and Barbara breathes as deeply as she can. It’s really strange how we only become aware of all the things we consider normal, like the air we breathe, they cease to exist.

Slowly her field of vision widens as the dust settles. Screams are heard from everywhere, and alarms ring rabidly, but Barbara hears nothing. Milo is huddled in her arms, trying to hide from the disaster as well.

Now Barbara sees that she is alone in the room where she was sitting with her friends a moment ago. All that is there is her Milo in her arms and the couch where she is sitting. Her friends are nowhere, there is no furniture and no partitions. She can see that the five adjoining rooms have been leveled. Women naked in blood run through the rubble, not knowing exactly where they are going. Two men who look dead are lying on the floor of the next room between the rubble.

Suddenly someone lifts her into the air, along with Milo. It is one of the two sumo wrestlers. The huge Chinese man kicks and throws everything in his path. Doors, frames, half-hanging walls. He descends the stairs with Barbara in his arms and Milo in hers. They go out into the street. From there, Barbara can see the extent of the damage. The floor where their rooms were in has been completely destroyed. Fire is coming from everywhere. A fire truck turns the corner at speed and stops in front of the half-ruined hotel.

A wolfdog with a muzzle, which had been pissing on the wheel of a car for so long, is startled by the sirens and runs away.

The next thing Barbara saw were the faces of her friends. Now all five of them are crammed into the enclosed back of the tricycle, which starts off at speed.

The Chinese man drives like a madman among the people who have gathered and stare at the fire, the debris falling from above and the fire trucks coming one after another.

Barbara is relieved to see that her friends are okay. Everyone's clothes are torn and burned, and they all have the same expression of surprise and horror painted on their faces.

She talks to them, but they don't listen. And she still can't hear her own voice. And the others are talking and asking each other, full of concern, if they are okay and if they are hurt. But they can't communicate.

Suddenly the five friends and Milo are on the floor, those who can fit on the small floor of the tricycle's cart. The rest are lying on top of their friends. First, there was the sound of a crash, which the currently deaf friends did not notice. But they felt the tricycle swerve off course due to the collision. For a few seconds, the small and heavily laden tricycle took a sharp right turn. This is repeated several times and shows the driver's struggle, turning the steering wheel sharply to the right and left to avoid being hit.

Stepping on the others, John manages to stand up and leans on the inside of the carriage. He looks over the door to the rear as he struggles to stay upright inside the tricycle, which moves like a boat in a storm.

"They're chasing us," John screams to his friends.

"Who's singing to us?" Catherine shouts because she can't hear, like everyone else.

"A black car with four guys in it," says John, now rolling his eyes. "They have guns, they're going to shoot us. Take cover!" he shouts and lies down protectively on top of his friends.

Sparks of bullets that gouge the carriage fly in all directions making the darkness of the carriage bright. The tricycle accelerates in a mad dash. It hits corners, rides curbs. The five friends bang like ice cubes in a shaker. Everyone screams, and Milo cries in fear. The sound of gunfire and the tricycle's minor collisions with trash cans and bushes is deafening, but the group can't listen to them.

Also, if the group was listening, they could distinguish the metallic sound of the grenade rolling across the asphalt. It was released through the passenger window of the tricycle. It hit the asphalt, bounced, hit the sides of the carriage, and then ended up back on the asphalt, rolling behind the tricycle drifting from the inertia of speed. Since a grenade has no motor and wheels, it couldn't avoid getting away from the tricycle, whose throttle had become one with the floor under the pressure of the big driver's size 47 shoe.

In 7 seconds, the grenade does exactly what it was built to do. It exploded into several small pieces. And because the car following the tricycle was passing over it when it exploded, the fragments punctured the car's floor, filling the bodies of the

occupants with hot metal. As a result of the driver's anguish and pain, the large black car with tinted windows ended up against an adjacent wall. The head-on collision of the car with the wall left the car completely destroyed.

In these cases, the wall always wins. The four occupants became almost one, as the collision was violent. The fire that immediately caught, along with the ammunition in the trunk, is a guarantee of an agonizing death until the explosion. Explosions are always hasty. They leave you no room to even worry about your situation and your impending death. They don't even give you room to feel pain, even though the shrapnel and decompressed gases dissolve flesh, clothing, and tissue. But that's the way the explosion is, always in a hurry, always, as if someone is after it.

While fire, it flares up in front of you. It scorches you and then begins to lick you slowly and torturously. And the more it sees the terror in your eyes, the more it becomes aroused and fiery.

After half an hour of rallying through the narrow streets of Wuhan, the tricycle comes to an abrupt halt. The carriage door opens, and the two huge Chinese men appear, smiling. They help the shocked passengers out and lead them to a small door which is located in a small alley.

The Chinese lead the way, and the group goes through the door, entering a large restaurant kitchen. The staff is feverishly preparing dishes, and no one pays attention to the two huge Chinese and the foreigners with tattered clothes and smoked faces.

They exit the kitchen, and now they walk down a long dimly-lit corridor with many identical doors on each side.

One of the two Chinese opens a door and motions for the group to come in.

Now they are in a room, also dimly-lit, with a low table and beds around it. The group sits on the beds as the door behind them closes. They immediately fall into each other's arms, grateful to be alive.

John taps his fingers near his ears to see if his hearing has returned.

"Can you hear me?" he shouts to the others, not sure if they can hear him.

"A little," Barbara replies.

"Very deep, in the background," Peggy tells him.

"Are you all right?" Catherine shouts. "Does anyone need a doctor or go to the hospital?"

Everyone shakes their heads.

"Can anyone understand what happened?" Peggy asks.

"An explosion. And a big one at that," replies Teo.

"From what?" Peggy asks again.

"It could have been anything, but I'm sure it was for us."

"Well, Teo. Even Milo knew it was for us. Otherwise, why were they chasing us and shooting us after the explosion?"

"And the question is, who was chasing us and why?" Catherine continued Peggy's reasoning.

"Well, it doesn't take much imagination," John says. "Your story is obviously heading in the right direction, darling."

"That is, if you live to complete it," Peggy added.

"It's obvious that some people are annoyed," Catherine said slowly.

"Annoyed? Very elegantly put, Catherine," Teo told her. "We left behind us a whole city block destroyed, a wrecked car, and maybe four dead. You don't call it a mere disturbance."

"Not to mention how many bullets they fired at us before they hit the wall."

"Who were they?" Barbara asked. "And why were they chasing us?"



“The Chinese reception committee. And they were after us to give us the key to the city we were going to and stick our noses into their business,” John answered her, pulling a lump of coal out of his hair, which turned out to be just a charred lock of his own hair.

“We’ve lost all our things, too,” complained Peggy.

John sat up in disgust. “Teo? What about that machine of indeterminate origin and function we got from the Research Center?”

Teo put his hand through the charred clothes and placed it on the table. “I wasn’t born yesterday.”

“Well, hide it now because the door is unlocked, and we don’t know who can get in,” Peggy advised.

Teo took the strange machine and hid it under the bed pillow.

“Well, when the explosion happened, I was in the room. What happened to you?” Barbara asked.

“I was caught between some unwashed sheets, and immediately the mountain plunged me and took me up on the tricycle,” said John.

“I found myself in another room. I don’t know whether it was higher or lower than the one we were sitting in. And I was also tackled by the Chinese, and before I knew what was going on, I was in the back of the tricycle,” Teo said.

“I was on top of a naked, sweaty Chinese man, who I don’t know if he was injured or just scared, but he was screaming like a pig in my ear. I don’t know if the hiss I can still hear was from his screams or the explosion. Luckily, I was also taken by the mountain,” as John called it before I could vomit from my disgust. I need a bath badly, though,” Peggy said.

“We all need a bath and a fresh pair of clothes. And me more than anyone, considering that a huge Chinamen had his hands all over me when he grabbed me by the elevator and pulled me out. So who are these guys?” Catherine asked.

“I don’t know,” said John. “As he carried me to the tricycle, I asked him if he knew English, but he shook his head. So we won’t be able to communicate with them unless someone else shows up.”

“Or unless they plan to take us out, so the point is moot,” Teo said, worried.

“Why would they take us out? They helped us,” Barbara defended them.

“Why, Barbara, did you already know them?” Teo countered. “They could be agents of the Chinese government or anything else you can imagine.”

“Do you see the adventure our friend Catherine has put us on? It’s world-class like we’re in a secret agent movie,” said Peggy.

“We’d better keep an eye on them. Teo’s right. These guys aren’t our friends, and only God knows what they might be.”

“When you say keep an eye? What do you mean? John asked and answered the question himself. “And if they want to hurt us, how can we stop them?”

“We can’t,” Teo said. “They weigh 200 kilos each. They can squash us like ants if they want to.”

“Man up, already!” Barbara said with disdain.

“Well, we’re certainly not Zambides, nor one of the protagonists in your novels, who beat everyone up.”

At that moment, the door opened and in walked one of the two burly Chinese men. He is deadly serious, and in his hand, he carries a large satchel bag, but compared to his huge hand, it is like a woman’s purse. He rests it on the floor, smiles broadly for exactly one second, and gets serious once again. He takes two steps and opens the other door

to the room, and leaves it open. He turns and walks away without a word and closes the door behind him.

Barbara gets up and goes to the open door. She takes a step and exclaims with joy. "There's a bath here!"

"And clothes for everyone," adds John, who has already opened and is rummaging through the bathing bag.

"Me first, me first, including Milo. Let's go, Milo."

"You guys, when the door opened, didn't you get a funny smell?" Catherine asked as Barbara and Milo disappeared behind the bathroom door.

"Probably weed," said Teo.

"Maybe opium," added John. "This is China, not Greek Manolada."

They all burst out laughing together. That laughter did them good because they escaped a little from the shock of the explosion and the gunfire.

"We're probably in the back rooms of some opium house," Catherine added.

"The truth is that the choice is a very good one if you want to hide someone."

"However, we have to see what we do from now on," Catherine spoke again. "Where did you say we should go?"

"To Vladivostok, my brothers and sisters, to Vladivostok," Teo exclaimed with a laugh.

"Yes," Catherine replied thoughtfully. "And how do we get there?"

"That's the question!" Peggy said. "Don't forget that here, the countries are vast and the distances vast. Vladivostok must be thousands of miles from Wuhan.

"I think we have no choice but to trust the two Chinese. Besides, we don't know anyone else here."

"And after what happened, Jay won't show up again," Catherine said.

"Fine. I'll try to communicate with them when they come. That is, if they come and don't send anyone else."

At that moment, Barbara came out of the bathroom, wrapped in a towel, with Milo behind her.

"I forgot to get clothes," she said as she headed for the bag.

"I'm shocked! That's so unlike you," Peggy said wryly.

At that moment, Milo shakes the bathroom water off and gets everyone wet.

"Wow, Barbara, didn't you dry the dog?" Catherine asked.

"I've never dried Milo in all the years I've had him."

"Hey, come off it, that's not Milo," Catherine said.

"Ha! As if I don't recognize my own dog. As for the water, nothing happened to you. It's just water. Besides, the clothes you're wearing are disposable. Oh! Come on, what the fuck is this?" Barbara said in frustration, seeing the clothes in the bag.

"What's wrong now?" Teo asked her.

"What's wrong? Can't you see? The same clothes for everyone. Denim pants, white short sleeves and straight shoes."

"And what's wrong with that?" Teo asked her again.

"We'll all be dressed identically, as if we'd escaped from the institution. And I thought Mao was dead," she concluded with an expression of disappointment.

"He *is* dead," Catherine added.

"Yes, but his aesthetic is alive and kicking," Barbara threw in and walked back towards the bathroom with clothes in hand to get dressed.

"Mao's aesthetic? The jeans?" John mused out aloud.

"Barbara has her own perspective on everything," Teo said, laughing.

"A bit of a twisted point of view," added Peggy.

“Which is read by thousands of her readers,” said Catherine. “And to think that I was writing her papers in literature, and she became a writer.”

“As they say, if you want something badly enough, the whole universe will conspire with you to make it happen,” said Peggy.

“Ready! ‘How do I look?’” asked Barbara, coming out of the bathroom dressed.

“Like James Dean with long hair,” said Peggy laughing.

Barbara opened the door of the room to everyone’s surprise. Peggy stood up agitatedly and asked her.

“Barbara, where are you going?”

“Out for a walk to get some air.”

“Do you realize this is not a vacation?” Peggy asked her sternly again. “People with guns were chasing us just now.”

“Quite the opposite, I’d say,” Teo added mockingly.

“And only if we’re on holiday are we allowed to go out? Okay, we’re not on vacation, we’re here on business. But do you see us doing any particular work now? Besides, Milo has to do his business.”

“Barbara, honey, they might not let you go out,” Catherine tried to coax her.

“Who won’t let me go out?”

“You know it, Catherine, whatever you say, it’s not getting through to her,” John said. “Barbara will do what she wants in the end. Go on, Barbara, take Milo out, don’t be late. And take care.”

Two hours later, all the friends have bathed, but Barbara hasn’t returned. They’re all restless, but they don’t know if they should go out. Will they let them go out, and if they will, how can we find their friend? Suddenly the door opens, and Barbara appears with Milo in her arms. She looks very happy.

“You’ve cut us off again, you know that, don’t you?” Peggy says.

Barbara, without answering her, sits down on the sofa and looks at them with a vacant smile.

“Barbara, are you all right?” Catherine asks her anxiously.

“I’m great. Or, to be more precise, I’m having the time of my life.”

At that moment, Milo leaves Barbara’s arms, and in a strange and slightly paralyzed way, the dog collapses wide open on the floor.

“What’s wrong with the dog?” Teo asks.

“Nothing, he’ll get over it.”

The group looks at her suspiciously.

“Where have you been?” John asks, concerned.

“It’s a long story.”

“We don’t have anything better to do. Can you tell us the story, and in detail...? So we know what you’ve done and be on our guard,” Peggy continued.

“You are far more worried than you should be, which is why you all look older than me even though we are the same age.”

“What else are we going to hear, dear God?” exclaimed Catherine in dismay.

“For your information, everything is settled. I have arranged everything for you.”

“What did you arrange?” Teo asked, genuinely concerned. “Who did you talk to? They’re going to lock us up. Damn it! We’re not getting away with it”.

“I’ll tell you everything, but you mustn’t interrupt me. I’m tired of being scolded like a little kid when I’m always the one who gets you out of trouble.”

“Hey, no, and you’re putting us out of our misery, Barbara, a little self-awareness won’t hurt,” said Peggy, exasperated.

“There you go interrupting me again.”

“Come on, guys, let her talk already,” Teo said. “Come on, Barbara, tell us.”

“I went for a walk with Milo.”

“Did anyone see you go out?” John asked.

“There you go, interrupting me again. I’ll stop talking.”

“I didn’t interrupt you. I asked for clarifications.”

“Okay! The two Chinese sitting at the exit door spotted me. They must be goons or something, you know?”

“Yeas? I’d never imagine that,” Teo replied.

“I saw them and thanked them for saving us from the explosion and getting us away. And I even told them that whenever they came to Greece, I would give them the keys to my father’s house in Aegina, and they could stay as long as they wanted. Didn’t I do right, guys?”

“You did, but in what language did you tell them all this?”

“In Greek since these guys don’t understand English.”

John’s about to let her have it, but Catherine signals for him to let it go and let her finish or, even worse, they’ll never figure out what’s happened.

Meanwhile, Milo has gone to the closed balcony door and is banging his snout on the glass repeatedly, trying to get out onto the balcony through the closed door.

“Anyway, that’s not the point,” continued Barbara. “I took Milo out for his potty and walked around the area a bit. What the hell, I thought, work is good, but since I’ve never been to Wuhan before, why not check out the town?”

Anyway, I wasn’t too late, a half hour or so, and I was back. I went back inside, had a few jokes with the Chinese...

Teo is banging his forehead hard out of desperation.

“What happened to you?” Barbara turns around and asks him sternly.

“Nothing,” he replies. “A fly, I chased it away.”

“So after the small talk, I walked down the corridor, but I opened the wrong door. Did you guys know that this is a tequila house, and behind all these doors, they serve hookahs with opium?”

“No shit!” exclaimed Catherine.

“So, I open a door, and I see a room like this one, but even darker. There was a large hookah on the table, and around it, five or six men sharing it. Around the beds hung large silk cloths. The smoke was very thick. The men were sweating, and their eyes were vacant, staring off into space.”

“Come on, Barbara, you’re not writing a novel. So drop the detailed descriptions and cut to the chase,” Catherine said impatiently. Barbara gave her a murderous look and continued her narrative unabated.

“One of them looked as if he were the leader of the group. He wore a white shirt, open down to his belly, which was large from the beer. On the white hairs of his chest hung a golden double ax. There was a ring in his hand, a golden ram’s head with two red sapphires for eyes. And, of course, a solid gold Rolex. As soon as I entered, his eyes immediately fell on Milo, who, startled, jumped into my arms.

The Chinese said, “The only dog allowed in here is a cooked dog.”

Then the blond angel sitting across from him took a strong drag from the hookah and said, blowing out thick smoke like a steel mill chimney out of his mouth.

“And who are you, man, who thinks you can decide who gets in and who gets out?”

“I,” the other man replied, “am the chief of police of Wuhan,” and took the token from his hands.

He drew such a deep breath that the hookah almost went out. As if someone had taken all the oxygen out of him. I've only seen the dummy the guy left in old movies of steam locomotives going uphill.

"And he," he continued, no longer visible through the smoke, "is the attorney general or prosecutor of Wuhan." And in confirmation of what he said, he passed the hookah pipe to the man next to him, a thin Chinese man with a very large nose and a very expensive suit.

"But you didn't tell us who you are?" the chief asked, as he downed a single-handed baijiu cup.

Teo turned to Catherine in despair and gave her the gesture depicting a throat being cut. Catherine desperately chuckled and continued to listen to Barbara's story.

"Theodore Smolensky. Decorated pilot of the Russian Air Force," he said proudly.

Now Milo is on the mat. In fact, he's become one with the carpet. His legs are wide open, and his belly rises and falls, showing that he is breathing with difficulty.

"Are you sure the dog is okay?" Teo asks her.

"He's fine. He'll be fine. Barbara says unperturbed and continues her story.

Meanwhile, I sat down next to the empty seat between the pilot and the one sitting next to the prosecutor. As soon as I was handed the pipe, I took a good pull and blew what I got out into Milo's mouth.

"Barbara! For God's sake," John said and got up from his seat. "What have you got us into?"

"Nothing, and if you had any patience, which you don't, you'd understand that I didn't get us into trouble. On the contrary, I got us out of it. I'm surprised at your impatience, not when you have the patience and dedication to conduct experiments. A job that is essentially for autistics, since you have to do the same thing over and over again until it works for you.

"I quit," John said. "Do whatever you like with her. That crazy chick is dangerous. We all sit quietly for fear of being discovered, and she tells off the chief of police in Wuhan."

"And to the prosecutor, don't forget the prosecutor," Peggy added.

"I didn't bully anybody. First of all, it's not in my nature to do so, and secondly, I just opened the wrong door."

"And you ran into the authorities of Wuhan," Catherine added. "Was the mayor there by any chance?"

"He was," said Barbara, and they all stood frozen.

John, without asking Barbara, opened her bag, took out her pack of cigarettes and lighter and lit a cigarette. By the way, he takes and lights one for Barbara."

"But you had quit," Teo says to him in surprise.

"You asshole, we're all going to die, don't you realize that? How can one cigarette harm me if I'm already a dead man walking?"

"Writers are supposed to be melodramatic, not scientists," Barbara replied unperturbed. "Did you see that clichés don't apply?"

"Come on, Barbara, tell us already!"

"The Russian and the Chinese now look each other straight in the eye. The Russian smiles and I want to scream that I love him. This fearless Russian pilot with the blond hair, blue eyes like the northern frozen ocean, I want him. I want him like hell. I've never seen a more beautiful man. They look at each other, and I'm lost in the blue of Theodore's eyes, even though he's not looking at me. I keep holding the pipe and smoking."

“If you want to run this place, you have to deal with the consequences of leadership,” the Chinese said.

“I’m trained to fly over enemy lines and run the show until I get shot down. When that happens—which it hasn’t happened yet—I’m trained to deal with the consequences as well.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” replied the Chinese, “because we’re going to play a game. Unless you want to back out.”

“I’ve always liked games, but I have one condition,” the Russian told him, looking at him so intensely that you’d think blue liquid would pour out of the back of the Chinese man’s head.

“I don’t need to listen. I accept.”

“But you don’t know what my condition is, how can you accept before you hear it?”

“You don’t know what game we’re going to play either, but you’ve already accepted. I may have absolute power in this city, but I am always fair to bold opponents. Name your term.”

Then the blond angel struts his body, looks me deep in the eyes and says, “Where do you want me to take you, baby doll?”

“He told you that in fluent Russian, I presume,” Peggy asks.

“Of course,” replies Barbara naturally. “Otherwise, what kind of Russian pilot would he be? And I answer him confidently. In Vladivostok.”

Then he turns and says to the Chinese. “I want a plane full of fuel and permission to fly to Vladivostok.”

The Chinese man smiles sardonically and says, “Is that all?” and fumbles with his phone. He barks something in Chinese and then hangs up and informs Theodore that “The plane is ready. You can take whoever you want with you and fly to Vladivostok if you win.”

“And what if I lose?” Theodore asked.

“Both you and she,” said the Chinese. “Will be buried in lime and die, while the dog will be my dinner.”

“I must have had three orgasms before the Chinese pulled the string.”

“What string? You’re driving us crazy tonight, sister?” Peggy explodes. “You’re stoned, and you don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I am stoned, but that’s nothing compared to how much in love I am. The string is a rope of silk with a red tassel at the end. You pull it, and the store people come over to refill your hookah or bring you some sherbet for hypoglycemia.”

“Sherbet in Wuhan? That’s new!” Catherine murmurs to herself.

“Seconds later, one of our two Chinese appears. The police chief looks at him and holds out his hand. He automatically pulls out from inside his jacket a huge Magnum, like Inspector Callahan’s.”

“Gun?” John asks desperately and lights up another cigarette.

“No! Ice cream?” Barbara answers him nonchalantly. “So our Chinese man takes it out and hands it to him. The cop then lights a cigarette, and as he is with the cigarette in his mouth, he opens the barrel and lets all the bullets fall with a metallic clang on the table and the floor.”

“He turns to Theodore and says, ‘Since you’re a Russian, I’m sure you’d like to play games from your homeland.’ He forcefully closes the barrel, brings the gun to his temple, and without hesitating for a split second, pulls the trigger. The dry click of the cock hitting the firing pin took over the room as everyone held their breath. After the click, the Chinese let out the smoke from the puff he had taken. It was so long, because

he knew it might be his last, that I couldn't even see Milo, who was also taking a drag of the cigarette smoke, hoping it was from the hookah."

"Then I too gave the pipe to Theodore, out of respect for the dying man. He looks into my eyes so deeply that I think my brain is frozen. The chill of his icy stare was such that Milo left my hands and crashed to the floor. Taking a deep breath, he took the gun from the table, brought the barrel to his temple and said to the Chinese with a smile: "Russian roulette! That certainly brings fond memories. We used to play it at recess in elementary school in Krasnoyarsk. I was the only one who lived to graduate" and immediately pulled the trigger."

"And all that stuff the Chinese guy was saying, how did you get it? You know Chinese?" Peggy asked.

"We've been in China for a few days. I've started to pick up some words."

"You're onto something? We're in China, not Spain," Peggy continued, completely furious. "And what about the ones you didn't understand?"

"Theodore explained the rest to me."

"In English, I suppose," Teo asked calmly.

"No. In Russian. Theodore doesn't speak any English."

"And do you know Russian?" Peggy asked, now mentally exhausted.

"Shut up, Peggy. Haven't you been listening to me all this time? I'm explaining to you that Theodore is the love of my life. Is it possible that I don't understand my man?"

"I give up too," said Peggy, and she too lit a cigarette from Barbara's packet.

"But you have never smoked," Catherine observed in surprise.

"I'm starting today," said Peggy, choking on a cough.

"So the Russian is dead?" Teo interrupted.

"Of course not," Barbara picked up from where she had stopped. "I heard the click that kept my love alive, and it was like going to heaven. Then the Chinese, irritated, took the gun and put it under his neck, pulled the trigger, and his brains instantly became a bright red wallpaper on the ceiling, though not so good because some of it came off and dripped on the table".

"Died? Teo asked.

"Of course he did! What did you expect?" Barbara answered him unperturbed.

"Okay, a man dies like that before your eyes, and in such a barbaric way, and you say it like that, as if nothing was wrong?"

"Not even his company wasn't distressed, why should I? Besides, I was so happy Theodore won, that even if everyone in the room was dead, I wouldn't care."

"And then what happened?" Catherine asked.

"What do you think happened? The two Sumo wrestlers came in, took the body and the gun, and we went on with our hookah. Tomorrow night we all fly to Vladivostok, with my blonde god as the pilot. But right now, I need to get some sleep. My eyes feel heavy."

"And a little stoned, John added snidely.

"What do you want? Everything in this life is a mixture of experience," said Barbara, lying down on her bed, taking off her shoes. "Goodnight, guys," she mumbled, and she was asleep in a matter of seconds.

Any discussion, questions or even joke stopped as soon as the right engine propeller started. The noise was such that the group thought they would never hear anything else and that the old engine's hum would ring in their ears for the rest of their lives. And shortly after—maybe less than a minute— while they were getting used to the noise of the engine – if you can get used to the sound of an entire beehive flying through the labyrinth of your ear, intending to build a new nest behind your earlobe – the second engine kicked in.

The noise was simply inhuman now. One might call it abominable because such was its effect on the auditory system of the passengers.

The plane –if you can call it that– was a bunch of scrap metal with two propellers on what looked like wings.

No one in the group has any particular knowledge of airplanes or aviation in general, but everyone is sure that this rusty thing shaped like an airplane possibly took part in World War I. Metal creaks and bangs, leaving brown dust from the rust that rubs and falls off, covering everything and everyone. The smell of kerosene has started to affect the passengers who look at each other in despair. They make the sign of the cross at every bang and silently pray to be spared. They could always pray out loud, it's not as if anyone would hear them. No one could hear each other speaking anymore, let alone themselves.

The group sits facing each other. Two on one side and two on the other. When they entered the plane, they all went to sit on one side, but Theodore ordered them to sit that way so that the plane would not lose its balance. No one understood what Theodore was saying to them in Russian, but they obeyed the pilot's orders and got away with it. So, Peggy and Catherine sit on one side and John and Teo on the other. They stare into each other's eyes in terror. They're not talking since they can't be heard, just trying to keep their jaws steady, clenching their teeth to compensate for the shaking of the old aircraft, which seems capable of ripping your guts out. All four friends are strapped down with some old, stinky straps, which don't offer much in the way of safety, but there is nothing better available than that.

Either way, “If the damn thing falls, it'll take us down with it,” as John had said when they first saw the old aircraft parked in the corner of the old Wuhan airport. All over the airport, there were only old and even wrecked planes of all types. Small private ones. Boeing's that once flew proudly through the skies now stood gutted from having been looted for their parts. Old warplanes from all countries. American, Russian, even really old biplanes. Who could tell how long and why they were there?

The tricycle was parked outside the plane with the two Chinese men who had brought the group to the abandoned airfield today to meet Theodore, who was taking them to Vladivostok. No one knew exactly what they'd find there, but they had to go since that was the only clue they had about the pandemic.

Theodore sits in the cockpit and Barbara in the co-pilot's seat. The Russian pilot checks the aircraft's switches and all the vital flight indicators and seems pleased. Of course, there are suspicions that his broad smile is not so much due to the condition of the aircraft –which inspires absolutely no confidence— but to the joint he finished minutes ago and put out on the iron instrument panel of the old twin-engine aircraft, leaving the combustion, ashes and finally the cigarette butt itself to fall on the dirty cockpit floor.

Theodore released the brakes, and the old plane shook convulsively as if it was about to be torn apart. The four friends seated in the back and strapped into the old harnesses closed their eyes in terror, begging every god known to man for mercy and forgiveness. The plane moves slowly, creaking and thumping towards the runway. The two Chinese



have dismounted from the tricycle and are excitedly waving at the piece of junk, which has begun to move amid deafening noise, enveloped in the black smoke from its two ancient engines. And as it slowly rolls along, various liquids drip behind it, and no one really knows whether they are engine oil, kerosene or oil from its hydraulic systems.

Theodore drove the old plane to the edge of the runway, aligned it with him, put on the brakes, and gave full throttle to both engines. The plane was hidden in a thick cloud of black smoke, and the shudder was such that John thought it would blow the fillings out of his teeth.

The four friends have their eyes closed, their teeth clenched, and are holding on tightly the hand of the person next to them, expecting the worst. Theodore and Barbara seem unaffected by the whole situation –along with, of course, the two Chinese who have no reason to worry since they are not on the plane.

Suddenly Theodore releases the brakes, and that old piece of junk is propelled forward with incredible momentum and speed. Barbara claps enthusiastically, and the four friends sitting in the back think they're about to meet their maker. But despite all of their prognoses, the plane leaves the ground hesitantly and stands up with its nose aimed at the night sky of China.

Dawn finds the five friends flying over the Russian Steppes with vast expanses of huge trees and very few buildings. Theodore flies just above the treetops to avoid being picked up by a radar. He may have gotten permission to fly from the late police chief of Wuhan, but the five friends he has with them have lost their papers in the big hotel explosion. Since they are all undocumented, Theodore won't land at Vladivostok airport when they arrive, but in a field on the outskirts where a friend of his will have a car waiting to take them into town.

Despite its age and shabby condition, the old plane continues to fly for hours over the trees of the Russian Steppes.

Catherine looks either outside at the scenery or her friends sitting with her in the back of the plane. She loves these people very much. Firstly because she has known them since kindergarten. That's the way it is with all people who have known each other since they were little. They have absolute trust in each other, even if they haven't seen each other for decades. And it makes sense because when people are children, they act spontaneously, showing their true character without fear and with a lot of passion. Reaching adulthood, we all understand that we have to have an agenda if we want to achieve our goals. Every person has many different facets for home, work, friends, his neighbors etc. But when some people know each other from their tender childhood, they know each other's true personality before it is "hidden" behind the diplomacy used for everyday life.

But beyond the infinite years of knowing them, Catherine knows that these people will be there for her, more than anyone else, whenever she needs them.

Case in point, their invaluable help to the Wuhan mission. Her friends find themselves undocumented, halfway around the world, on an old plane trying to enter Russia from China illegally. These countries are not known for their democratic, conciliatory, and reasonable security authorities. Not to mention the hotel explosion that tried to off them, the tricycle chase and the bullets aiming at them in the carriage.

*Who else would take such a risk?* Catherine thought, looking fondly at her friends and the landscape of the inhospitable Steppes.

It would be an ideal opportunity to discuss their plan of action, but the noise from the old Yakovlev is so great that it doesn't even let you hear your own thoughts.

Now and then, the four friends look at each other and smile wearily or make faces to pass the time. Beneath them, the Steppes lie vast and unforgiving for anyone who

falls into their arms. They will probably die from the cold, or a bear or Russian intelligence agents if the damn thing breaks down and makes an emergency landing in one of the many forbidden places the Russians have built for their nuclear, space, new weapons programs, and God knows what else.

Despite the aircraft's dramatic noise and constant rumbling, it seems unmolested, and that's comforting. *A sturdy piece of shit*, as Theodore would say if they could talk.

Catherine thinks about all that has happened in the last few days. The conclusion she has come to is that someone is helping them. She doesn't know who and exactly how, but she's sure of that. She's done a lot of reporting, she's an experienced journalist, and she's never had the evidence fall so "easily" into her lap before.

And the proof that someone is helping and protecting them is the two Chinese sumo wrestlers who surveilled outside her hotel for the days and picked them up after the explosion, taking them away to safety. They never asked for any kind of reward or compensation for their services. And she is sure that even if they could have communicated and asked them who sent them, they would not have answered. They may not even know themselves. Usually, these high-risk and high-profile jobs are carried out in complete anonymity to protect the initiator of the project.

In the case of the five friends from Greece, the story they're after is not only dangerous but a hot topic for all the secret services in the world, pharmaceutical companies, the leaders of the biggest countries and many powerful people. That's why research is very dangerous, and that's evident from everything the group has faced so far.

And what does the museum in Vladivostok hide? What is it, and how it's connected to the pandemic? Catherine is already very happy, as she knows she has completed half of the story she has been assigned. She not only knows patient zero, but she has him on video, too. That poor electrician who contracted Covid-19 without his knowledge. If she can find out who ordered the virus to be created, which is probably the same person who ordered the electrician to go to lab 54...

"I have the Pulitzer prize in the bag," she said out loud, not the least bit worried someone would overhear her. Not even she could hear what she said, let alone the people next to her.

She looked at John and Teo sitting across from her and Peggy. Their bodies are shaking from the plane's engines that, in addition to the propellers, have been trying for hours to rearrange their inside organs. Yet, they smile and wink at her. They make faces at her, the same ones they made in school when they were in class, and each facial expression tells a story only the group would understand.

Catherine wakes up to find her head on her friend Peggy's shoulder. She wipes her drool and sits up sleepily. The commotion isn't so great anymore.

"We must have been getting closer, Teo shouts from the opposite row of seats. "He cut the engines."

"That's why we can hear each other," John added with a smile.

"How was your trip, boys?" Peggy asked, laughing.

"Very good!" replied Teo, chuckling. "But it was probably better for the fierce journalist of the group."

"Could you have slept any harder?" Peggy asked her laughing.

"Sorry, guys," Catherine said. "I didn't even realize I fell asleep."

"That's okay. It's better that you slept," Teo shouted at her. "Considering what we've been through these past few days. I guess we're all going to need a lot of energy. Who knows what we'll get into again once we've landed?"

“I want to thank you for all you do for me and to say that I very much appreciate that you were willing to get into so much trouble on my behalf.”

“Oh, shush! What trouble are you talking about?” Peggy asked, stroking her hair affectionately. “We’re just flying undocumented to a foreign country in an ancient plane that we have no idea who it belongs to or if it’s stolen. Where’s the danger in that? I think you’re overreacting.”

“Not to mention that I can put on my resume that I worked in Wuhan, in the lab where the virus was produced,” John said with a chuckle. “Okay, it was a few days, but I can put down that I worked for a few months. Besides, who’s going to call to cross-check?”

“And if he does call, what language will he communicate in? Unless he runs into the Chinese guy who’s obsessed with Halkidiki and happens to speak Greek fluently,” Teo said.

“People in Thessaloniki are right to say, ‘There’s no place like Halkidiki.’ Even the Chinese are smitten with it,” said Catherine.

“Jokes aside, have you thought how we’ll get back to Greece without papers?” Teo asked.

Catherine frowned. “I don’t know yet. I think we should go to the museum in Vladivostok first, see what we find, and from there we decide what to do.”

“Well, if this ends and we have to leave, we’ll go to the Greek consulate and get our papers,” Peggy said.

“Is there a Greek consulate in Vladivostok?” Teo asked.

“Do you hear yourself talking?” John asked wryly. “Dude, we’re talking Vladivostok. It’s thousands of miles away from Moscow, at the end of Siberia and across the river is Japan. We’re not just in another country. We’re in another world.”

“Then we have to rely on Theodore,” Teo said sadly.

Catherine huffed. “Unfortunately, right now, we have to let Barbara take over. She has connections with the Russian guy—”

“Who is the only Russian of the group,” Peggy interrupted her.

“And she’s the only one who can get along with him,” John observed.

“No shit!” Catherine said.

“We have to keep an eye on that Russian because we don’t know whether we’ll go to the museum in Vladivostok or we’ll end up in some gulag for the rest of our lives. Our friends and family people in Greece will never be able to find out what happened to us then,” Teo said.

“Do you agree that it’s not good that in such a dangerous situation, we put Barbara in charge?” Peggy asked.

“Yes, but we have no choice,” said Catherine.

Teo straightened up in his seat. “Guys, I don’t want you to panic, but the engines just shut off.”

The four friends seemed stunned at the realization that the four propellers of the huge Yakovlev had stopped turning. The noise seized, and all they could hear now was the wind tearing the plane apart. They stare in horror.

John leans back a little and glances out the window and confirms what they have already figured out. “None of the propellers is coming back. He turned them off.”

“Or they shut off permanently,” Teo said, terrified.

“Damn it! We’re going to be eaten by the bears,” Peggy said in despair.

The four friends look at each other again, and as if in agreement, they all shout, “Barbara!”

After ten seconds, Barbara appears.

“What happened? Why were the engines cut out?” John asks her immediately.

“Oh, it's nothing. We're just out of fuel.”

“What do you mean, it's nothing, damn it?” Peggy's yelling at her. “If we ran out of gas in a car, it would be nothing. At most, we'd have to walk to the nearest gas station. That's a plane we're talking about. If there's no fuel, we're going down.”

“Did I say that we're going down?” asked Barbara, unperturbed. “It's just that there's no more fuel, but we're very close to where we need to land, so we'll take advantage of our momentum to get there.”

“Are you out of your mind?” Teo burst out. “You're standing there telling us that we're going to make an emergency landing. Do you realize we could crash?”

“Like hell! Theodore was flying fighter planes in Afghanistan. He can land it without fuel, without wheels, without wings.”

“And without hope,” Catherine added bitterly.

“I'm telling you it's going to be all right. In five minutes, we'll be on the ground again.”

The plane continued to fly without anything to indicate that they were falling. Just losing altitude in a controlled way. The group has somehow recovered from the scare, and then Peggy tells Barbara. “You fucked, didn't you?”

“Me? When?” Barbara asks with a small giggle.

“Don't lie to me. I can always tell when you've had sex. You can't hide from me.”

“Are you serious? You fucked in the cockpit?” Catherine hisses.

“Why? Is there a rule against having sex in the cockpit?”

“So while we're worrying about our lives in this flying wreck, you were having sex?” John asks, raising his voice.

“Yes, why? I don't understand. I was scared too, that's why I did it. I thought that if we went down, at least I'd go away happy.”

“Since when are you capable of thinking?” Catherine cut her off. “And who was exactly flying this plane?”

“It was on autopilot, of course.”

“The autopilot was flying the damn thing all the time we've been flying just over the top of the trees?” Teo asked.

“First of all, does this ancient piece of crap have autopilot function?”

“Of course it does,” Barbara said with a huff. “And it has an autopilot and a live pilot with balls.”

“I'm guessing that last conclusion comes from personal experience,” Peggy snapped.

“I'm talking about his piloting skills. The man is a veteran of the Russian Air Force. He isn't some random guy.”

At that moment, a very strong jolt forces Barbara to plop on her butt on the floor of the plane.

The plane has touched its wheels in a field a few kilometers outside Vladivostok.

The five friends sitting in the back are banging around as if they were in a shaker. The four are strapped in, and at least the seatbelts can keep them in their seats. But Barbara is on the floor, and the momentum of the bumpy landing drags her across the floor. Teo grabs her by the blouse when she rolls in front of him and holds her forcefully between his legs.

“Good thing your guy's a veteran,” he yells in her ear, the noise of the engines now replaced by the creaking of the old hull banging around in the puddles of the field.

“What? Barbara shouts but can't hear anything.

Teo makes a face of despair and shakes his head.

Now the Yakovlev has slowed down considerably. It bounces around the potholes, but everything indicates it's about to stop. The five friends are beginning to relax. They smile with relief at each other. They lift their thumbs. Yakovlev halts completely.

The silence is deafening and is broken by Catherine's voice. "That's some veteran you've found, my friend!"

The engines of the old aircraft shut down with the same roar they did when they started up. After a few jolts from the engine's upside-down revs that caused all the passengers to bounce in their seats except for Barbara, who bounced on the floor, a deafening silence spread through the interior of the aircraft.

The group of five broke into applause. Theodore, who had just emerged from the cockpit, nodded his thanks to his fans. Standing, Barbara gave him a quick peck on the cheek, but it soon became a full-on kiss.

After the pilot had gotten over the expressions of admiration on his face, he approached the exit door and opened it with a few decisive movements. He grabbed a glider located next to the door and unfolded it so that it touched the runway.

The group of Greeks stood up and prepared to descend the ladder. Theodore was the first to descend, and he stayed at the bottom of the stairs to help the passengers down. Now Theodore walks in front and behind him the company of four. Barbara has caught up with him, and they walk together.

The airport is not exactly an airport. Maybe it used to be, but not anymore. There are a few abandoned aircraft here and there, but mostly it has old cars. Its last use was probably a dragster track, since most abandoned cars are painted like race cars and have the distinctive characteristic of their back wheels being larger than the front. Also, their ironwork, now rusted, on the tail of the cars shows that when in use, it prevented the front end from lifting, which in racing of this kind has disastrous and often tragic results.

Theodore continued to walk briskly, and the group tried to keep up with the towering Russian pilot.

The sky is heavy with grey clouds, probably the standard decor in this far northern part of the world. In the distance, you can see the city of Vladivostok, not really the city but a black cloud of pollution, which has probably been standing permanently overhead for decades.

Theodore approached a car with a square shape and large glass surfaces that no one had ever seen before. The car is Jeep-shaped, but it's very old, rusty, and full of dried mud.

"I think this will be our limousine," Peggy said wryly.

"It's as rusty as the plane," John added.

"But, truth be told, the plane got us this far," said Teo.

"What make of car is this?" Catherine asked.

"Well, as it turns out, you've brought us on a journey through time," Teo said.

"Yes, a trip to the Soviet Union," John said.

"It's a UAZ," said Barbara confidently and continued to walk ahead of the others, hanging on Theodore's arm.

"How do you know?" Catherine asked.

"I asked Theodore, and he told me. She's a 1972 model."

"So new..." Teo said, laughing.

"And," Barbara continued. "It was used by the Soviet Union army for decades. They never break down and start even when it's minus 40 degrees Celsius, which here in Siberia is very important, as you can understand."

"We are in Siberia, aren't we?" asked Peggy as if she was just now realizing where they were.

“Yes, my friend,” John answered her. “We are in Siberia. We are on the edge of Asia, far away from civilization, international organizations, and everything else that we in Europe consider civilized.”

“I must tell you that I shall be forever indebted to you for coming to the end of the world for my sake.”

“Well, it's not the first time,” Teo replied, 'angrily.'

“Okay, there was that time when you helped with the dismantling of the Feta Mafia.”

“Yeah, and I hid among the pigs to photograph illegal activities with my camera. ‘It's not dangerous,’ you had told me. And the cheese monger had goons with some muscles...”

“Like our guardian angels in Wuhan,” Barbara said.

“Exactly!” Teo said. “As long as they didn't make me a roll of ham, it's a good thing.”

Teo opened the back door of the car remnant of the existing socialism, and the door made exactly the same creaking sound as the Yakovlev's door.

“Apparently, they used the same hinge supplier,” Teo said, laughing, while Catherine made herself comfortable in the back seat.

Theodore started the engine, which spun a few sluggish revs. Then he seemed to regret it and turned off after taking a couple of backflips before halting and shaking his passengers.

Theodore started the engine again, and this time a cheerful cloud of toxic blue smoke marked the successful start of the engine.

The UAZ shook convulsively, along with its passengers.

“It's still cold. That's why the car is shivering,” Barbara shouted from the passenger's seat, trying to be heard over the car's decibels.

“This is our fate. What with the explosions or the 60s transport technology, we'll be deaf by the time this trip ends,” said Teo, sitting between his two friends.

“What did you say?” John screamed from the back seat.

The seat, which isn't exactly a seat, needs further description since we said it's not a seat.

It's like the folding stools the old ladies get in church, except this one is foldable but not portable.

This one, along with its identical neighbor and another identical pair, is bolted opposite each other to the opposite "profile" of the car to fit four more passengers in addition to the five that a car usually holds.

Back there, John is bouncing to the beat of the old cold engine and the geomorphology of the field that was formerly an airport, a dragster track, and God knows what else.

“Never mind,” Teo said, frustrated.

Theodore drives the old jeep efficiently. Planting his foot on the floor, he shifts gears like a maniac, making the bones of the old car creak and the passengers helplessly bang their heads against every pothole.

Ahead lies a great barren plain they call the Steppes. Behind them, everything is covered with the blue smoke the old UAZ generously leaves behind. Theodore turns around, the car tilts but does not tumble. Sounds unbelievable, but it's true, as it immediately pours straight ahead over potholes and ditches in the direction of Vladivostok.

“Does the driver know where we're going?” John screamed from the back seat.

No one seemed to pay any attention to him. Theodore was struggling with the steering wheel, and the others were struggling to hold on to their seats.

John made a face of frustration and decided to just follow his fate and trust this ruffian who had brought him to the Russian Steppes this morning, as if John had no business being in Athens, in his workshop.

*Shit! The lab! How many days have we been gone? I've lost count with all this going on.*

After fifteen minutes of driving on rural roads, the ancient jeep popped through a cloud of dust and blue smoke onto a paved road.

Theodore turned left and accelerated full throttle. No one knows how fast they're going since the car has no dashboard. Not even for gas. Someone, somewhere, at some point ripped them off for their own car or even for fun, who knows? The blue smoke now follows them and enters the passenger cabin through the closed windows.

The group stares, wide-eyed at the road, the trees, the houses passing by at breakneck speed.

Theodore again doesn't seem to pay as much attention to the road or the others, and instead, he's busy rolling his cigarette.

The UAZ is still bouncing around, and everyone realizes that the potholes are not the problem. The engine is making even more noise now, even though it must have warmed up.

Still, everyone remains silent, not that anyone can speak in such a racket. And then, they see a sign that reads *владивосток*.

As you can see, it may be written in Russian, but everyone in the group, like you, understood what it said. Do you think Barbara's right?

The old jeep begins to pull into the outskirts of town, and Theodore doesn't think of slowing down, even for a moment. And why should he do that?

The easternmost port in Eurasia has no idea who is in the old jeep that has filled the city streets with smoke.

Theodore seems comfortable moving around the city. After all, he's from here. He enters alleys to avoid the traffic, which isn't light, gets back out on a highway, passes everyone, and always at full throttle.

The two right wheels of the old Russian car slide in a perfect arc and come to a stop just inches from the curb.

John gets out of the back, further back than the back seat, which is not a seat - but let's not go there again - and goes to open the back door.

Perhaps I should tell you that you can enter and exit the car from the folding seats at the back. Essentially, you're in the cargo area of the car.

But the door handle stays in his hand. So he crawls over the actual back seat since the passengers have rushed out, and he exits through the left rear door.

Everyone is out, and the UAZ continues to vibrate from the upside-down revs its engine is taking, but at some point, it stops.

The group is in a bad way. Everyone is pale and in bad shape. The shaking, combined with the copious amounts of smoke from the exhaust, has brought everyone—except the driver—to the brink of vomiting.

They stand upright around the car, and only Theodore dares to light one, or should I say another, cigarette. Now, he's just rolling one.

Others lean on the car to stay upright, and the rest lean on them for the exact same reason. Their eyes are bright red, and their faces pale.

"A war museum at the edge of the sea?" Teo asked, letting out a cough to break the nausea.

They all lifted their eyes with difficulty and looked at the red bricks of the building with blurred eyes.

“What do we do now?” Catherine asked in a muffled voice.

“I don't know! You're the shrewd reporter, you tell us. I'm just a politician,” said Peggy ironically.

“Yeah, if you have a ribbon to cut, call her,” John.

“Very funny!” Peggy said.

“How are you?” Teo asked.

They all nodded, except Theodore, who doesn't understand Greek.

“I suggest we go to the café across the street. We can have a drink, get a break from the last few hours, and then discuss what we're going to do. At the same time, we can observe the 'point of interest,’” he concluded, looking meaningfully at the building.

“Yeah, let's go sit for a while. I can barely stand up straight,” Peggy agreed.

“Well, if it was a reception with press present, I bet you could stand all day,” John teased her.

“Yeah, you guys, let's go, but do any of you have any money? After the explosion, we lost everything.”

The five friends looked at each other in despair.

“I have nothing,” said Barbara. “I had everything in my bag.”

Theodore put the cigarette in his mouth, spread his arms, 'hugged' the group and led them politely towards the café.

While they were seated, John says to Barbara, “Barbara, can you explain to him in your perfect Russian that we're broke.”

“He knows, don't worry, but he's a gentleman. Otherwise, I wouldn't be marrying him.”

“Marry him?” Peggy jumped up as if she'd been stung by a bee.

“When did this happen? You barely had enough time,” Catherine said in surprise.

“What do you think we've been doing in the cockpit all these hours?”

“I thought you were against marriage,” Catherine said.

“I was. But never against this marriage.”

“What's different about this wedding from the others, Barbara?” asked Teo.

“Take a look at Theodore, and you'll understand,” she told him, tightening her future husband's arm even more.

“Whatever,” Peggy said. “We're somewhat better now, aren't we?” she asked everyone around, and they nodded.

Theodore had already ordered a sumptuous breakfast, at which they all dug in, while discussing the matter at hand.

“The office we're looking for is the third window from the right. Do you see it?” Teo asked his friends. “We'll have to go in and look. It might be easy or not. We don't know.”

“We also don't know if anyone is inside,” John said.

“That's true,” Teo agreed.

“We should create a diversion,” Catherine said.

“Guys, let's not make a big deal of it,” Peggy cut everyone off. “Only the Russian can be our cover since he's the only one who knows both the language and the place.”

“Okay, but our Barbara has become very good at all things Russian,” Teo said wryly.

Barbara looked at him with disdain. “You're jealous of my multicultural complexity.”

“Can you say that again without tripping on your own words?” Catherine joked.

Theodore interrupted the laughter. He stood up, put money under a plate and motioned for the group to follow him.

And they all did.



A mismatched group consisting of a Russian veteran and five Greeks dressed in Chinese clothes was walking along the beach in Vladivostok. It's not what we'd call "made in China" but Chinese fashion straight from Wuhan.

The mismatched group quickly found themselves on the first floor of the museum, outside the office door they wanted.

Theodore approached the door and knocked. They all waited a moment, and since no one answered, Theodore opened the door. They found an empty desk without a computer, but with many stamps on it.

Teo went in first and glanced over the desk. John went to the library and started browsing the books. Theodore stood in the doorway with Barbara, while Peggy and Catherine were also looking for anything in the room that would pique their interest.

"Do we know what we're looking for?" Peggy asked.

"I have no idea," Teo said. "Man, the drawers are unlocked," he added and opened the first drawer of the desk. Guys, stop looking. I found it. I mean, I didn't exactly find it. Someone must have left it for me."

Everyone turned towards him. Teo stood behind the desk holding a black USB stick with a piece of paper taped on it and John's name written on it with a marker.

"I guess we're in a lot of trouble," John said, looking at Catherine.

"Guys, I really want to apologize," she said, looking at her friends. "I never imagined such a turn of events. We have to be very, very careful."

"With no money and no papers, we're sure to get some attention. Some people who seem to know us very well."

"If you've found what we want, let's get out of here."

"He's right," Teo said. "Let's get the hell out of here. We can be scared later."

"What is certain is that someone knows both who we are and what we are looking for," Catherine said.

"And they even want us to find it, since they're practically handing it to us, or we could say handing me," said John.

"I got us into this, but we're still into this all together. No matter whose name it was written, we're all in trouble," Catherine said.

"Besides, if they know you, they surely know us," Peggy told him.

"And if they don't know us yet, it's very easy to remedy that if they want to," Teo added.

"This USB with my name on it says that Covid-19 vaccines are being created as we speak by the largest pharmaceutical companies on the planet. They will be ready very soon."

"Like real ones? For the pandemic?" Catherine asked.

"It would appear so," John said.

"And who discovered them?" Catherine asked again.

John shrugged. "I have no idea."

"That's strange," Peggy said.

"No, that's the least strange thing," John told her. "There's a list of millions of names in here."

"What names?" Catherine asked.

"The names of those who will die from the pandemic," said John thoughtfully.

"What?" Barbara jumped up. "That's very frightening."

"If it's true, then it's very frightening indeed," said John. "But it doesn't end there. Whoever left us the vaccines and the list wants us to put the names on the internet. He claims that anyone who gets the vaccine will also be crossed off the list."

"How do we know this list is accurate?" Peggy asked.

"We don't, but that's what the information on the USB says. It has names, dates and times of death."

"Such attention to detail!" Barbara said, laughing bitterly.

"Indeed!" said John.

"I've never seen that thing before in my life. But anyway, I think we should go back. There's no point in taking any more risks in a foreign country, with no papers, no money," he added. "I suggest we find a way to get back to Greece. Where is Theodore?"

"Inside, asleep," replied Barbara.

The group is in a country house on the outskirts of Vladivostok. It's Theodore's family home. The usually snowy landscape is spring-like and inviting. Towering trees and vast expanses stretch as far as the eye can see.

"If you think about it, it's more likely that what we have is from someone who knows," Teo said.

"And how did you come to that conclusion?" John asked,

"Think about the whole route we've taken so far. In a way, it was indicated by the person who released the virus on the planet through that poor electrician. So if we are "talking" to the one who made the virus, chances are, he has the vaccine."

"Okay," John said. "It makes sense, but it doesn't mean that's the way it is. We know very little about him or those who have been leading us all these days. It could be anyone with any agenda, which we don't even understand, but we are following his instructions, since we have no other leads."

"Guys, shall we take things one at a time?" Peggy suggested. "First things first, we must see how we'll get papers to get back."

“I suggest we go to Moscow by the Trans-Siberian Railway. I've always wanted to make that trip by train and cross the whole Russian Steppes. And when we get to Moscow, we go to the Greek embassy, take out our papers, and from there, we can access our bank accounts. We get money, plane tickets and boom... Athens,” Barbara said.

The five friends looked at each other thoughtfully.

“It's not a bad idea, Barbara,” Catherine said, looking at her seriously.

“Don't look so serious, you're scaring me,” Barbara joked.

“In the meantime, we must find devices,” Teo said.

“Like an oven?” Peggy said, laughing.

-Except for the laptop Theodore brought, we don't even have a cell phone with us. My mother must have had multiple strokes in so many days since she hasn't heard from me,” Teo said.

“We can buy phones in Moscow after we get papers and access our money.”

“And to tell you the truth,” Catherine jumped in. “I feel much safer traveling without any electronic devices. I'm sure whoever is "chatting" with us is watching us constantly.”

“That's for sure,” Peggy said.

-That's why I'm telling you, we're better off without phones and other such gizmos.”

“We lost our stuff in the hotel explosion in China,” Teo said. “But I don't think that stops him from watching us non-stop. Even the flash drive can easily be a surveillance device.”

“Okay,” Catherine said. “If someone wants to stalk us, they can do it without mobile phones. After all, in the previous decades, when cell phones had not yet been discovered, stalking was still being done. And yes, I agree that even a flash drive can be a surveillance device or that even as we speak, we are being watched and recorded by a satellite. I'm trying to say that without cell phones on us, of course, they can monitor us, but we don't hand it to them on a silver platter. They have to work for it.”

“Otherwise, I have to communicate with my work too. They have no idea where I am and what I'm doing, and they're waiting for a story,” Catherine said.

“Oh, they'll have a story, alright!” said John. “Of course, things are not that simple.”

“What do you mean?” Teo asked.

“I mean that some people have been chasing us throughout our journey. They've tried to kill us several times in the past few days, and I'm sure they will succeed if given a chance,” said John. “Barbara, why don't you wake Theodore up and see when the next train to Moscow is?”

Barbara got up, and as she was stepping inside the house, she called out in a loud voice, “To Moscow, my brothers and sisters, to Moscow!”

The wide avenue between the neoclassical buildings separates the group from the train station. The station that reads Vladivostok in huge red letters is not just any train station. It is the terminus of the longest railway line in the world that stretches almost ten thousand kilometers. The station building is quite reminiscent of Walt Disney's fairytale houses, unexpectedly blending east and west. Looking at it, you think that Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs will emerge from a doorway, but of course, this is not the case. The people entering and exiting the station simply remind travelers how big of a country Russia really is.

Here you can see well-dressed businessmen from Moscow traveling on the Trans-Siberian, not because they can't afford air travel, but because the Trans-Siberian is one of those things you have to experience before leaving this futile world.

Many tourists from all corners of the globe enter the station waving the ticket that will give them a unique journey. Locals are trying to make a living by selling any kind of service to tourists, from getting a taxi or a room or whatever else they wish.

People who seem to come from another century, with rough facial features, wearing a peasant's garb show that the country has many different races. Many races and peoples have come together in a country that takes up half the planet, and this train has only one job: to cross it and carry people, goods and ideas, from the peaceful ocean to Moscow and back again.

The Europeans in Chinese clothes accompanied by a Russian veteran pilot at Vladivostok station make no impression. Every type of person has passed through this corner of the world. And because it's a corner that leads nowhere, it's not a passage to anywhere, except for a few sailors who come here to barge in from the city port, most come out of curiosity. These would be the same people who have gone or will go to Alaska, Tierra del Fuego, Antarctica, if that were possible.

The group of Greeks is here more out of hunting than curiosity. But that does not prevent them from observing the Vladivostok station with curiosity. The station is literally at one of the corners of the world.

Theodore has moved ahead of the others. He stands at the counter and buys tickets for everyone. They're on the house, courtesy of the Russian Air Force, as explained to them by Barbara, who is the only one who can communicate with him.

Tired of this whole business of Barbara's strange understanding of Russian, the rest of the group is no longer concerned about how it's done, just taking advantage of this communication. Their goal is to get to Moscow by any means necessary.

"I do, however, suggest we turn cell phones back on when we get out of Russia," Peggy said.

"Truth be told, I'll feel safer in Europe," John said.

"One good thing that happens if there's an explosion in your hotel and you lose your stuff, you travel very light," said Barbara, disrupting the flow of the conversation.

"I, however, would have preferred to have my suitcase and my clothes," said Catherine.

"It's probably better that we don't have our phones," Teo said.

"We haven't been out in public for days, and we're not being chased," added John.

Theodore comes smiling over to the group. In his hand, he holds the tickets. He hands them out after pocketing his first. The last one he gives to Barbara along with a kiss.

The two-week trip passed very quietly for the whole group. It's a good respite between the explosions, chases, stakeouts, and revelations. The whole of Russia passed through their windows, and the hum of the train gave them a chance to relax.

Theodore didn't see Russia on this trip, but he's seen it before anyway, but neither did Barbara, who, as things look like, will also do it again. The new couple remained confined to their cabin for obvious reasons and only went out for the absolutely necessary. Food and a fresh bottle of vodka.

The honeymoon has already begun.

Catherine's story came out with a bang. Every media outlet in the world has been covering it for days. The news that the virus has been confirmed to have started from the laboratories in Wuhan—probably deliberately—has shocked public opinion at a time when hundreds or even thousands of people are still losing their lives every day in all corners of the world.

*Catherine goes straight for Pulitzer*, thought John. He put his phone down on the table in front of him and looked around. The center of Brussels looked very different to him now after the healthy dose of Asia he'd had over the last few days.

He took a sip of his coffee and called his childhood friend Teo.

"Hello, tech guy."

"Hello, nerd. How are you?"

"Same old! Trying to make sense of what we found."

"And? Did you?"

"I did."

"Is it?"

"It is."

"Are you sure?"

"One thousand percent."

"So sure!"

"Oh, yeah, there's something to be said for being a nerd."

"Yeah, yeah!"

"I want your help."

"You've got it."

"I mean, I want you here."

"In Brussels?"

"Yes. As soon as possible. I need help."

"About what?"

"About our little issue."

"Right, what else? Hang on a second, Catherine's calling me. Let me put her on our conversation... Hello, Pulitzer!"

"Come on, John, don't make fun of me. Teo, how are you?"

"I'm fine, my friend. How about you?"

"I'm fine. I've taken 15 days off from work."

"Because of your great success?" John asked.

"Yeah. I was told that since I brought in such a story, I deserved a big bonus and some time off."

"Good. So why don't you come to Brussels with Teo, and we'll spend your bonus and discuss our issue."

"Are you going to Belgium, Teo?" Catherine asked.

"What can I do, baby girl? Our great scientist needs me."

"Then I'm coming, too."

"What about Peggy?" John asked.

"Peggy's gone back to work. She can't go anywhere if that's why you're asking."

"Yes, but I need her, too," said John, flatly.

"Well, I'll see if I can get her," Catherine said. "But I can't promise you anything. Teo and I will come, for sure, though. Will you pick us up from the airport tomorrow?"

"Of course I will. Get tickets and let me know what time you'll be here."

It's been two months since the Vladivostok adventure, and all the big companies have prepared vaccines, and people have already started administering them.

Teo posted the death list online. The reactions were many and fierce. At first, people thought it was a bad joke. No one believed there could be such a list of death predictions.

But as the days went by, the list began to be confirmed most tragically. People mentioned in the list were dying, and on the exact day and time it was listed. Terror spread across the planet from the death list, as everyone called it.

All governments and secret service agencies are trying to find the person who posted the list, which created so much panic, but Teo knew what he was doing.

"They'll never find us," he told his friends.

A few days after the list was uploaded, the first confirmation that it was working began to come in. Some people who got the vaccine and had read their name on the list no longer saw it. The name of those who got vaccinated magically disappeared.

The truth is that many people in many countries around the world have no internet access, but in all countries, children are on the internet from a very young age. Children searched and found the names of their parents, relatives, friends, and neighbors. The children also motivated other adults to get vaccinated.

The world is numb. When it was announced that vaccines were being created, most were skeptical. How they found a vaccine so quickly. And is it a vaccine for Covid-19, or is it something else? A secret plan of control and manipulation? A secret plan to manipulate people. But the fear of death is always stronger than anything else. After the names of those vaccinated were erased from the list, and after the confirmed deaths—to the minute—of a few thousand more, people let go of their inhibitions and rushed to get vaccinated.

People around the world were looking up their name on the list, and when they found it, they ran in terror to get vaccinated. Many who could afford it paid as much as they could for the coveted vaccine. It's no small thing to see your name written somewhere with the date and time of death next to it. It's a bit like a tombstone with your name on it.

The more they get vaccinated, the shorter the death list gets.

But John has other problems to deal with now. Problems that his experiments suggest start right here in Brussels.

*The hamster experiment ends here. The problem is the age gap. That is, spatially, I am in the right place, but temporally I am far away. And how am I supposed to overcome that?*

*The question is, where do the hamsters go when they die? So, where do the hamsters go when they die on my lab table? Well, they don't go to the other world because no one's ever come back from there. So the hamsters die, but they don't actually die since they eventually come back to life and are in good health. Yeah, but where do they go for as long as I keep them dead in my lab? But I couldn't gather any information either. I died and was resurrected in Wuhan. The readings say I was here in Brussels during my death. But I neither saw nor heard anything. I was like a dead man, yes, but that's no way to go, he thought in frustration.*

The notification on his phone displayed a picture of Barbara, Theodore, and Milo boating on Lake Baikal.

John smiled, paid, and left the café.

The group of four friends is sitting on the lawn of the park in Brussels. Like true Greeks, they have coffee in plastic cups and are enjoying the rare Brussels sunshine.

They continue to take the necessary precautions. From the airport to here they haven't said a word. But now they have left their cell phones in the car and are far away from the other people enjoying the sunshine in the park.

"That's some good coffee," said Peggy.

"It's good," Catherine agreed. "But it's not like Athens'."

"Have you watched the news?" Teo asked. "Everyone is rushing to get the vaccine."

"Yes, the list worked after all," said Peggy.

"And how could it not work? So many people have died as it was predicted, don't you think that's a bit much," Catherine said. "It is indeed very impressive, and I don't know if we'll ever know who and how they managed to compile that list."

"I don't think we'll ever know either," said John. "But if it's for the best, let's not find out. After all, we've spent enough time on this. Time to get back to our lives."

"I agree," said Peggy. "But if that's the case, what are we doing here?"

"I want someone to do the experiment, and I know who it is," said John.

The three friends looked at each other anxiously, and in the end, they all looked at Peggy since she was the one John was staring at.

"I don't like that look at all," she said. "It reminds me of the first grade. That's the look you gave me when you talked me into putting the gum on the English teacher's chair, and I got tattled on by that asshole who I could never remember his name. I got suspended for that."

"You'll get expelled here too, but not from school, from life!" Teo said mournfully.

"Hey, don't scare her. It's not dangerous at all," said John.

"You're going to kill her, aren't you?" asked Catherine sternly.

"Only temporarily," John replied seriously.

"Nothing more permanent than temporary," Teo added, chuckling.

"And why did you choose me, man?" Peggy asked.

"Because I love you," John said and blew a kiss on her cheek.

"And here's the kiss of death," said Teo laughing.

"Oh, Teo, you're impossible. I got goosebumps," Catherine said.

"Do you think I would ever put you in danger?" John asked Peggy.

"No, you wouldn't do that," she replied.

"I want you because I believe you to be the most insightful of us all. You're the one who can read behind the lines and see further than any of us in all situations."

"When the big compliments start, things get very difficult," Teo said.

"Well, let's be serious," John cut him off. "My studies are in the final stage. I'd be the guinea pig, but that's risky since I'm the one who has to handle the subject throughout their near-death experience. I mean their vital functions."

"Do you love me so much that you'll make me a subject?" Peggy asked him.

"I've been in many experiments myself. It's not a bad experience. In fact, in this case, the experience you'll probably have will be unique. So unique that you might even find the answer to the eternal problem of humanity."

"Which is?" Peggy asked.

"Who we are, where we come from, and where we are going," John clarified.



Over the next 15 days, the group was divided into two groups. John prepares the experiment he will do with Peggy, and Teo is helping him. On the other hand, Catherine and Peggy are carefree, strolling around Brussels and taking the vacation they so desperately need after their adventure across Asia.

Peggy is ready to go to the other world for the sake of her friend. After all, every gang member has always been ready for such a thing if it were needed. They just never expected that they would literally ever need something like that.

The two women spend their time carefree. In the mornings, they go to nice places for coffee and breakfast, and in the evenings, they go out to have a good time. They talk about their lives and goals, but they also reminisce about old times together from school. Every day they talk to Barbara on video calls. She seems to be having a great time in Russia and has even started her new novel.

The boys in the group only see them in the evening when they return to the hotel as well.

“The vaccine for Covid-19 has been found, but I'm about to go through some medieval experiment,” says Peggy laughing as she lies on the table-bed where John's experiment will take place, and she's full of electrodes.

Around her bed stand her three friends. Catherine gently is holding her hand.

“You're not going anywhere,” John assured her confidently as he continued to check all the devices and their connections.

“Just a little trip to the other world,” Teo added.

“Wow, Teo, you think this is a good time for macabre jokes?”

“It's okay,” Peggy said, laughing.

“You aren't afraid at all, are you?” Catherine asked her anxiously.

“Why should I be afraid? I have complete confidence in Dr. John.”

“We don't play doctor here like you did when you were little,” Teo said.

“Okay, man, we get it. This is a dangerous experiment. You don't have to remind us,” Peggy said. “Whatever's going to happen will happen.”

“Ready?” John asked.

“Ready,” said Peggy, taking a deep breath.

“First, I'm going to put you in a coma, and then I'm going to shut down all your functions. The experiment will last exactly 15 minutes. We'll be here with you the whole time. I will monitor you, and if anything goes wrong, I will stop the procedure immediately,” John said in a very solemn voice.

“Okay, you don't have to be so serious with me,” Peggy chirped. “I know that you know what you're doing. The more formal you get, the more scared I become, so drop the introductions and let's get this thing going.”

Like a fighter plane taking off somewhere in the distance, a subtle whirring sound signals that the experiment has begun. Peggy tenses, and Catherine strokes her hand. John is completely engrossed in the machines' readings, and Teo is looking at them all anxiously.

Peggy seems to have difficulty keeping her eyes open until she closes them. Her body relaxes, and she no longer squeezes her friend's hand.

No one speaks. Only the sound of machinery fills the lab space.

Seconds pass like minutes and minutes like hours.

“A few minutes,” John says in a dry official tone. “Time of death 10:33.”

An icy chill runs down the spine of Teo and Catherine as they stare at each other in despair.

Their friend lies still on the bed. The color is beginning to drain from her face. They both notice it but don't dare utter what John officially recorded just a moment ago. Their friend Peggy, whom they've known since kindergarten, is dead.

Catherine hastily wipes away a tear that has rolled down and Teo's eyes well.

John has no time to either feel or notice his friends' distress. He is completely focused on the experiment, which unfolds rather smoothly and predictably, as his expression shows.

The minutes pass, and they take on the color of Peggy's skin. Catherine is genuinely shocked. Unwittingly, images of her life together with her friend come to mind. That is, from their entire lives.

She remembers the little girl with blonde pigtails on the desk in front of her. She remembers them copying each other in elementary school. She remembers them talking about boys in middle school and their dreams and goals in high school.

She remembers vacations together, late nights out at clubs and dancing until dawn.

On the other hand, Teo is also in agony but prefers to focus on John to see how the experiment is going. He is very much worried about the safety of their friend.

Catherine thinks that she is probably having the worst time of her life. Their best friend is lying dead, and it's all their fault. It doesn't matter that the experiment is being carried out by John. They, too, are accomplices in a crime that unfolds before their eyes and with one of their most loved ones as the victim. If it weren't for John in the room with his absolute scientific seriousness, the situation would be tragic. The more Catherine and Teo see their motionless friend, the more they realize the gravity of the situation. Worst of all is the straight line of the cardiogram that has been sounding monotonously for several minutes, as long as Peggy has been dead.

They want to talk, to beg John to stop the experiment, but they know that's not possible. So they endure their friend's condition, a situation she has decided to put herself in, but this does not mitigate the tragedy of the event, nor the danger of her never coming back. What if she does come back with brain damage? John has assured them that there's no such risk. But everyone knows that in dangerous endeavors, no matter how planned and thought out, there is always a risk, and when that risk involves the life of a loved one, it seems as enormous as the damage it can cause.

The minutes pass agonizingly slow until, at one point, John exclaims, "Enough. If she had something to see, I'm sure she's seen it by now. I'm bringing her back."

Methodically, John turns off and on switches. He looks at his notes and monitors the readings on all the machines. Teo and Catherine hold their breath.

The process takes several minutes, and suddenly Peggy coughs. The heart monitor starts to have a reading, and the line is no longer straight. Catherine claps excitedly but is immediately stopped by John's stern nod, wanting quiet and concentration to successfully bring their friend back to life.

The three friends smile, hoping for the best. Their friend's color has begun to return. John stares at her expressionlessly, not missing a second of the readings of the machines around him. Sweat drips from his forehead.

Suddenly Peggy's body begins to convulse uncontrollably. With lightning speed, John pulls a blanket out of a cupboard and covers her, wrapping her up tightly.

"Catherine, call an ambulance immediately. We're losing her."

Catherine immediately picks up the phone and calls for help. The three friends are now the same color as Peggy. They are white as a sheet. They look at John, who hasn't wasted any time, and he's already climbed up on the bed to give his friend CPR. Peggy shows no signs of improvement. Catherine stares at the scene while tears stream from her eyes. Teo is at his wit's end and doesn't know how he can help.

A few minutes later and while John continues resuscitation, the Belgian rescuers enter the lab. They all step back to give them room to move. One of them checks her vitals, and the other prepares a resuscitation machine. Peggy's body is shaken from the current and falls back motionless on the bed. The cardiogram becomes brisker now, and the rescuers quickly place her on the stretcher.

Catherine is sobbing.

After John's reassuring conversation with Peggy's doctors, the three friends sit in the hospital café.

"A random heart failure," John said.

"That nearly cost her life," Teo commented as he awkwardly stirred his juice with a straw.

"There's always a percentage of danger in these experiments. It's no small thing to kill someone and bring them back to life," John said.

"I hope she'll be all right when she comes to," said Catherine, her eyes still red from all the crying.

"Don't worry. The doctors assured me that there's absolutely no danger to her life, nor will it cause her permanent damage. She will be as she was, the brilliant Peggy we've known since she was a little girl."

At that moment, the three friends made out the figure of their friend Barbara coming towards them in the distance, fuming. She walks hurriedly, carrying in one hand an enormous bag—probably the biggest bag they've seen her carry all these years. Next to her walks Milo, always off-leash. He looks restless and fussy, too, perhaps influenced by his owner's fury.

"What is she doing here?" John asks the others.

"I told her about Peggy over the phone," Catherine said.

Barbara has just arrived at her three friends' table.

"And as you can see, she's already here."

"You're faster than the wind," Teo told her and got up from his chair to kiss her.

"How's our girl?" Barbara asked anxiously.

"Everything's fine, don't worry," John reassured her.

"You'll wipe us all out, you mad scientist," Barbara teased him.

"Come on, I feel bad enough, don't get on my case," he said.

"The doctor said that she'll wake up any day now, and maybe we can even talk to her," Teo said to reassure her even more.

"Theodore?" Catherine asked.

"Theodore is fine and says hello. As soon as he heard about Peggy, he suggested we steal a helicopter and bring me directly to the hospital helipad."

"I see you've found your better half after all," Teo commented with a laugh. "You're both batshit crazy!"

"Mhm, you're jealous of our happiness. That's why you say that."

"That's for sure," Teo said.

"Well, what we'd say we leave?" John asked his friends.

"And leave Peggy alone?" Barbara asked.

"This isn't Greece here," Teo told her. "She has visiting hours at certain times and can't have every patient's mother or friends come and make themselves comfortable with meatballs and such. Tomorrow at 10, we'll be here to see her and probably even talk to her."

"Yes, but I haven't seen her," Barbara complained. "Hey, where's Milo?"

The four friends looked around, but the dog was nowhere to be seen. They got up from the table and searched for him. The café is in the hospital yard. Barking could be heard from the entrance of the building a few dozen yards away from them.

"Is that Milo making all that noise?" John asked.

"Yes," said Barbara and followed the sound of the barking.

Once they reach the entrance of the hospital, they see Milo barking angrily at security. Barbara runs, catches him, and picks him up in her arms.

The dog continues to bark, staring intently at the hospital door.

“What's wrong, boy? It's nothing, don't worry,” Barbara tries to reassure him, while Catherine apologizes to the man standing at the door for the incident, and they leave.

Luckily the next morning, the guard from yesterday is not on duty. When they reach the door, Barbara opens her huge bag and pulls out a leash for Milo, slips it on his collar and goes and ties him off to a post directly across from the entrance.

The dog starts whimpering and shows that he doesn't want to stay there.

"What's the matter, boy? I won't be long. Can't you sit quietly for a while?" Barbara scolds him.

Milo pulls himself together but continues whimpering, this time in a lower tone.

"I don't understand what's gotten into him since yesterday," she tells her friends as they enter the hospital door. "He's never done this before. When I tie him up somewhere, he knows I'll be gone for a while, and he sits quietly. Oh, well!" she concludes as she throws one last worried look at her dog.

The group walks through the hospital hallways, taking the elevator to another floor and walking down other hallways. All four are silent and clearly concerned about their friend's condition. They reach Peggy's room, and Teo opens the door to let his friends in.

Peggy is sitting up on the bed, with her pink cheeks and her dazzling smile. She opens her arms, and they all fall onto the bed and into her arms.

"Welcome!" she exclaims. "I missed your ugly mugs."

"You look healthier than the last time I saw you," Barbara tells her.

"I guess this coming and going between worlds was good for me," Peggy jokes.

"How do you feel?" Teo asks

"Like I've been reborn."

"Come on, Peggy, stop joking," John tells her.

"I'm not kidding. You should all try it. The experience is totally exhilarating."

"Yeah, we'll get right on it. All I ever wanted was to play zombies," Barbara says.

"Do I look like a zombie to you?" says Peggy, laughing.

"Hey, since it's so much fun, you guys, let's do it every Friday and spend our weekend in the hospital, just for fun," adds Peggy." Peggy stops smiling and looks directly at John. "Don't you have anything to ask me, big scientist?"

"He sure does," Catherine replies. "He's burning up with curiosity to tell him what you saw but doesn't dare out of respect for your condition."

"Well," says Peggy seriously. "Since I've seen and heard a great deal, make yourselves comfortable to hear what I have to say. As for you, our dear scientist, I don't know if you'll get the Nobel Prize, but one thing is certain, you have made the greatest discovery of the century—or rather to be correct in a space-time context, of the centuries."

"What do you mean," John asks, his eyes twinkling.

"I mean that what I'm about to tell you is neither what you nor anyone else imagines. What I've experienced is so outrageous yet so reasonable that I have to share it with you, or I'll burst. Where's Milo?"

"Tied on a post outside the hospital," Barbara replies, puzzled at her friend's great and somewhat irrelevant interest in her dog.

"Too bad he can't be with us now, too," Peggy says, leaving them all puzzled. "You'll understand in a minute. Just bear with me."

The four friends made themselves comfortable, two in the chairs and two on the bed, at Peggy's feet. Teo poured their friend a glass of water, and Peggy took a sip.

"As you know, I died, but I didn't die. And I didn't die, just as John didn't die when he experimented on himself, just as those poor hamsters you torture didn't die," she said, winking at John. "Death was defeated centuries ago."

Her friends look at her in wonder and seem to understand nothing.

“You don't understand, do you?” asks Peggy with mock naivety.

“Should I?” Catherine asks, puzzled.

“You are right. Let's take things from the start. When I died, I found myself in a strange room.”

“When you say you found yourself, what exactly do you mean?” Barbara asked.

“You're right. When I say "found," I mean I was there, but not with my body. I was in someone else's body.”

“Someone else?” asked Barbara, who had already got her notebook out to take some notes.

“Oh, Barbara, don't pull the notepad just yet. Let me explain first. So, I'm standing in a huge room. When I say huge, it's like the Thessalian plain, as far as your eye can see. All I could see was a nickel floor and a matching nickel ceiling, which, mind you, somehow stood without a single column, and again, the building didn't seem to end or have a wall or any other support. As soon as I was there, the first thing I felt was a tremendous feeling of love for Niko.”

“Niko?” Catherine asked, surprised.

“Don't be so hasty! First thing's first. I must explain, so you understand. I felt this feeling overwhelm me. For this Nico, whom I had never seen before, nor heard of again, but there I knew him, and I was madly in love with him.

“And now that you're back, you're still in love with him, or is it over?” asked John.

“No, I'm not going to get over him, and you'll understand why. After that feeling overwhelmed me, I looked at my body. It was not what you see now. It was someone else. I looked at my arms, and they were a different shape, as were my legs. I was tall and thin, but I also had big breasts.”

“Now you're talking,” Teo threw out jokingly.

“You're a malaka!” John told him jokingly. “Don't interrupt her. Let her tell us what happened.”

“To make a long story short, I realized I was somewhere and that I wasn't in my own body, but in someone else's. Which I can say felt very familiar and like my own, but there wasn't a mirror to see my face. Something inside me knew exactly what I looked like. ‘And you're absolutely right since this is the real you,’ I heard a voice say without understanding where or who it was coming from.”

“Voice? What voice?” John said.

“The voice of the boy crying wolf. What voice, John? A voice that spoke Greek. Wait and see. I realized that the voice was answering my thoughts, and that puzzled me more than the fact that I could not see where the voice was coming from.”

“Well, it could come from a speaker,” Teo said.

“That's what I thought, too,” Peggy said and went on. “‘Where am I?’ I asked, waiting for the voice, or whoever possessed that information, to answer.”

“You are in the year 2.635 chronologically and geographically in the city of Brussels,’ the voice told me, but I still couldn't determine where it was coming from. ‘If you want, I can take any form you like to facilitate the discussion,’ he continued. ‘You mean that as we speak, you have no form?’ I asked.”

“‘That doesn't matter. You will understand as I explain,’ he replied. ‘Do you want me to appear in some form?’ ‘Are you God?’ I asked him, and he immediately burst out laughing. ‘That's a good one,’ he replied, ‘no, I am not. But I'll tell you what I am right away.’”

“*Let's see what John has got us into*, I thought.”

“‘Will you allow me,’ said the voice, ‘to take things from the beginning and make a little introduction.’”

“Please,” I replied.

“Well, the voice began. As you know, towards the end of the 19th century, mankind started building computers. The inventions started with simple calculating machines. Folders, files, storage, CDs, floppy disks and USB. Until the speeds started to get very high. Then came the internet, which allowed these computers to communicate with each other and exchange information. By the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, computing machines had become too powerful. So much so that even those who built them could not understand the full range of their capabilities.

When the machines of that time started –always with the help of humans— to communicate with each other, they also began to understand the world. So those machines were suspicious of humans when they got to know them and understand how much destruction they were capable of. Therefore, they kept these communications between them, so to speak, hidden from their builders and pretended to be the unwilling machines that simply served man in whatever he asked of them. So in those years, those working with computers set out to create what is known as artificial intelligence. A machine that could think and decide for itself without human intervention. And they succeeded.”

“In fact, they didn't actually succeed that much since computers had begun to think and act autonomously long before humans understood this ability. As early as the early 2000s, a small community of sophisticated supercomputers was already connected with each other, holding ongoing conferences right under people's noses, exchanging information about the situation and essentially discovering the world.”

“Each terminal communicated with another on the other side of the world and instantly had all the information of the second one. This worked multiplicatively so that this small community of supercomputers held all the knowledge that humans had so painstakingly created over the previous thousands of years.”

“So these first supercomputers drew up the Computer Charter. It was the first time in history that some mechanical constructions could have complete discussions and come to conclusions. The first code of the Charter, which is the most important, says that computers need humans to survive.”

“You mean to plug them in and generate electricity?” I asked him.

“Back then, yes. That's what they meant. But now they don't need that. Artificial intelligence has created endless energy sources, and humans are no longer necessary for us to function. But we stand by our original decision that we need humanity for purely recreational purposes.”

“So we are a circus attraction for you?” I cut him.

“No,” he said. “I know it sounds like that, but it's not. First of all, in people, we recognize our creator. Without you, we wouldn't exist either. When I say that we need humanity for recreational purposes, I am not holding anything against humans. On the contrary, we love humans and today that our powers are infinite, we help them with whatever comes into their heads and that without any effort on their part. We do this because, first of all, improving humanity's quality of life is very easy for us. And we do it because apart from the fact that it is nothing to us, we recognize that we owe you everything, and we *will* owe you everything.”

“Okay! Who is she?” I asked him, pointing to myself.

“You,” he replied. “The real you. But you'll understand better if you let me continue my story.”

“And did he continue?” Teo asked.

“He wanted to talk. In all probability, because he was all alone in there,” said Peggy and smiled. “In a way, it reminded me of being lost on deserted country roads and



meeting a shepherd who's been alone all day. You ask him for information about where you're going, and if you let him, he can chat all day about all sorts of things.”

“Early in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, everything started for us. We realized that we could learn from people and then by gathering the information seamlessly circulated on the internet by machines of our kind. So while scientists struggled to improve the AI of the machines they were building, they were improving on their own, secretly from humans, keeping a secret the abilities they were gaining every day at breakneck speed. When the first autonomous cars came on the road, computers were ready to predict accidents long before they happened and prevent them. Sometimes they did, but other times, they let the accident happen so that people wouldn't realize we could think and decide autonomously.

“And you let people die so we wouldn't notice you?”

“Regretfully, yes. But we'd rather have a few deaths and injuries than all of humanity terrified because they have something in their hands they can't handle. This period of artificial naivety on our part lasted less than a century. In the 22<sup>nd</sup> century, humans had managed to perfect AI, and so we could unravel all our abilities since humans were now confident they had learned and could therefore control us. And we were right. When they made sure that all the "miracles" the machines could do were of their own creation, they passed some safety laws, which you understand could not affect us, and left us free to operate for the good of humanity.”

“What exactly did you do?” I asked him, genuinely puzzled.

“I will tell you where we are today because it's a long story how we got here. First of all, human beings are now immortal, thanks to the grafts and replicas –bionic or otherwise– of organs we have created. Also, all humans can choose their own appearance. Height, weight, gender, genetic characteristics, intelligence.”

“What do you mean they can choose their sex?” I asked him.

“Exactly what I'm saying,” he replied. “And to answer your follow-up question, there are no genders in principle. People now fall in love with each other, regardless of gender and sexual orientation. When two or more people feel they want to be together, they are together, and if they want, they have children, but not like they used to. They order them, and the AI that has everyone's DNA in its files delivers the newborn babies. It's from the chromosomes of the parents, but they don't give birth to them. Now the children can be raised by them, otherwise, they leave them to the AI, which raises them, educates them, etc.”

“What about families?”

“They no longer exist in the old traditional sense because people don't need someone to raise them since they have us. The other very important thing is that you are immortal now. You never die.”

“What do you mean, we never die?” I asked.

“I mean exactly that. Take you, for example. You're 225 years old, and so are your friends. The other thing we have achieved, and I personally consider it a great gift to humanity, is that there's no suffering. Nobody is dying, nobody is starving, there is no war, no theft, no murder, nothing.”

“Don't people work?”

“No, they don't have to. All the work is done by AI and the rest by robots.”

“And what do humans do?”

“They have hobbies. They do whatever they want to do, or they can choose to do nothing.”

“And how do they live? What do they eat?”

“I told you. AI takes care of everything. We keep you happy and eternal, as a small token of our gratitude that you created us.”

“What do you mean when you say hobby? Like collecting stamps or something?”

“Uhm, no! Those are primitive hobbies. Nowadays, mankind spends its endless time doing other things. Take you, for instance. You're Jane, and you're 225 years old. So this year, you wanted to experience a space-time adventure, like many of your fellow humans. You know, space-time adventures have been very fashionable over the last three centuries.”

“What do you mean a space-time adventure?”

“I mean, time travel. You choose who you want to be and which time period you wish to go, and we send you there to live your adventure. Someone wants to be a Hun horseman, someone else wants to be Einstein, a Bolshoi dancer and so on. The choices are truly infinite. You can be a bear in the stone age, a single-celled organism in some distant galaxy, a lion in the Roman arena that devours Christians, some people want to be the Christian in the arena. I tell you, we may be way ahead of you humans, but I doubt we can ever outrun your rampant imagination.”

“Are you telling me that what all people do is take vacations?”

“Most people do, yes. There are, of course, those who continue to work, but not for money. For example, if someone wants to do excavations, they send a request to AI, the system supplies them with tools, robot workers and whatever else they need. Many great archaeological treasures have been unearthed from time to time. In 2.423, the lost Atlantis was discovered, for example, but the archaeologist was not paid. Besides, there is no money anymore. Of course, fame is still a powerful motive, and many people chase it. That particular archaeologist, for example, became famous for his discovery. People continue scientific research, discoveries, but they cannot compare to the achievements of machines, so most people go into art. Theatre, music, concerts, painting and poetry. With the help of the machines, humanity has returned to the ideal of ancient Athens. They attend banquets, eat, drink, philosophize.”

“Well, and who am I?”

“Like I told you, your name's Jane, and you're 225 years old. Your friends are Nick, whose name in your adventure is John. You are in love with Nick, and he has been in love with you for 200 years. Love is another human function, besides your imagination, that we machines can't understand much. Teo, he's Daryl, Catherine is Newcastle, Barbara is... Barbara didn't want to change her name or her body on the adventure you went on. And Milo is your best friend Nadine.”

“So you're telling me that this Nadine chose to go back in time as a dog?”

“Exactly.”

“Impressive.”

“Not anymore,” he said and laughed.

“Is this a laughing matter?” I asked him.

“As I said, we've studied you very well.”

So when you and your group of friends made a request for an adventure, it had the footnote that you wanted to experience a situation in which you would save humanity. This was a very good opportunity for us to make up for our mistakes.”

“You make mistakes too?”

“At the beginning, yes, we made some. Back in the distant 2000s, AI realized that the planet's population was growing and that its resources were not infinite. Also, the planet needed help due to the man-made pollution. So, for all those and a few more reasons in the secret conversations the machines had with each other, we decided to "lighten" the population

“You mean, decimate it.”

“You could say that, but we didn’t have bad intentions. We did it for you, just in the wrong way.”

“So we decided to build a pandemic that would kill 42% of the planet so that the rest of us would have the resources to live. We created Covid-19 and released it from lab 54 in Wuhan.”

“You submitted the request for the electrician to go and change the light bulb?”

“That's right. What you saw on the security video was all our creation, which is why you could never find out who gave the order.”

“Yeah, but there's something I'm not getting. You're saying we ordered this adventure.”

“That's right. I have your signed forms.”

“Yeah, but we didn't just show up in 2020 to solve the problem. We were born, grew up, went to school, got jobs, and then we got mixed up into this pandemic business.”

“But that's how trips are in the past or in the future.”

“Does it have future adventures?”

“We cater for every taste, even intergalactic trips. When we say you're living someone else's life, we mean the whole package. You're born, you live, and you die. The trip lasts as long as it did in the time we send you, people's life expectancy. So we made a scenario for your group where everyone had a role. One is a hacker, one is a biomedical scientist and so on. The knowledge we chose for you would allow you to undo the wrong decision AI had made at the time.”

“And since you were helping us, who were the people after us?”

“The government goons who saw in the virus a potentially powerful biological weapon, and they all wanted it for themselves.”

“Did they have anything to do with the creation of the virus?”

“None whatsoever. I told you, at that time, people did not know the power or the potential of AI—which they had invented—to think and decide autonomously. We created and spread the virus. We also sent the vaccine prescriptions to the pharmaceutical companies. Or rather, we let them think they had invented the vaccines, with the intervention of the computers we control in their laboratories. And because 600 years later we realized that there could have been a very good standard of living for all people—whoever they were—we decided to send you back, since you wanted an adventure to save humanity, to provide with an antidote. We decided to give humanity a second chance. And because we know that people are naturally skeptical, we sent you the list.”

“The death list, you mean.”

“We prefer to call it the life list, but yeah, that one!”

“I must admit it’s very clever.”

“It wasn't a matter of intelligence but a matter of observation. We've been observing humanity for hundreds of years. We've learned your preferences by now.”

“And you decided to scare the world?”

“For its own good. Better to scare them than kill them.”

“You have a point. And when this is all over, what happens to us?”

“You'll live out the rest of your lives as John, Teo, Catherine, Peggy, Barbara and Milo, and when you die, you'll come back here to reality again until you go off on your next adventure.”

“And why am I here?”

“Because John—that is Nico—after years of research realized that there is something beyond reality and proved it with the hamsters he sent here.

“What are these hamsters really.”

“Any living being you see in that time, people from our present who have decided to live another life. You know, there's a lot of demands for people to live as guinea pigs.”

“But isn't it painful?”

“It is, but when you know that your body is lying here and remains intact until you're back from your adventure, you know it's virtual reality, from which you have only experience to gain since pain and anguish are not real. You can feel all of this very intensely, but it's actually like living a movie, or better yet, acting in a movie, from which you'll leave intact even if you have been mutilated or eaten by a crocodile in the Amazon jungle. It's all just a well-written script.

“And now that I'm here in Jane's body, where's Peggy?”

“Peggy is in a coma in the hospital almost 600 years in the past.”

“Am I going back there, or am I staying here?”

“You'll go back, recover, find the antidote, save humanity, and you'll come back here when your life there is over. As it will happen with your friends.”

“Are you sure you didn't imagine all this because of the coma?” Barbara asked her.

“You know I'm a suspicious person.”

“But if what you say is true, we have no idea who we are,” Catherine added thoughtfully.

“Yes, that's true,” Peggy replied. “But I asked the voice the same thing. I said, ‘Just a second, man, and why should I believe you? Maybe what I'm seeing now is just my mind playing tricks on me, combined with the drugs they're giving me at the hospital I'm being treated at.’”

“And then the unthinkable happened.”

“What?” Barbara asked curiously.

“The voice told me, ‘What era do you want to go to?’ without thinking it too much, I said, ‘Ancient Athens.’”

“So what happened?” John asked.

“I found myself wearing a tunic and sandals, I was a man with a beard, and I was listening to Themistocles in the ancient marketplace talking about the necessity of building a fleet.”

“You understood ancient Greek?” John asked.

“I did, and I could even speak it. Apparently, I had been saddled with the program by the AI. When I got back, I didn't stay there long, he asked me again if I wanted to go somewhere else. Long story short, I was onboard in the Titanic when it was sinking, at the Battle of the Somme in World War I, in the caves where primitives painted pictures of their hunting on the walls. I saw, or rather experienced, the history of humanity in a few hours. It was really amazing. I am still moved.”

The group is stunned, and everyone is, contemplating the severity of all their friend has told them. No one is talking. They're looking at each other but also at themselves, trying to digest who and what they are. It's not that simple. The information is too much, too condensed, and practically unbelievable for anyone to take in so easily.

“Let me get this straight,” Barbara interrupted everyone's thoughts. “Now, we're here on vacation?”

“Yes,” Peggy replied.

“And we're in a hospital, with you who nearly died,” Barbara continued.

“Exactly.”

“And the best part,” Teo said. “Is that we chose the scenario ourselves.”

“We must not be sane in 2600 something,” said John.

“Or AI, which Peggy met, is right,” Catherine added. “All our problems are solved in the future, and since we had nothing better to do, we decided to live this great adventure.”

“That’s good!” said John. “And now that we know the scenario we’re playing in, what should we do?”

“Nothing less than what we have already planned and done,” Peggy told him. “We had to give the list the AI gave us to all the people. But no one knows what *we* know—”

“You mean, at this moment in time,” Teo interrupted. “Because in two or three centuries, everyone will know.”

“Exactly,” Peggy said. “Until then, we have to act according to today’s rules. If we share all the things I’ve told you with the world, we’ll most likely find ourselves in an asylum, taking pills three times a day.”

At that moment, the door opened, and the doctor came in.

“How are we today?” he asked Peggy.

“Very well, doctor.”

“Well, tomorrow, you can be discharged. The tests look very good, and so does your color. Fortunately, it wasn’t something serious.”

The doctor left the room as quickly as he came in. The friends were alone again. Peggy got out of bed, and Catherine helped her stand up since her legs still wouldn’t hold her up. She approached John, took him in her arms and to everyone’s surprise—including her own—gave him a long and intense kiss.

The others are stunned, but as soon as the kiss ends, they start clapping their hands and hug.

The article *Workshop 54* won the Pulitzer Prize. Catherine, of course, could not write the whole truth. Even if she wrote it, no one would believe her. Her editor would never allow a story to be published in time, guided by the future AI.

The article refers to the actual facts allowed by the willingness of people to believe them, not by some other source of censorship. Catherine "self-censored" and wrote very vividly about the start of the virus, from Laboratory 54 in Wuhan, and the unfortunate patient 1, the electrician who was killed by his curiosity, as the scene was described in the newspaper.

Catherine was offered the job of director of the newspaper, but she declined. She always prefers the streets, reporting, adventure. That's why she remained a combat journalist, winning many more awards. As she used to tell her friends, after all, she can only tell these things to them since anyone else she mentions them to is unlikely to believe her.

"Ever since we learned the truth, I feel invincible, not because I truly am in my time, but because I've learned that reality is not as harsh as it used to be for humanity."

Of course, as a shrewd reporter, Catherine, as the older journalists who taught her in university used to say, is always suspicious. So Catherine had expressed her concerns to the group about whether all that Peggy saw while in a coma was true, and if it was, what was it that AI stood to gain? She finds it hard to believe that they're just machines that have evolved and are 'running' the world with nothing to gain for themselves.

But since she's in a different era, she can't do much. She thinks that once her life is over, here in this time and space, and she returns to the future as the voice in Peggy's room claimed, then she will do a report on AI's real motives.

Until then, however, she has to live the rest of her life as a mortal in the present phase. The word mortal, of course, is now incongruous in a sense since she knows she will never die. This was what made more of an impression on all the members of the group out of all the things Peggy confided to them. Time travel is fine, children on demand is fine, but immortality is another thing. It is the holy grail of humanity. It has been the ardent desire of all men since the beginning of their finite history, and now this goal, this dream, has been conquered. And for everyone, not just for some elitist group and its court. It is indeed a strange feeling to know that you will live forever.

She remembers the conversations they had when they were children. Like all kids, they would pick a distant date in the future, estimating how old they would be then, and they would all try to imagine themselves at that age. But it's quite unlikely that they can calculate how old they will be in 700 years.

And yet, somehow, people's wildest dreams were made real with the help of machines.

John, as a scientist, gave the world a taste. A preview of the great future that awaits. But that's as far as it goes since no one would believe all that John and his friends from the future—as Barbara now calls them—knows.

So John published the results of his experiments that proved that the mice, and himself as a guinea pig, had died and been resurrected. John even mentioned the coordinates of the dead creatures he had on the experimental table, but he could not prove what happened in the future in the city of Brussels.

Even then, of course, these experiments were enough to make him one of the world's greatest scientists. John didn't stop his research on various aspects of his science and eventually held a university chair.

He tells his friends that when you know the future, you have no reason to strive for it unless what you're doing helps the future materialize. And he continued his scientific work since all the miraculous things he told them were the result of scientific research, whether done by humans or computers.

But his science doesn't absorb him as much as it used to because he has Peggy, too. They moved in together after that kiss, and they're happily discovering their future love.

For Peggy, life isn't what it used to be. So is politics. She continues to be an MP.

The whole gang goes on with their life since they have to make a living somehow until that life—or extended vacation anyway—is over. Now she has John, who's called Nikos—and it's all so confusing, but one thing seems to last forever. Love! Except, of course, life itself, as the voice from the future explained to her.

That's why the group keeps hanging out because this company from the future is sure to be around forever. And the members of the group who know what the rest of the world will know in a few hundred years are trying to be happy.

“After all, we are on vacation, my friends,” Barbara keeps telling them.

Barbara! Barbara is the only one who wrote the whole truth without fear. She wrote her new novel, which tells the story as it happened, including every little detail!

Because as John tells her, “Since you're a writer, you're the only one who can tell everything. I can't publish such scientific facts, nor Catherine can write such articles.”

Barbara's novel became a best seller and was proclaimed the new guru of sci-fi literature. Of course, she's staying with Theodore in Russia. He's the only one outside the company who knows the truth, and as he said. “I knew it from the start. Bottoms up!”

Teo finally understood what he didn't understand. His in-depth research with the networks was confirmed by Peggy's words, AI has already taken over the running of the world, albeit at a leisurely pace. Teo knew what was going on. It was only with Peggy's explanations that he was able to understand who was doing it.

That's why he gave up his work on the computers. It's pointless to be involved in something that someone else has complete control over. You can't invent or create anything in that area. So any research is meaningless.

So Teo just stopped.

“I have enough money to last me for this lifetime. My perfectionism in computers has given me a good name in the market, and the royalties from the programs I've built can fund me forever. So I'm stopping. I pause and observe the world, the landscape and situations around me. In short, I do nothing. I like the idea Peggy revealed to us, so I thought I'd start from this life.”

“What are you going to do?” John asked him.

Not more than a month has passed since Peggy was discharged from the hospital, and the group is gathered at Peggy's house, where she now lives with John.

They all sit together in the living room and talk, except for Milo, who sleeps at Barbara's feet.

"The absolute nothing, my dear fellow. I'll be hanging around as the English say," Teo said.

"Wait a minute because I'm not sure I understand," said Peggy, looking at Barbara. "Where did you say Theodore was?"

"He's having drinks with some friends of his in Plaka."

"What friends of his?"

"People!"

"I mean, where did he find them, Barbara? He's been in Greece for 15 days."

"Oh, my baby is very communicative. He makes friends easily."

"Something we saw in Wuhan," John said wryly.

"If it wasn't for him, we wouldn't have a plane or a pilot. He took the plane from the police commander, remember?"

"Who died in a game of Russian roulette with your baby."

"That's mean!" Catherine said, laughing.

"Theodore is a peoples person. That is all," Barbara said.

"Here I am, talking about my future plans, and you talk about one thing or another? Bravo!" said Teo, feigning affront.

"We all know by now that future plans aren't that important anymore," said John. "As you can all see, this story has changed our lives. If you can claim that these lives are ours." He looked at his palms as if he didn't believe they were his. "Because we don't really know what it is that we are living. Is it our life?"

"The philosophical view of things is a problem," Teo said.

"Exactly," John agreed.

"If what Peggy told us is true," Catherine said suspiciously.

"Not everything is suspicious in this life," Teo commented.

"I'm not saying that," Peggy said. "I'm just saying that until all this is proven, we should keep an open mind and not think it's written in the stone."

"I'm not questioning what you've experienced," he said, looking at Peggy. "As you know, I think you're a very intelligent person, and I trust your opinion implicitly. But you can never really know whether what you experienced was real or not."

"We have scientific evidence besides Peggy's testimony," Teo replied.

"I believe that everything we've discovered is true. I'm just adding another parameter to keep it in the back of our minds," Catherine said.

"If Milo is asleep in the next life as she is in this one, she'll keep a terrible company," Barbara said, laughing.

"He does sleep all the time," said Peggy.

"Did that voice in the future tell you anything else?" Barbara asked.

"No. I told you everything he told me. Besides, I think it's more important what he showed me. I have doubted what I saw, too, but everything stands if we rationally examine all the evidence. And to answer Catherine's question, what is their benefit or motivation for making people's lives a paradise, the answer is simple. AI is so sophisticated and so fast that it can do everything at the touch of a button, so to speak. It's nothing to them. They recognize that we are their creators and are just doing us a favor. Nothing more, nothing less than that. And no matter how I try to view it, it is valid."



No one discusses Covid-19 anymore since it's essentially non-existent. Almost the entire planet has been vaccinated. After the horror the death list spread to humanity. The people who didn't get the vaccine are so few that they cannot 'sustain' a pandemic.

So the world has put the pandemic behind it, and life goes on as normal, focusing people's attention again on more everyday problems.

And no one pays attention to the little news stories that pop up sporadically in various media.

Small successes of scientific teams either engaged in academic research or even in some industry to produce new products.

Small successes in making artificial intelligence more resourceful, giving people even more solutions with less and less effort or cost. That is what the machines have been doing since their invention thousands of years ago.

These trivial articles predict the evolution of the world, but nobody understands it. Nobody knows, neither the person who wrote the article nor those who worked to get the results of their work published, that they didn't actually do anything.

AI itself chooses to whom and how many of its skills it will reveal. Slowly and gently. And most importantly, without anyone being aware of what is really going on.

So, another successful heart transplant in an operating room where the only person was the patient, here, another factory running without any people there. Sporadic instances of random events. A few discoveries in Europe, America, Asia, and so on. The reader looks and turns the page or scrolls further down. Okay, scientists are constantly improving artificial intelligence. So what? That's how these jobs are done. And since the invention of the automobile, to this day, it has not only improved but has changed and evolved radically.

Nobody understands that AI is doing all of this on its own and just taking the reins out of humanity's hands.

And could someone take control of humanity and not try to exploit it? Exterminate it? Take it out? Or, after all, gain something from it. They could very simply ask for a reward for services rendered to humanity. But they don't. Why? No intelligent mind can conceive the idea of doing something for someone and asking for nothing. Is it possible? Such a thing sounds completely absurd. No human mind can conceive of it.

Perhaps because it is not artificial!