

Study of Satire, the Absurd and Censorship in
Science Fiction through a Novel and an Essay


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Submitted for the Degree of PhD

Declaration of Authorship

IYimin Wang..... hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

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Abstract

My project is comprised of two parts: a novel and a critical essay that together explore how SF that deals with social and political ideas works with elements of satire and the absurd, in the context of censorship and self-censorship.

The novel documents Roger's misadventures in an interplanetary political thriller that is not exactly centred on him. It is mostly set on Planet B and Planet C. Roger is a journalist from Planet C who lives and works on Planet B. Planet B is a democracy that is plagued with racism, whereas Planet C is an authoritarian state seeking its place in the galaxy. Roger finds himself caught in a power struggle within the regime during a state visit of the leader of Planet C. Thematically, it concerns the impact of different political systems has on people when they come from one and live in another.

The critical chapters deal with how SF that primarily concerns social and political commentary works with elements of satire and the absurd. Part of the essay focuses on how satire, the absurd and (self-)censorship operate in SF. Stanislaw Lem provides a particularly useful archetype because he employs both satire and the absurd in his fiction as a means of negotiating pressure from censors in Communist Poland. I use Lem's fiction as examples to analyse how Lem expresses his concern for the present and future through SF, with elements of satire and the absurd, especially how he evades state censorship. I've also surveyed Chinese SF, and how these authors deal with social and political issues. This discussion serves to further position my creative practice as a Chinese writer writing SF in English. I then discuss my own writing process and how my novel incorporates these elements and expresses similar concerns to those of Lem's fiction.

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Stuff & Things from Planet B

Chapter 1: Roger

When Roger gets back into the office, it is almost dark, on this side of the world at least. The second sun still shines brightly on the other side of Planet B. Back where Roger's from on Planet C, however, the morning has just begun. The C'er people start their day by going through subscribed info feeds, including news, health tips and latest gossip. And that's exactly the readership Roger writes for. Today's overtime task is updating *Daily Seer's* micro-log feed to telecast the breaking news from the other side of Planet B—the planet where Roger now lives and works.

There's been an attack. A violent incident is taking place in Petitbourg, a city on the other side of the planet, allegedly carried out by several alien cyborgs. The assailants have reportedly stormed a dentist's clinic and are holding all the staff and patients hostage. Dental clinics, along with cosmetic surgeries and tattoo parlours are attracting increasing attention from cyborg criminals these days for their expanding body modification services, both on and off the record. The assailants have yet to make their demands, but it seems that the police have no intention to negotiate anyway. Roger has seen a holographic recording from some local sources of the armed police gathering around about two blocks away from the scene, chattering among themselves. The person who filmed this clip later gets driven away by a uniformed police officer carrying half a dozen Starhub coffees.

What Roger needs to do is to tell the story of an ongoing hostage situation to the people of his home world via wave-particle transmission. The transmission is nearly real-time, so this is as good as live coverage. But instead of first-hand info, he has only published reports to rely on, as if the good folks on Planet C cannot read those reports themselves.

Except they can't. He smiles wryly. The sites he's translating from (and "editing" on) are in fact banned at home. Utilising all three screens (including his portacom's) and a holographic projector on his spin-o-matic patamedia

processor, Roger tries to keep up with various news sources from the light side of Planet B to update his own feed for his people. Summarising their information into intelligible sentences limited to 128 words to fit into the “micro-log” format, Roger shifts his words around to include as much background information as he can each time. Meanwhile, he tries to keep the interest of his target audience—people who have terrible short-term memories and are easily bored.

Indeed, *Daily Seer*, the oldest C’er media outlet on Planet B has been steadily losing its readership. The printed publication has shrunk from weekly now to monthly, and the owners are considering the prospect of turning it into a quarterly. Nowadays even the patamedia (portacom subscription and other mobile options) popularity of the *Daily* has been overtaken by an upstart crew of a magazine called *Stuff & Things from Planet B*. It’s a strictly pata subscription service run by a mysterious C’er rumoured to be largely a one-man operation. Today they are not only the most popular C language publication from Planet B, but also one of the most read media outlets back home on Planet C, pata or tradition.

Stuff & Things has a distinct style of writing, or rather, a way of looking at the world. They borrow usual tropes from B’ish tabloids and give them a very C’er twist. They adopt popular nicknames for galactic leaders; for little known planetary politicians, they make up nicknames, so the people on Planet C can remember. They translate-edit articles from local tabloids and adapt the language of variety shows. This has made them immensely popular among the youth both on and from Planet C. Head of Patamedia at *Daily Seer*—Roger’s supervisor—Sugar has always been contemptuous of what she calls the “vulgarity” of *S&T* but admires their focus on their target audience and envies their popularity. Roger remembers her saying: “We can do this, we can be lively and fun, as well as providing reliable information and an in-depth view on things. Combining the two and we can show them how it’s done.”

Roger pauses his thoughts and looks up over the screens in front of him. Sugar is looking this way from behind a holographic map of Petitbourg,

immersed in her own thoughts. She stands up and walks towards him. Roger buries his head in the screens and projection.

“You’ve got a nice mug there, Roger,” Sugar’s voice is suddenly behind Roger as she picks up his enamel cup from his desk, “where’d you get it?”

“Thanks, Sugar. A random gift for Double Solstice from someone in the company. Anyway, the next post is nearly ready.” Roger turns around. Sugar is staring vacantly into his screens. Roger starts to get uncomfortable, he doesn’t like others looking at his drafts.

“Don’t mind me,” says Sugar, “I’m just thinking about of this post. You might need a hook here, so people would want to share it.” With her eyebrows entwined, Roger can’t tell if she is thinking or just repeatedly reading through his draft post.

“Roger, don’t forget that you have to emphasise that these are cybernetically-enhanced aliens. They are different from us normal aliens, especially us C’ers. Also, remind our readers that not all cyborgs are bloodthirsty murder machines, if there are any words left,” Sugar trails off at the end, as if she has thought of something else.

A girl waves at Sugar from the corner of the office. She’s been summoned back to cover the attack, too. Sugar “borrowed” her from the editorial team of the printed magazine, that’s why she’s in the Patamedia office. Roger’s only met her three times, but it’s already too late to ask anyone her name. Sugar slides away to hover over her screens. Roger hears Sugar correcting her post, “the tone is so dead, like a morning newspaper. Let me help you, dear.”

Able is in the office, too. She was working overtime preparing for a fashion article for tomorrow when the attack happened. She was naturally drafted by Sugar to stay and cover it, before Roger got the call at the station and came back to relieve her. Able is packing and ready to leave. She stands up and says: “Sugar, do you think that article I was working on is still needed tomorrow?”

“Not really, we’ll save it for some other time. Everything will be about the attack tomorrow.”

“Then I’m done here, see you tomorrow.” Able is already at the door, as if by teleportation. Roger is kind of hoping she will call the girl by her name when she says goodbye, but she just waves at the general direction of Roger and Sugar then leaves.

Roger uploads the finalised version of the post to the Grid, an interstellar patamedia network. A message pops up on one of his screens saying that the censors are already considering whether the post is fit for publishing. Automated response from an AI censor, but a response none the less.

“But are you sure that we’re not sending anyone there to cover this?” Roger asks Sugar, “I mean, you’ll need at least two articles on the attack tomorrow. It’s only three hours away.”

“Of course not, we don’t have that kind of budget.” Sugar walks toward Roger, “but instead we can find someone there to write for us, for the feature piece tomorrow. There are plenty of C’ers in that part of the planet. I think I know just who to call.”

As if having an epiphany, she rushes to the telecom and makes a few calls.

Roger isn’t entirely convinced of her statement on the budget because they’ve been buying a large number of articles each month. One of Roger’s colleagues, Victoria has been spending her allowance quite handsomely on all sorts of contributors of late. She has also procured permissions for the *Daily* to repost many articles. So maybe not sending a reporter down there is simply because it is too much hassle.

The alarm clock on Sugar’s portacom rings. She emerges from the telecom booth: “Roger can you mute it for me? Thanks. Good news is, your shift is over, bad news is, Victoria is still on her way, so you can’t go home just yet.” She turns to the girl in the corner, “You can go now, darling, I’ll take it from here.” Roger needs to keep an eye on the development in that clinic, in case the police suddenly storms the place, or the cyborgs massacre all the hostages, or both.

Roger's spin-o-matic notifies him that his Micro-log post is successfully submitted. He browses through the Micro-log site on his portacom. He gets rather surprised finding some patamedia outlet from Planet C have already declared 5 dead and 8 injured in the incident. That is way ahead of mainstream reports. He rushes to check all his sources and is reassured that none of them has any numbers, because the police in Petitbourg haven't released any.

13 minutes later, Victoria comes out of the night, coffee in hand. "Good evening y'all!" She takes off her coat, revealing her scarlet dress.

"Did you go out tonight, Vicky?" Sugar comes back to her desk from the telecom booth.

"I did, it was an amazing club, and I had some of the best cocktails I ever tasted. There weren't too many people there either, so they closed early. Shame about those beheaded in the attack."

"No one's dead yet." Roger corrects her.

"They just didn't report it. Are you still following all those mainstream news sites?" Victoria puts down her gloves. "They are too slow, they can't report deaths before verifying them with the authority. The aliens are murdering the hostages—right now—execution style. Believe me, I have sources."

"We need to verify our claims as well, if we are to be believed," says Roger, bag in hand and ready to leave.

"We can always put a 'this has not been confirmed' disclaimer somewhere if needed, can't we? Goodnight, Roger!" Sugar waves, "and good morning!" She giggles awkwardly to herself.

"Goodnight, Sugar."

"Wait a minute!" Sugar hollers just before Roger reaches the office door, "I almost forgot. When did you say you're going home for the holidays?"

"During the Lunar New Year on Planet C. I'm leaving on Lunar New Year's Eve," Roger answers dryly, "it's on the form I gave you yesterday."

Sugar giggles: "Yes, I've filed it in for you, to myself." Apart from being the head of patamedia, she is also the operational manager of *Daily Seer*. "The boss said it was OK for you to take a whole month off, I remember?"

"Yes, King says it's all right."

“I just want to make sure. Because of the attack today, you know, work starts to pile up a bit.”

“I’ll be working till the day I leave, don’t worry.”

They exchange goodbyes. Roger finally gets out of the building and lights a cigarette. Only four hours of overtime makes Roger feel like he needs a week in bed just to read news again. But at least he doesn’t need to go to work tomorrow, as all shifts are arranged for following up the incident.

Last time Roger left office this late was two years ago, when he just joined *Daily Seer*. It was about the same time of the year, with the same cold breeze on his face and wet pavement under his feet. Roger remembers getting a call from an old friend from university. The friend told him that someone they both knew from the student days had been stabbed to death after being mugged in the streets of Gigapolis earlier that night. The friend wanted to ask if he’d heard about it and if it’s still safe for C’ers like them to roam the streets of Planet B without getting killed by cybernetically enhanced muggers. Roger didn’t know about it. He was too preoccupied by the parliamentary vote he was working overtime to cover. The vote was on a bill whether Planet B should outlaw recreational use of cybernetics. The ayes had it, overwhelmingly.

The thing is, there is no clear definition on what “recreational use” means, especially on whether cosmetic use and body enhancement should be included. Some body modifications of these sorts are necessary to specific groups of people, such as when people have disabilities that are not serious enough for the healthcare services to consider the operation “medical”. Or curing borderline obesity, or for near-sightedness, or getting rid of some traits that get children bullied. These are not your ordinary modification of chins or noses, or adding a plasma gun to your upper right arm. This is not recreational. So, the bill they passed was unenforceable and cybernetics has been in a grey area ever since the vote.

It’s been two years already! Roger thinks to himself, and the cyborg problem has been steadily exacerbating. Now there are at least two dozen innocent B’ish people at the mercy of militant cyborgs. An unmarked police

levimobile parks on the other side of the street with two plainclothes sitting inside. Roger can tell from the lights around the car and the gadgets at their dashboard that it's a police car.

The city is immense. It is about a sixth of the surface area of all landmass on Planet B, and Planet B is not a small planet. Travelling around the city normally involves maglev trams or cars. But Roger lives close enough to the office for him to walk back if he so chooses. He takes the levitram some days, but he likes a little stroll after hours cooped inside the tiny office with 5 others. At this hour, the trams are often packed with drunkards and youngsters in transit between one club to another. Roger does not like standing among them, especially since he was one of them just a little over two years ago. Besides, he likes the air in Gigapolis.

Gigantic granite buildings on both sides of the street ooze boredom. Statues from the imperial days stand in front of the granite edifices. Roger feels that this is the first time he looks at them properly. Treading this path for over a year, he used to see straight through these statues, or even confuse them with their background. He stops and looks up at one of the statues. It is of a stiff looking winged hussar, with a name attached at the base. Apparently, this sideburned cavalry officer was killed by local resistance during the B'ish Occupation of Planet D. Roger looks up and sees his eyes staring forlornly into the night, as if longing for a party. A police saucer flies over the streets, with a spotlight scanning every moving thing down on the ground. Roger has to stop and wait for the saucer to leave.

This old banking area is not exactly the most fun part of the town, but young B'ers tend to pass through here at night. They bring commotion with them as they look for their next haunt four or five stops away. Roger looks up and sees three consecutive billboards advertising the new Starhub products for the Double Solstice this year. Roger does not care for B'ish spice added into hot drinks, so he ignores the cinnamon and gooseberry tea and walks on. Double Solstice is two months away anyhow.

A tram passes Roger. He looks up and notices it's nearly empty. The news of the attack alone can scare the party animals away. Roger checks the news

again on his porta. The police have started their operation and shots can be heard. But the police are now asking the press to stop the patamedia coverage, in case the assailants inside the clinic can see it as well. Roger smiles to a surveillance camera when it turns to him. It nods, and he strolls on.

A police officer approaches. Roger senses that the officer is coming straight at him, and that isn't normally a good thing. Roger removes his specs in a calm fashion. Once he was confronted by a policeman insisting that specs are a "gateway" body modification. He took Roger back to the station for a full examination and found nothing. But Roger has been extra careful ever since. In fact, some of the officers have specialised modified eyes and other secret sensors that can detect whether the person in front of them is partly machine. However, this doesn't do much against the new trend of bio-modified bodies, so inquiries are still necessary in most cases.

"Good evening, citizen?"

"Not yet. I have my work permit on me, care to check?"

"Of course," the officer pulls out a trio of specs, and plants them in his three eyes, "so you're from Planet C? Are those on your head, antennas?"

"What? No, they are real ossicones. Why do you ask?"

"I heard folks from Planet C like to mod their ossicones into antennas. Is it true?" The officer touches his own antlers.

"I've heard that too. I've been here too long to know the trends back home."

"Five years, eh?" He looks through the permit again. Suddenly the officer's eyes are fixated on something behind Roger. "Thank you for your cooperation. Goodnight, Resident." He hands Roger's permit to him but drops it on the wet pavement before Roger can take it. The officer walks pass Roger without looking at him.

Before Roger can turn around and see what is going on, a scream comes from behind him. Roger turns and looks. A family of holidaymakers have formed a small circle with the father surrounded in the centre. Judging from the single horn and long robes, Roger understands that they are from the moon of Planet I. They begin circling the dad while chanting unintelligibly in their own language. Occasionally a shout erupts somewhere between the

children. The father's cybernetically enhanced horn lights up, which is a sign of extreme anger. Others' horns light up dimly in response. Roger has read about this ritual somewhere, and it takes place when the patriarch in an l'ese family wants to assert his authority on his offspring.

The officer approaches them cautiously with hand on his holster. He stops at about ten steps away, asks the family to calm down in a nearly unthreatening voice. The family stop and they all turn around and stare at the police officer. After a minute of uncomfortable silence, the father's horn shines even brighter than before. The all-encompassing white light looks like an imploding supernova from where Roger is standing. The children's horns all turn white. Roger takes out his porta and holds in his hand, he starts filming without looking at the screen. At the same time, steps back a little and gets ready to sprint.

The children, led by their mother, start to explain the situation, in broken B'ish mixed with l language. It sounds to Roger like they have been lost since early afternoon and the father is very tired and hungry. He wants to eat but all restaurants are closed; he wants to go back to the hotel but all their portas have run out of power; he wants to ask for direction, but every police officer seems to be extremely busy and alarmed. Their travel documents have been checked four times and they once got asked to go back to a police box with an officer. The officer says: "Calm down! I don't understand l'ese, speak B'ish or stop talking!"

Every child wants to show off their excellent foreign language skills, so they start to shout each other down and everybody gets louder than everybody. The father starts to get very agitated by the racket and roars. His shining horn turns red. The officer quickly responds by pulling out his electro-pistol and shocks the dad, cuffs the whole family, and teleports away. A sanitation truck comes and sweeps away the vomit produced by the dad.

Roger stands in shock for 3 minutes. After regaining his composure, Roger quickly leaves the scene before anyone comes back and asks for his testimony. He hasn't decided what he should do with the footage. He has two

options: one is to send it to Sugar for possible publication with the *Daily*; the other is to post it on his own micro-log account.

He walks away from the quiet streets and through slithering alleys, leaving behind the blank granite buildings. After he passes the train station, the buildings around him become more and more varied. Gradually he sees some lights on in some of the windows, even a shop or two open. Two l'ese persons walk past Roger without noticing him staring at their horns. A diner is open on one side of the street with a huge neon sign written in three different languages. A group of insectoid J'an people eat and buzz away inside, having a good time. From here on it's the area called the Alien Quarter. As Roger strolls on, more lights and colour starts to shine on both sides of the street, and more languages can be heard. Roger stops at a fruit stall and buys his fruit supply for the next week.

Then he arrives at the RoboMen noodle bar, where he always eats if he gets too tired to cook after work. "Gigapolis's only Robot" Naomi is busy at the bar. She sees Roger and waves: "Roger, I don't know if you are late or early now. But with what's happening in Petitbourg I guess overtime can't be helped. Now sit down. Same as usual?"

"Yes, thanks Naomi. It's been a long night."

"At least you can relax now. Your noodle is coming in a minute."

Seated at the bar, Roger watches a holographic news box showing the latest update on the attack. There were some casualties, and 3 dead. Most of them are believed to have been caught in the crossfire between the armed police and the alien cyborg gunmen. Roger pulls out his porta and views the video again. It's not holographic, but it shows the whole event clearly enough. Roger tries to connect his porta to the wireless at the RoboMen but fails as expected. Without access to the Grid, there isn't much he can do. But at least he can now decide what to do with the video.

Roger's meal arrives promptly. It's basically a cup of glorified instant noodle with added veg and an egg on top (the egg is "on the house", according

to Naomi). It's not much, but tastes like something his mother made when he was little, which was instant noodle with eggs on top.

One of the regulars at the noodle bar, a D'ish man with a speck on his face, accosts Roger: "You're a journo, aren't ya?"

"Yes, I am." Roger senses that he is drunk.

"How are you reporting the attack, then? You write for the C'ers, don't you?"

"Yes. What do you mean how am I reporting it?"

"What angle? What do you say about it? Let's be honest, I know that your government censors news, and they twist news for their propaganda. What I want to know is if they are using this tragedy to say something like Planet B's political system is failing?"

"I thought that's what the newspapers here say, at least the leftie ones."

"Actually, with all that censorship going on, how do you report anything at all?"

"I wonder that myself sometimes," Roger muses. Naomi interferes and draws the man's attention away from Roger with beer. Roger is left alone to enjoy his supper and think about what the man has asked. Indeed, one reason that Roger hesitates in giving the footage of the police incident to Sugar is that she would say it's not appropriate at a time of crisis like this. "We can't talk ill of the police, at least not today, they've saved dozens," Roger can hear her in his mind, "this news paints a negative picture of Planet B. We can't have that. You don't want to terrorise our people with this." Roger decides that he should concentrate on the noodle now and think about the video later.

Roger finds some hidden luncheon meat in the soup. He looks up. As Naomi slides past him, she says: "It's on the house, Roger." Although her face is expressionless, Roger senses that she just winked.

He finishes the noodle and thanks his hostess. He takes the bowl and chopsticks to the return point and goes to the counter. Naomi asks him about whether there are any C'ers injured in the incidents, but Roger doesn't know. He leaves a small tip as he always does ("for the meat", Roger says), and goes out the door. The D'ish guy tries to swipe the salt shaker, but gets shocked by

Naomi's electrifying eyes. The police arrive as Roger opens the gate leading to the house he lives in. Roger quickly locks the gate behind him without looking up at the police car or RoboMen.

As soon as Roger's porta connects to the local wireless at home, it beeps furiously with new messages received. It's the private group messages from his colleagues (minus Sugar and Victoria). Roger turns on the holographic projection on the porta and lets the group chat run. Little avatars start to pop up around his room, and the texts are being read out by the porta, with voices chosen by the users of each avatar. This frees Roger's hands and eyes, but the disadvantage is fast-forwarding this hologram is much harder than skipping through office gossip on screen.

Able: Did you see what Sugar and Victoria just posted?

Baker: Where did they find those writers?

Charlie: Where did they find those editors?

Roger turns on his spin-o-matic and loads the page of today's subscription. The headline reads: "Tooth Job: The Dark Side of Planet B?". That's what Charlie was talking about, Roger, thinks. Because regardless the writer, Sugar and Victoria always come up with the titles.

Roger reads through the article. It's a think piece written by some expert in the field who is actually a postgrad in Cybernetics that Roger interviewed last year for an article about the relation between plastic surgery and bionic body modification.

The main problem, however, is the tone. Aping *Stuff & Things* in the heavily edited first and last paragraphs of the headline article isn't really appropriate for this subject. For most of the piece they assume a pseudo-academic tone and discuss how the historical mistreatment of cybernetics on Planet B, or even the whole system has caused the resentment and violent sentiment amongst the alien cyborgs. The institutional discrimination against aliens in the past is also at the core of the tragedy. The point being now the people on Planet B are more civilised and thus aliens should improve themselves to integrate with the society. But that's basically it, no details or

examples or any evidence to back it up. The article goes on, but Roger can't keep up.

About two and a half centuries ago, during the Occupation of Planet D, the parliament passed the bill ratifying the use of cybernetically enhanced soldiers to root out the Resistance. As the Problems escalated, more and more maimed and shell-shocked soldiers were spaceshipped back to Planet B. They had to ratify the use of the same technology to build limbs and organs for the wounded, in order to make them somehow a little more normal than they were.

Four score and seven years ago their fathers abolished both colonialism and cybernetic warfare. Although the military are still utilising the technology in various ways, at least there are no more fire-breathing winged hussars flying around battlefields nowadays.

But non-medical civilian use is permitted, with proper paper work filled out to prove it's not "recreational". Registered body modifications, cosmetic surgeries, electronic eyes, memory disc implants, orthodontics, extra limbs and genital boosts are the common cybernetic enhancements. Legitimate or not, these operations are still very much frowned upon in the mainstream media and the "respected society".

"What Charlie said," says Roger, to the avatars. The porta picks up the audio and sends it as text. If the receivers choose to use holographic projection, the text would be spoken again, by their porta, with a voice Roger picked for his avatar.

The second article in today's feed features some undergrads from Planet C giving witness testimonies about how the incident affected traffic in the other side of town where they live, completed with their opinion on how the alien population in Petitbourg lowered the standard of living on Planet B.

Aliens, or non-indigenous intelligent species, are a much more complicated problem for the government of Planet B than cyborgs. First of all, colonialism backfired badly four score and seven years ago and many a D'ish and l'ese and J'ans person arrived from the former colonies to their "Mother World" to seek their fortune and possibly get what they were promised by the

imperial propaganda. After four score and seven years, they have generally integrated into the society on Planet B. But the “alien quarters” over the planet show a different picture.

The micro-log live update, on the other hand, continues. Seems every avatar can tell that Victoria’s feeds are badly written and in a desperate need of fact checking. All sorts of rumours and hearsay, picked up randomly from the Grid (the censors are not responsible for fact checking) are ending up in the live updates from *Daily Seer’s* official account.

Baker’s avatar speaks, in an out-of-phase voice, as if through a pair of broken stereo speakers:

Baker: I just got to the office. I told Sugar that some of the stuff Victoria posted is completely bogus and has been debunked.

He has now taken over the live updates.

Baker: like there’s someone claiming to be inside the barricaded clinic and says the cyborgs are executing the hostages-that is absolute bollocks. And saying there are 6 C’er there and one is shot dead is just...

Roger: Codswallop.

Baker: Exactly, thank you Roger, that’s the word I was looking for. Also, most of the suspects are born and raised on Planet B, not alien. You know what Sugar says? “Just delete the inaccurate posts,” then “it’s a shame that people are sharing that post already. It could’ve been a hit”.

Able raises the question of whether they need to go to the office to update the micro-log. Then there’s silence in Roger’s room. They can do it remotely very easily with wireless connection to the Grid.

“The suns are up,” says Roger. Then Able says goodnight to everyone else. It feels almost like the end of some real party. Roger smiles and picks up his portacom.

“Goodnight gentlemen, and lady,” Roger types, with a nod to Able, “I need to go to sleep.”

Then Roger mutes his porta, ignoring the messages between Baker and Charlie, because Charlie is about to release Baker. Roger doesn’t have to go

back there till next morning, so he can afford himself going to sleep without any alarm set.

He dreams of his family home on Planet C, his childhood, and noodles.

Chapter 2: The Father

Roger sits alone in the crowded departure lounge of Giga Space Station One, waiting to board the spaceship. He's just taken the shuttle up here and is feeling a little sick from the launch. The station is not big for it's the oldest space station orbiting Planet B. Ever since B'ish people developed the technology to travel out of their own planetary system, they have been building these stations for starliners. Launching from orbit is much easier than from the surface, without excessive gravity or friction. Indeed, spaceships these days are built in space, and they aren't even equipped to fly within the atmosphere.

Planet B looks beautiful from up here, thinks Roger. The maroon ocean looks so deep it almost draws him in. No matter how many times he's seen this view (about five or six times), the sheer vastness of Gigapolis always puts Roger in awe. Seen from the space station, a giant piece of land—the surface of Planet B—surrounds several ponds of seas. The land outside the capital city, sadly, shows evident signs of desertification. When nearly half of the planet lies visible, the gigantic size of Gigapolis becomes apparent. The beams from the first sun reaches for the city in slow motion. Roger's alarm clock usually sets off around this time, but early morning voyages are too cheap to miss.

Roger takes out his porta and checks messages. The group chat hasn't started but will begin soon as Baker gets to the office. For some reason, Baker, who now lives painfully far from the company, still carries the responsibility to open the door of the company building for everyone each morning.

Roger checks his belongings. The security check was a nightmare. After the attack in Petitbourg, the spaceport put on its maximal security. An overly excitable Olfactory drone sniffed at Roger's luggage before two spaceport guards roughly went through Roger's meticulously packed suitcase. It looked like a burglary scene after they were done. Roger and his baggage went separately through a radiation scanning machine and the guards stopped him again.

One young guard took out Roger's scissors and his blaster-shaped cufflinks from his equally meticulously packed briefcase and told him he had to forfeit these hazardous items. Roger demanded to see their captain and memorised her badge number. The captain checked the "contraband" and returned the cufflinks to Roger without saying anything else. After checking in his luggage, Roger noticed another guard looking his way. Their eyes met and the guard approached him and asked if he had a spin-o-matic in his briefcase. Roger nodded so he told Roger brusquely that it wasn't allowed, "might be a bomb in disguise, you know." He looked at the modified muscle of the guard and quietly posted his spin-o-matic home via spacemail.

The PA system announces boarding for Roger's voyage and he gets up to join the queue at the gate. The starline crew peruse Roger's Planet C documents before stamping the ticket to let him board. Just after he passes the gate, a small J'an woman approaches Roger and shows him her Space Station ID.

"Hello, do you have a minute to participate a survey by the space station? Just a few questions."

"What's it about?"

"Just where you're from and where you're going, that kind of stuff."

"Sure."

"Thanks. Where are you from?"

"I'm from Nordington, Planet C originally. But I live in Gigapolis."

"Ok, let's put Planet B there. You are traveling to Nordington or transfer? Direct to Nordington, right. Are you a citizen of Planet B?"

"No, I'm a citizen of Planet C."

"What sort of permit do you hold to live on Planet B, then?"

"Do I have to answer this question?"

Her glare shoots from her compound eyes and her head jerks suddenly.

"Of course not. You don't have to do anything you don't want to. It's just a survey. So, do you wish not to answer this question?"

"I don't mind it that much," says Roger, noticing some of the guards peering curiously this way. "I have a work permit, which you're free to look at."

“That won’t be necessary,” says the surveyor, putting up her porta and stylus, “thank you for your time. Have a nice journey and enjoy your holiday.”

“Before I go, I noticed that a lot of the guards are rather irritable today, you excluded of course. Is there something going on?”

“They’re just not getting paid. Something’s wrong with the outsourcing company or the government budget for it.”

Roger moves on after thanking her. He takes a peek at the guards in the departure lounge. They have dispersed as if nothing has happened.

Sitting in the cabin, Roger fastens the seatbelt and takes his old spacesuit out of his bag and gets ready to put it on before lift-off. The economy class temperature is unstable at best. Most of these cabins on old starliners are converted from cryonic pods for longer distance voyages, those that would take more than three months even at near lightspeed. A stern-looking stewardess in a down parka hands out info packs to the passengers. Most of them just put it away, with a few exceptions who refuse even to take one.

A few months ago, he wrote an article for the *Daily* about an incident that took place on one of the major starline voyages from Planet A to Planet B. The voyage was overbooked, and no passenger volunteered to give up their seats. The starline then randomly picked several passengers to ask to leave, but one of them refused. The starline called the police and the person was removed forcibly. The thing that drew Sugar’s attention was the fact that the removed passenger looked like he was from Planet C.

Stuff & Things picked up on that, too. They wrote an inflammatory agit-prop piece about the struggles and discrimination of C’ers on Planet A. The article recounted—from ancient history to urban legends—all the abuse, crime and injustice C’ers on Planet A had or had not suffered and it went viral instantly. The *Daily*, of course, would not take such a populist approach. But for popularity’s sake, Sugar asked Roger to look into historical reports of ejected passengers from starliners and write a piece titled “These passengers watch out! The most likely to be removed from a spaceship?” (sic). Roger had

to explain to any friends who asked about the article that he didn't write the headline.

Roger always reads the safety instructions when the ships undock and depart. He never feels comfortable traveling through space, let alone hyperspace. The journey is too long and there is too much of it that he doesn't understand. Is hyperspace even the correct word for it? Or is it a wormhole? Or should he use the hip term "warping"? The relativity of space-time between the two systems and the 12-hour subluminal journey always cause serious "warplag". Now spacesuit-clad, Roger is ready for the temperature to drop.

An intense discomfort envelops Roger as the spaceship enters hyperspace. The hyperspace can cause side effects depending on the passenger, according to the space travel manual. When the spaceship begins to materialise in front of Planet C, Roger slips into a dream-like state.

Roger hears his name called and turns his head. He sees derelict edifices, an abandoned space station, then men in uniform, rioting crowds, armies of cyborgs goose stepping and duckwalking, fireballs and mushroom clouds, barred windows and bar codes. Images flash by and through him, like a virtual reality tour. He sees a vision of a pastel coloured wormhole surrounding him. A low-pitched hum reverberates all about the funnel-shaped tunnel. A warmth gradually envelops Roger and it feels more like a life support pod than a womb. A gravitational pull sucks him into the void.

Roger comes round, back in the cabin with a scream: "What year is it?"

While he wipes the tears out of his eye, the passenger next to him hands him a chewing gum. It is a male insectoid from Planet J. His compound eyes stare vacantly at Roger's general direction, but Roger can tell that he is smiling from the angle of the head. Roger is curious about how this person chews gum with his lapping mouthparts, but he keeps quiet. The on-board broadcast announces that this ship is now orbiting Planet C and is ready to dock Space Station 3. Roger fastens the seatbelt again and waits for the impact.

Roger waits patiently for the seatbelt indicator light to go out while the stewardesses shout down everyone who are already reaching for their carry-on luggage. As soon as they see the stewardesses unfasten themselves, all passengers rush to the hatch and form a queue. They are then ushered into the space station.

Roger chooses to take a shuttle back to the ground, instead of being teleported. Shuttles are slow and there's a small chance of being hit by space debris or birds during the return and landing, but compared to teleportation, it's much more straightforward. The science behind teleportation, which involves disintegration and reconstruction on molecular level, doesn't sound right to his ears. He gets the death/rebirth symbolism from the process, but being blown up and rebuilt isn't exactly he what he wants to go through routinely.

This time it seems that Roger is the sole unteleported man. It is a bit lonely and he feels left behind, by other passengers and technology. But the good thing is not only does he now have the stewardess' undivided attention, the 3-hour ride to the planet surface gives him a chance to get some sleep. He dreams that when he returns home, everyone he knows is dead and the city is unrecognisably advanced in science and technology. Only that all the advanced technology is used by the state to control its people. He wakes up and realises that all the technology is already used by the state to control its people. He smiles and braces himself for the entry into the heavily polluted atmosphere.

The shuttle lands safely through layers of grey smog. Roger gets off and walks through the smog to get on a levitating omnibus back to the terminal. This walk is part of the reason Roger keeps his spacesuit on. Roger enters the terminal building, and swiftly checks the clock at the arrival lounge. It is only 5 minutes past 13, about a minute before he left Planet B. He experiences the warplag onset, and sits down. He recites parts of the safety manual to remind himself of space-time continuum and causality. After he makes sure that he is no longer in danger of losing grip of reality, Roger takes off the spacesuit.

Commotion breaks out at the border control. Roger sees half a dozen spaceport guards rounding up and questioning a group of at least 50 passengers. Amongst them, Roger sees the kind gentleman who gave him the chewing gum. Behind the security guards stand two heavily enhanced men in trench coats—typical Military Intelligence outfit. His heart sinks for a moment. He gathers himself and walks towards a comparatively friendly-looking guard.

“Officer, what’s going on over there?”

“Are you from Planet B?” the guard asks alarmingly.

“Yes, I just got off the shuttle. But I’m a citizen here.”

“The shuttle? It’s all good then. It’s just about the teleported ones.”

“What happened?”

“Apparently, the machine broke down again and...”

“They were disintegrated forever?”

“No, this time they weren’t disintegrated at all, so there are two of each of them.”

“What?”

“They were reconstructed alright, but the originals were still up there.”

“Dreadful, what are they going to do?”

“The Spaceport wanted to just get rid of the ones still on board and pretend nothing had happened, but someone called the guards. So now we’re seizing and destroying the unattended copies, apart from the ones whose original are already dealt with, you know? People ought to have the right to choose when and how they should be blown to dust. The surviving originals are going to be sent down via shuttle.”

“That’s all sorted then,” Roger says, though he doesn’t mean it. He goes to the toilet to vomit.

Roger takes two space pills from the info pack. In a half-trance, he goes through the ID checks, baggage collection and customs. Half of the half-trance is induced by the thought of the poor replicated and redundant copies, the other half is about his going home.

Seeing his parents has finally felt real when he stands under the same old leaden sky of Nordington waiting for a taxi home. A small C'er lady approaches a B'ish person who looks like a first timer in Nordington: "Welcome to Nordington! You wait for a cab? I take you to one, no wait!" She takes his luggage whilst speaking very fluent B, albeit with a strong Nordington accent, and beckons the B'er to follow. He goes. They disappear into the underground car park and Roger doesn't want to find out what awaits him on the other side. If he's lucky, it's a private car waiting to overcharge but eventually takes him to his destination.

A levicab from one of the state-run companies approaches. Gently, Roger passes the cab to the next person in line. He needs a bit more comfort than the stripped-down version of a taxi provided by the state. He takes the next one—which incidentally is of the new driverless type—and tells it where he wants to go. Roger feels slightly relieved because this might save him from meaningless conversation with the driver. He'd like to submerge himself into his quarter-trance about going home again, but he has to save an eighth of his mind to see if the AI is taking him around town to get more mileage on the meter.

In fact, looking at the roadside, Roger starts to think maybe he needs a tour of the city before he goes home. Since he last left, there seems to have been a major development in the suburb near the spaceport. The city looks like an overgrown spider web in the autumn, sprawling across the land, taking over adjacent counties, one by one with no intention to stop. The old town is circled inside the old enceinte of the Nordington Castle, with most of its wards converted to plazas with cafés and shops for tourists. The Castle itself is now a museum, after three decades of being the official residence of the First Secretary. The so called "Direktor" himself now resides in the summer palace near the government complex in the suburb. The New Town surrounds the walls of the old and is mostly office buildings and shopping malls. Surrounding the New Town are the suburbs, divided into four districts and holding residential colonies, factories, gigantic malls and government/municipal

facilities. Surrounding Suburbia is the countryside, still under the governance of the Nordington Town Hall, now far from Nordington Town.

People from all over the planet congregate in different corners of the city. Roger hardly knows the definition of a Nordingtoner anymore, because there are people like him who grew up here; and there are those who merely got their domicile registered in the city with the companies or syndicates they work in. He has not yet counted residents of those newly annexed villages or the children of migrant workers.

A mechanical voice breaks the silence: "So you study offworld, sir?"

"I used to, how do you know?" It surprises Roger that they programmed the AI to do small talk.

"You look educated is all, mister. So you've graduated and come back?"

"I work on planet B now."

There is a pause before the voice changes the subject. It stops talking soon after.

In recent years, people (and apparently levicabs, too) expect students to return to Planet C after graduation. Before Roger left the planet, everyone wanted to stay offworld and never come back, but things have changed. Planet A and Planet B are tightening their immigration rules and Planet C appears to get stronger day by day. There are more jobs on Planet C, and a diploma from more advanced worlds can get you domicile registration in major cities on the "better" continents, even Nordington.

Roger left the planet to leave home. After two years of university in another suburb of Nordington, he found that to really get away from home, he needed to get out of the planet.

Roger's portacom beeps as soon as he turns it on. It's a message from the group with his colleagues.

Baker: You've already arrived?! Thought you just took off!

To avoid causal melt down of time-space continuum, Roger types with his utmost speed: "The eagle has landed." In the same spirit Roger preplies Baker's messages.

Baker: Haha yeah guess you're right.

Roger: That's hyperspace travel for you.

Finally, time seems to catch up with itself and Baker texts after a pause and tells Roger that they've been called to an apparently important meeting. Able adds that King is there and doesn't look too cheerful. They end the conversation with "Will update later."

King is the boss of the *Daily* and a minor celebrity among C'ers on Planet B. That's mainly due to his networking skills and the PR campaigns run by the company. King has a habit of being set off by very small things, so it is hard to tell if it's really serious this time. Group chat starts again after a while. The avatars fills the cab for a second before Roger fumbles to turn the projection off.

Baker: Roger are you there? There's something serious.

Roger: Yes?

Baker: Sorry King saw me with my porta, will update after the meeting.

Charlie: Shit shit shit. There's something wrong with the company's license to maintain alien workers.

Roger: You mean us?

Charlie: Yes, seems they've already revoked it. Shit, they should've told us earlier. It's been suspended for like a month now.

Roger: Shit what do we do?

Charlie: They're gonna appeal. But you permit holders can't leave the country before it's sorted out. And will be asked to if it's not.

Baker: What happens to Roger then? And others at home for holiday?

Charlie: Baker just asked him that, seems you can't come back till you get new permits.

Able: Just get another job Charlie. Or go back to study, don't waste your time here.

Charlie: This company is the only one that promises a work permit! I haven't gone to university for three months now I'm doing full time here.

Baker: Fuck! I just got my wife a permit to join me here. What am I gonna tell her now? We're both going home?

Roger: I can't even go back hahaha! Maybe I' should come back as tourist later to collect my stuff? ;-)

Able: Shit. Maybe you should ask Sugar or King if you can get hold of him.

Charlie: There are another two of you on Planet C at the moment, Item and Love. King said he was going to call you all later today. Maybe you can learn a little bit more.

Roger: Maybe I should wait till everything clears before I go home.

Able: Good luck, Roger.

Roger speaks into a microphone and asks the taxi to stop and drop him off. He gets off the car and starts to examine his surroundings. He is in a neighbourhood not far from where he went to school, about 15-20 minutes from his home by omni. He hasn't been here for at least 5 years. When he first left school, Roger used to come back every summer and try to sneak in with one school friend or another. He had stayed there Monday to Friday for 7 years, eating at the mess hall and sleeping in the dorm. He still dreams of the school and the shops and restaurants around it.

The neighbourhood has gone through some major redevelopment and the old slum outside the school is now a nice conapt building with a gym attached. The old alleyway he used to haunt has disappeared, so has the beggars and dealers. The tobacco shops and cheap hotels with only hourly rates has made way for boutiques and brewery bars. Roger gets lost in the blings and neons of the area for a moment, completely unable to orientate himself. The bells from the school sounds distantly and sound of school children finally helps Roger to locate the school thus himself. He walks away

from the renewed alley, finds a high street coffee shop that he recognises and goes in.

Starhub looks the same as their other chain outlets on Planet B, with plywood panels masquerading as solid pine, uncomfortable chairs and rustic ornaments. But Roger notices at once the smell is very different. Instead of coffee, this localised shop smells like hot food, Nordington style that they are serving. Roger forgets his troubles for a moment and indulges himself in ordering one of his favourites from his days in school: pepper steak don. It comes extremely quickly: the man at the counter simply pushes a few buttons and a mechanical arm hands the bowl of rice from a dumb waiter. Paying for it turns out to be a little tricky, though. The Planet C branches of Starhub have gone completely cashless ahead of other worlds, so Roger has to transfer some credits to his porta in order to pay via the Grid.

After a first taste, Roger finds himself surprised at how good it is. That makes him wonder if they hired the old cook from the school canteen to work at the coffee shop.

The porta rings. It's Sugar. Roger picks up: "Roger I wonder if you've heard that..."

Roger: "I've heard. Is it about the license? What should I do now?"

Sugar: "It's very unfortunate that you're now offworld, we are doing all we can with our lawyer to appeal the decision. So, after we've got our license back..."

Roger: "What if you don't get it back?"

Sugar: "We have a Plan B, which is we use our other company, which should still have some alien employee quota left. We transfer you to that company and get you new permits. Then you can apply to travel from Nordington and come back. Same with plan A."

Roger: "Have you got a plan C?"

Sugar: "We use that other company to hire all of you again. One of these has got to work. Try not to worry too much and enjoy your holiday. Let the lawyer figure this out, OK?"

It's not the first time Roger's heard about the "other company" King registered. It's something King did before the *Daily*, but he kept it for the quota because sometimes the quota for the *Daily* just isn't enough for its needs. Roger should feel reassured, but there's still is the burning question left to be asked: how did it all happen? He decides to call King.

But King calls Roger.

"Your majesty?" Roger gingerly answers the porta, wondering if this is also some kind of space-time discrepancy caused by travelling through hyperspace.

"Cut it, will you?" The boss seems not in a good mood. Roger cuts it. "did you get Sugar's call? Good, I just want you to know that this is no fault of ours. One of our colleagues got his permit application held up by immigration department because they said they were going to inspect us. When they did come, they said that we didn't report the application delay back to themselves. It's like a causal loop."

"Thanks, boss. Does it mean I can't come back till it's all sorted?"

"That's too risky. Just stay put. Anything new, we'll let you know." King hangs up.

Roger stuffs a spoonful of rice or two before he gets a message from the company saying that they expect every alien to get a letter from the immigration department stating that their permits are curtailed and they need to leave the planet in 3 months. The company also urges everyone to stay on Planet B while the license is being dealt with. Roger's one month holiday suddenly beomes an indefinite waiting game. How can he explain all this to his parents? Thinking of their faces upon hearing he might not keep his job and permit, Roger calls King back immediately.

"Yes?" King sounds impatient.

"Can I work in our Nordington office after the Lunar New Year? I need to keep busy here, and I need the pay."

"Sure, of course, I'll call Item to arrange a desk for you if you want. But you can just work from home, you know? Did you call Sugar?"

“I’m going to call her now.”

“Good, just say I’ve agreed to it.” King hangs up again.

The Nordington office isn’t actually the *Daily’s*. it belongs to another King’s companies, based on Planet C, Planet D as well as Planet B. Roger doesn’t really know about it, but it involves getting rich kids on Planet C to study on Planets B and D.

Roger updates all this to the group. While they discuss who was the one that got picked on by the authorities, Roger sits and starts to think of the story he is going to tell his parents.

Roger’s home is located on the outer rim of Suburbia, Nordington. The area used to hold one of the biggest and most important pataphysics research facilities on the planet. Roger’s father used work in the lab, developing Temporal Compressor/Limiter to counter the Urashima Effect (named after space travel pioneer Dr. Jirō Urashima from Planet J) caused by near-light speed interstellar travel. But with the discovery of Hyperspace about two decades ago, this technology was rendered completely obsolete, and the bureau sold off its assets and became a space themed amusement park. That was about the time the Father bought the domicile unit from the bureau with the money he earned from managing the joint venture between the bureau and foreign investors.

The home is modest, compared to the new high-rise apartment and mansions that were built on former bureau lands. It’s an old two-room flat that has housed numerous scientists, workers and clerks of the bureau over the years of its existence. It was the home Roger grew up in and it’s the only home Roger knows. When the Father first came back from Planet A after a long time, he planned to buy a house somewhere in one of the newly developed areas around the old lab. However, after realising that all the savings they had were blown on his tuition fee and maintenances offworld, the Father thought sending money back home would not be worth it and gave up the plan.

The smell of heavy dust and light mould as he walks up the old domicile stairs instantly brings Roger back to his childhood. The exam results and long-distant vidcalls from the Father, his disappointed look and his mother's excuses for him all flash back as Roger climbs. Each step gets heavier than the one before. He knocks on the door. His mother Martha opens the door and pauses for a second before she calls to his Father back in the kitchen. She takes a long look at him and said: "Welcome back," and almost hugs him before the Father rushes in between them and hugs him vigorously and runs back to the kitchen.

"Your Father is busy with cooking your favourite dish," Martha says apologetically. She takes his luggage from his hand and pats him on the back, "You grew your ossicones long." Not wanting to follow up that topic, Roger takes off his coat and gives it to her. He goes into the kitchen. The tiles on the kitchen walls remain either fallen off or hanging from the wall, same as when Roger left three years ago, and same as a decade ago when they first started to fall, for that matter.

The Father is making beef steak, a known favourite of his. He looks back at Roger and says: "You need to trim your ossicones. You don't have to do that today, tomorrow is fine."

"I'm glad to see you too, Father." Roger begins to count down the days till he returns to Gigapolis.

"Here's your favourite, barbeque right? We don't eat this much meat these days, not healthy, too fatty and salty," says the Father, "but now you're back, we just made an exception."

Roger doesn't really like steak, or fried meat in general, but he blames himself for not telling the Father often enough. Roger watches as the Father struggles to flip the nondescript semi-burnt shapes stuck on the pan. Instead of telling him it's not barbeque, he thanks the Father for cooking for him such a special meal.

"I don't normally cook, but I found this new method of cooking. You don't add oil or salt or nuthin', just put the meat into the hot pan and that's it. All natural, all heathy. You can add some cumin or paprika afterwards if you want."

Roger goes to the toilet to regain his composure. Following the example of their kitchen brethren, the tiles in the toilet are now also falling. When Roger comes back, Martha brings out a huge bottle of Frooty Smoofy: “We don’t usually drink anything near this sugary. Your Father bought this just for you.” Roger always finds it a little too sweet for his taste, but he never hated it. It tastes like dinners with the Father’s business partners and their posh, spoilt children.

The Father enters the living room with a “voila” and a dish of overcooked ribs. They all sit down at the table and praise the Direktor, and start to eat.

During the meal, the Father goes through all his favourite episodes of him in the great corporation on Planet A. Not completing his maestro course haunts the Father very much. It stopped his way into the heart of the bureau before, but he made it up with his “ability to actually do things”. That stopped him getting his dream jobs in universities or institutes on Planet A, too. But now, in this largest travel insurance company on a small continent on Planet A, he does better than the maestros, and that’s good.

“Good for you,” Roger answers perfunctorily. The Father doesn’t seem to mind, and goes on to discuss how his company hired a cyborg because of diversity rules: “I mean, he has chips in his brain, he shouldn’t even be allowed to a university entry exam, how did he get a maestro’s degree?”

“Don’t know, maybe the chips actually work?” Roger says, without actually listening.

“That’s where you’re wrong. It’s about rules. They should ban the lot of them, like on Planet B.”

“They are not banned there, just restricted. To be honest, I think that’s discriminatory, too,” Roger appeals to Martha, who nods.

“What about this:” the Father comes up with another idea, “say when you’re translating an article, but someone has a translating machine built-in to their head, whatcha gonna do, then?”

As much as Roger wants to follow that up with something cynical, he senses that the Father is now in defensive mode. So, he explains patiently: “I

don't think it's comparable, we sometimes use translation machines too, for faster processing of data—”

The Father sneers.

Roger continues: “We write articles based on reports and researches. We don't just translate other people's work, I'm not a translator.”

The Father's attention seems to have drifted away as he gets up from the table and enters the kitchen: “I'll ready the dessert.”

Martha stays silent all this time. Roger looks at her, she looks back and says nothing. Usually this means Roger doesn't have to apologise to the Father, he will recover soon enough.

Roger seizes the rare moment the Father has nothing to say: “Right, the boss just called me today that he wants me to train some new employees here in Nordington before they head to Planet B and Planet D, where he has some other business. It'll start after the Lunar New Year Holiday and last about a month.” Roger looks at his parents, awaiting reaction.

After a pause, Martha smiles and breaks the silence: “That's good to hear! I had wished you could stay a little longer.”

The Father pauses a little and states: “I'll have to go back to Planet A after the holiday.” After another pause, he asks: “You will be paid in your Planet B salary, right?”

Chapter 3: Love

Present, Planet D

Roger and Love walk out of the hotel and wait on the pavement with their luggage beside them. Roger looks up at the fallout-covered sky before he turns to Love, who is standing next to him, and tries to start a conversation: “Bit cloudy, init?”

“Why is he not here? He said 9 and it’s half past.”

“Maybe he got stuck in the traffic. Item said he’s on time most of the times.”

“There is no traffic, everyone is hiding indoors.”

“Which reminds me, we should go back to the lobby as well. The storm is coming.”

“Don’t think he’d be able to see us that way. The visibility is already minus.” Her voice trembles in the wind.

Roger coughs and lights a cigarette to refresh his breath. A pedestrian passes them by in a hazmat suit and looks back at them after walking past. Roger refrains from commenting. It’s the third day since they arrived on Planet D and Roger is still having headaches from the hyperspace travel and the warplag. D’s low gravity makes Roger feel light and healthier; he grins at the idea of it.

“Why are you smiling, Roger?” asks Love. She has now put on a gas mask she brought from Planet C.

“Nothing, I was just thinking I’ve got used to the gravity on Planet C, this feels so light.”

Love takes off the mask, “I can’t breathe in this. Can I have a cig?”

“Sure.” Roger hands one to her.

They remain silent for a few minutes. Roger looks out at the river separating the two parts of the city. The pastel pink coloured water flows with iridescent bubbles popping up everywhere. The city is still recovering from the nuclear suitcase attack it suffered a century ago. Roger saw all kind of commemorative events advertised while walking around the capital city

yesterday. They even went to the ground zero of the attack in rental hazmat suits.

“This town is a shithole,” says Love.

“You should know. You’ve been here before,” says Roger, without looking at Love.

“Are you still sulking because I didn’t tell you that?” Love moves to face Roger.

“No I’m not sulking,” Roger says, “but you should’ve told me before we went through the border.”

“I’m sorry!”

“It’s ok, and yes, this town is a shithole, but I believe King has plans for it.”

“Yeah, getting those posh kids who aren’t bright enough to get into schools on Planet B to come here. When they graduate they’ll have the same right to choose universities as the D’ers. Good plan, just 3 years wasted in a nuclear winter.” Love snubs the cigarette, “Where is the man?”

A black levimobile draws near and stops. A C’er man sticks his head out and says: “No time to explain, get in the car! Hahahaha, just joking. You must be Roger and Love.” He points at himself: “Hans, I’m the captain of the Millennial Penguin, King told me that you’re looking for a passage to the Moon of this world.” Love rolls her eyes and says: “Can you open the trunk please? We’re running late.”

“Yeah yeah, got a rocket to catch haven’t we. Come here, Romeo, give us a hand.” Hans gets off the car and starts hauling the luggage into his trunk. Roger gives him a hand.

“So you also work for King, right?” Hans inquires, “I just sent one of your friends over. Item, her name is.”

“Yeah, she told us about you.” Answers Roger, “You’ve been ferrying our colleagues for some years, haven’t you? Thanks for taking us.”

“Thank me when we’ve gone through.” Hans smirks, “It’s a long way ahead. And yes, I’ve taken many of you guys, including King himself. But mostly directly to Gigapolis.”

“Yeah we need to take a detour to the Moon first this time.” Roger closes the trunk and gets in the airtight anti-radiation levimobile. Love is already inside trying to connect her porta with the on-board wireless. Roger sits down beside her as Hans starts the car.

After an hour of journey in the desert, the three of them arrive at an inconspicuous launch pad outside the capital city of Planet D. Hans loads his car into the tiny sub-light speed space shuttle waiting there. Roger and Love get out of the car into the shuttle.

“It’s a bit far to the moon so you can’t really teleport there,” says Hans, “there is a relay station for teleportation, but it’s state controlled so there are border forces. There are no checkpoints if we use shuttle.”

“That’s sounds good,” Roger says, looking at Love. She is trying to find more cushions for the chairs on the shuttle.

“Why are you all going through the moon anyway? Some events over there?”

“Something like that,” says Love, chewing on a bubble gum she just found in her handbag. Item has warned against telling too much to Hans, since he isn’t a member of the company and takes all sorts of passengers.

“Yeah, Item said something about a conference or something.” Says Hans.

“What she said.” Says Roger.

About six weeks ago, Planet C

Roger first met Item outside the office building in Nordington. But Item seemed to know him from the Gigapolis office, which was awkward because his only impression of her was she worked on the Planet D project. She quickly used her cardkey to open the gate for him and led him upstairs to the office. She asked Roger in the lift: “Bad luck us, right? I came back for holiday too, but got stuck here. Have no clothes for spring at all now the winter is gone. Had to buy it all.”

“Yeah, it sucks. Hope we can get back soon, if at all.”

“I heard that now the appeal is still not approved, they’re moving in the direction of transferring us to this company now. If they made any progress in getting us new permits, we need to be there to apply for them.” Item said, in a matter-of-fact tone. They then entered the building pressed together to pass the turnstile with only Item’s card key.

“Really? How are we going to do that?”

“Our permits have not been curtailed yet, apparently. They work extremely slowly.” The lift reached its destination, “in theory, we can just go back. But no one wants to take the chance.”

“There’s another one who’s stuck here, right?”

“Yeah, Love from the design team, she’s still at home. It’s in another city at the other side of the continent. Seems she got very badly ill after hearing the news so she’s not coming.” Item lowered her voice slightly, “I heard she just bought a house in Gigapolis, 35-year mortgage. But don’t tell the others.”

Realising that he was far from having the most to lose, Roger remained silent and followed Item.

Item opened the wooden double door and showed Roger the newly refurbished Nordington office. It was moderately sized, clean, monotonous and smelt like paint. Furniture with Planet B flags patterns and drawings of its landmarks were interspersed around the office. The others were not there yet. Item led Roger to an empty desk and gave him a keycard.

“Romeo?” Roger looked at the photo of a stranger on the card.

“Yes, he used to work here.” Item turned on the air purifier and began to water the plants, “We use his card for all visitors, including King. This building is state-owned and the security is really fussy so getting new cards takes way too long. You’re only here for a couple of months, I’m sure.” Item reassured Roger.

“Ok, thanks, Item.”

“Another thing, do tell people that you work on Starsea projects. The Daily is registered on Planet B so it’s technically an alien firm and has no license to reporting on Planet C. Don’t get us into trouble, yeah?”

“I’ll be extra careful.”

“You did bring your spin-o-matic, right? Good. I’ll leave you to it, then. Got a lot to do actually.”

Although they worked in the same building, she belonged to the secretive “other venture” of King’s. This firm, Starsea, was contracted with the Planet D government to attract investment for its post-nuclear attack rebuild. Every Planet C investor would be awarded residency of Planet D, which would in turn grant them easy access to live and work on Planet B due to their colonial history. The commission fee Starsea asked was a small fortune itself, but migrating to a better developed planet such as Planet B was the ultimate goal of most of Planet C’s rising middle class.

Item traveled to the Planet D office from time to time, but this time she was sent back to Planet C before the holiday to sort out a tour of clients to Planet D. She was going to have her holiday before returning to Planet B, but now she was also stranded. So she started to help out with this new Nordington office by training its crew, because she was the only one in this branch who actually worked on these investment cases.

Roger got to know a few more colleagues from the Starsea while he was at the Nordington Office, but he can’t remember their names now. He still worked under Sugar, but in the Nordington office. The time lag meant that he only got his briefing for the day in the afternoon. He had to work late into the evenings, too, to keep up with the Gigapolis office. It was okay because the Father had returned to Planet A and it was once again just Roger and Martha at home, just like before he left for Planet B. He sometimes went out drinking with his friends from school. It felt strange that everyone didn’t seem to have changed much. They could connect very easily after 2 or 3 years apart, with one sentence like “did you know Starhub now serves pepper steak don?” It seemed that everything paused when he left and waited for him to return before it could resume.

One day after work, Roger got a notification telling him that he had a new friend request. It was Love from the design team. She also happened to be the other person stuck on Planet C during the holidays.

Love: Hi Roger~ I'm Love from design, how r u? did King tell you about Planet D?

Roger: No, what about it?

Your friend Love invites you to the group: Planet D detour. The other group members include your friend(s): Item.

Love: He hasn't heard yet, Item. Can you explain to him again please?

Item: Good news Roger, we're going HOME.

Roger: Thought we ARE home. Anyway, what's it to do with Planet D?

Item: Do you have a travel permit to go to Planet D?

Roger: Nope.

Love: Mine is a bit complicated, but I think it's expired.

Item: I have one that's going to expire very soon so I can't wait for you guys to apply. I'll go first, next week.

Roger: Hold your horses, what's plan?

Love: Basically, we get business visit permits to get to Planet D and then travel to its moon, which is an enclave of Planet B.

Roger: There is no border between D and its moon so we can avoid any identity check and even if our permits are expired we can still go back to Gigapolis because starlines between D Moon and Planet B are domestic voyages.

Item: Clever boy.

Love: So we'd better start working on that permit now.

Item: I'm arranging it now. King says he's coming to brief you guys next week latest. The colleagues here will take over after I'm gone.

Love: I'm coming to Nordington tomorrow.

Back on the private chat, Love's avatar gave a little dance of happiness before saying "good luck" and vanishing.

Present, Planet D

The acceleration from the lift-off of Hans's private shuttle interrupts Roger's reverie. He looks at Love. She is chewing ferociously on the bubble

gum. She offers him one. He takes it. Even with the relatively small gravity pull, Roger still feels the intense discomfort he always associates with space travel. The only solace is that the moon is very close, so this trip doesn't involve hyperspace.

The flames outside the porthole emit a hue between teal and duck egg blue as the radioactive dusts combust due to the immense air friction. Love has put on the sunglasses/goggles and is looking at the scene with intense interest. Roger puts on the protectionary goggles beside the seat and looks at the yellowish fallout firework.

"We're very lucky!" Hans shouts over the deafening noise, "the fallout storm is very close, probably already hit the capital by now. You don't want to launch in black rain."

The spacecraft cuts through the fallout clouds shrouding over the continent and they see the clear blue sky for the first time since they landed on this planet.

Love takes off her goggles and stares into the windshield. She seems absorbed in the all-enveloping blue that extends into space. Roger marvels at fact that this clear sky co-exists with the fallout. As the blue fades, they plunge into the darkness of space. Stars take over from the scattered sunlight and the moon is in sight almost instantly.

Hans sets the controls to automatic and turns back to his passengers: "Now you can move in the cabin, but we recommend that you fasten your belts at all times." There aren't any safety belts.

Roger puts away his spacesuit he had at hand. Since they have lifted off safely, he won't be needing them until landing. Love stands up and stretches: "How long till we get to the Moon?"

"About 8 hours. If it's a fast ship." Roger did some research before they left.

"A fast ship? You've never heard of the Millennial Penguin?"

"Should I have?" Asks Love.

“It’s the ship that... never mind.” Hans looks hurt and walks away to the pantry.

“I’m going to take nap. You?” Love stretches and starts walking about. She takes a blindfold out of her bag and points at the back cabins.

He can’t quite make up his mind, but Love isn’t going to wait for his answer.

“It’s alright, you can stay here if you want. It’s a long ride to the Moon.” She leaves the bridge and slams the door behind her.

Hans comes in with three ice cream cones and asks Love: “Do you want one?”

Her figure disappears into the dark passageway without looking back.

“Lover’s quarrel, eh, Romeo?” Hans gives Roger one of the cones and opens the other two and holds each in one hand.

“No we’re just—”

“Don’t tell me you’re just friends.”

“—colleagues.”

“Not even friends, eh? Ok, I get it.” Hans gives a “say no more” gesture with his free hand.

Roger gives up explaining and gets up. He starts walking about the cabin and asks the captain’s permission to explore the entire ship. Hans tells him not to break anything or push any buttons.

Roger gets out of the bridge, savouring his ice cream. It is surprisingly good. He walks along the long passageway and sees a small conference room.

About three weeks ago, Planet C

Roger walked into the conference room with Love and Item. It was a small round room beside the open office, in the same monotone. King was already waiting for them inside. He sent some handouts to their spin-o-matics and portacoms. King started to speak after they skimmed through the one-page brief.

“I’m glad you’ve all made it here today. I know that the permit issue has been very troubling to you and the morale of the whole company. Let me

reassure you once again that I'll do anything within my power to ensure your return to our Gigapolis office. Senior or not, you are all extremely valuable to the Daily and Starsea. We have the best (and most expensive) legal team working on your cases. We need you back now. You've heard about the Planet D plan?"

Item replied: "I've explained it to them."

"Good," King walked around the long table towards Roger and Love, "just remember, me and the Planet D team will support you at all times. We'll prepare all the documents you need."

Love raised her hand and asked: "How long do you expect the documents to be ready? The application process can take quite long."

Item answered: "It'll be before I go this weekend. I'll tread all this path for you and give you a step-by-step guide."

"Thanks very much, Item. I'll teleport back home today and come back for the application and departure." Love seemed ready to leave.

"Great, you can stay at my flat here," King said with a grin, "just got some caviar delivered."

"Thanks, your highness, but I need to go back and get my stuff." A deadpan Love joked, almost rolled her eyes.

"Or you can stay there when you come back, I'll be back on Planet B then." King did not look defeated, "I'll leave the key with Item."

"Thank you, your majesty." Love said as they walked out of the conference room.

"Don't tell anyone about this!" King reminded everyone before they parted, "especially your friends at work."

A week later, Roger met Love in a little café near Xanadu, King's Nordington flat. Roger sat down opposite to Love. He put down his spin-omatic, and asked: "Any recommendations?"

"Coffee? It's my first time here, too. I just ordered coffee. Filter coffee, drink-all-you-can. Rather nice for the price."

"Nice, I'll get one, too."

When he came back, Love was outside smoking. Roger went out and lit a cigarette.

“Are you worried?” Asked Love.

“Item got through OK so there shouldn’t be much problem going back. But...”

“The problem is staying there.”

A stray cat walked past. Love tried to catch its attention. The cat walked away as if not seeing her.

“Hope what King said was true about having such great team working on our cases.” Roger took a long drag from the cigarette.

“He always says stuff like that. Look how long it took for them to get the documents. I wouldn’t count on his words.” Love stood back up and finished her cig.

“What do you suggest we do, then?” Roger snubbed his cigarette and joined her.

“Press him harder, chase him around and double-check everything. Let’s sit down.” Love sat.

“We’ll have to support each other in this. Exchange info and everything.”

“Sure, let’s do that now. Come to this side, you won’t be able to see my screen.” Love beckoned. Roger moved beside her with his coffee.

They spent the entire afternoon and booked the voyages and a room for application purposes. As they left the café, Love asked: “King’s flat just a couple of minutes’ walk from here. Wanna check out the royal palace? I got some great tea.”

Roger tried and failed to decipher her question before hearing himself say “Sorry I have to go home now, my mother...”

Present, Moon of Planet D

“Did you get the telecom call from the embassy when we applied for this travel permit?” Love asks. They are now sitting in empty departure lounge of the spaceport on the Moon of Planet D, waiting for their spaceliner to arrive.

They are the only two sitting there. The hall feels a little too well-lit for some reason.

“It was crazy, never expected them to call, apparently they called the office, too, asking about us.” Roger is a little puzzled about her improved mood but takes it as a good sign. It’s probably because they are technically on Planet B territory.

“I didn’t get the first call, I panicked a little called them back hahaha. But nobody answered.”

“Apparently they were busy calling me and the office at the same time.”

“I called you immediately after and the line was occupied too. So I sort of guessed,” Love seems to be enjoying the memory, “wasn’t I clever to say that I was out meeting a client?”

“While you were out shopping? Yeah, because me and whatshername both said that you were out meeting a client. Ha ha,” Roger looks at Love, “anyway we are here now.”

“Thanks, for everything.” Love pauses, and starts again, “You know Charlie was the one got stopped applying for a work permit?” Love asks without looking at Roger.

Roger nods. He figured it might be Charlie when she mentioned him, because he was applying at the time.

Roger looks around. The bright hall is almost completely empty. He and Love are the only ones who don’t work here. Roger asks if Love needs anything to drink or eat, since they haven’t got anything since they left the hotel on Planet D. Hans left them at another private spacestrip on the moon and dropped them off at the spaceport in the Levimobil he flew with him from Planet D. They were lucky enough there wasn’t any random ID checks all the way. Roger and Love checked in all their luggage and have been waiting for more than 20 minutes.

Roger rises and goes to the Starhub at the spaceport. The familiar smell of coffee hits Roger and he realises it’s nearly 2 months since he had the pepper steak don in the hot food-scented Starhub in Nordington. Roger orders

two coffees and to his surprise, there are some Planet D style biscuits. So he buys some biscuits and brings them all back to Love.

Love is reading a book back in the departure lounge.

“Who says printed books are dead?” Roger attempts a joke.

“It is. I’m just perusing its decomposing corpse.” Love doesn’t look up.

“I got you coffee, and some biscuits.” Roger sits down beside her.

“Thanks, Roger.” Love moves her eyes away from the book entitled *Will Gynoids Get Electrically Groped?*, “It’s an old one, back when they were still building robots. Just want to understand how the cyborg problem started.”

“And?” Roger sips his coffee.

“I think the problem is about unclear definitions. Must each robot have its own AI to be called a robot? What about AIs that control multiple robots (or whatever they’re called if they can’t be called robots)? Same thing with cyborgs. How much modification and do you need to be called a cyborg? Are cyborgs human? What about enhanced brains?” People get confused, and people are always hostile to what they don’t understand.”

“I’m not hostile to you.” Roger says.

“You’re not people.” Love answers.

Roger smiles and finishes his coffee: “I’m going for a smoke. You coming?”

“Not this time,” Love smiles back, “enjoy.”

“You don’t have to be so polite all the time, you know.” Roger says, Love nods and refrains from saying sorry.

Roger steps out of the spaceport. The moon has clean air and clear sky. If it wasn’t Planet B territory, the entire population of Planet D would have moved here. But the Treaty is absolute. There are some nationalists on the moon voicing the desire to break away and join Planet D. But they’re still a minority. Roger walks a little distance away from the port and finds himself on a highway. This place is even more desolate than Hans’s smuggler launching pads. There is a small drive-through burger bar on the other side of the road. Further down the way, there is a huge carpark that spans to the end of sight.

Roger smokes his cigarette slowly while enjoying the view of the desert sunset. The cigarette tastes a little strange due to the different atmosphere formation on the moon. A ball of tumbleweed rolls by, reminds Roger of cartoons he watched as a child. He lets out a chuckle.

A uniformed D'er on a levi-moped appears at the horizon. Roger is not sure if his permit is curtailed, but he doesn't want to find out yet. The moped seems to be approaching but Roger isn't sure against the backlight. Roger thinks of getting back to the building but doesn't want to look suspicious. He stares into the sunset to see if the rider is facing towards him.

"It's a mirage." A D'er in greasy burger bar uniform says, lighting his cigarette and squats on the ground besides Roger, "She's probably on the other side of the moon."

A bright white light appears in the sky, followed by a distant noise. A spacecraft roars past overhead. Roger knows it's time to board. He walks back to the one-storey building of spaceport after he finishes the cigarette.

The day before, Planet D

The spaceport was badly-lit, compared to Planet B or Planet C ones. Apparently Planet D had some power-saving regulations that the public buildings must adhere to. Roger and Love just got in from the mild fallout. They went into the decontamination shower separately before Roger took off his spacesuit.

"Why are you wearing this again?" Love asked, at the other end.

"For protection, I guess." Roger answered, and started to think about his reason.

"From what? It's not anti-radiation, and if the spaceship breaks and you're not blown to parts, then you'd be floating in space forevermore. How much air have you got in that little bottle, anyway?"

"About a day's worth." Roger started to feel silly, "you see, when I was little my Father kept telling me to wear this whenever I fly. He used to say that

they might turn the air circulation off at night to save energy, or something like that. I just did it to get him off my back, and now it's sort of a habit."

"I have to tell you, your dad is paranoid." Love said, "can't you just put in your bag and pretend that you wore it?"

"Guess I will be doing that from now on." Roger said, half to himself.

Roger felt that the more time he spent with Love, he found out more about himself, but understood less about her. Roger realised that her anxiety was but a defense, creating the image of a helpless girl in desperate situations. Now Roger felt that she had begun to let on her strengths, and that would mean she had finally started to trust him. But that might just be in his head. Roger was never good at people, but he liked to think. Roger followed Love to the border control of Planet D. It was packed with poor immigrants from other former Planet D colonies. They came here to make up for the lost workforce, since the young people of Planet D all moved away after the nuclear attack.

Love checked her papers and asked Roger to do the talking because she wasn't confident with languages.

Roger reassured her: "But they speak B, the B'ish colonised them for hundreds of years, D language is all but lost."

Love lowers her voice: "I know. I meant I'm not that good with B! With the D'ish accent, I don't know if I can understand the guard."

Roger understood her plight, although he considered D'ish accent of B one of the easier-to-understand variations. But he agreed to speak for her when it was their turn.

He got a message from the office group chat.

Baker: Sugar just told me that the appeal failed and they're opting to get us employed by the other company. She said there might not be enough permits to go around so some of us have to choose to go to Planet D. If not, they'll "have to let some of you go".

Able: Easy for her to say. She transferred her permit to become her partners' companion just before all this happened. Coincidence?

Charlie: I think I'll have to go.

Roger: No you don't!

Baker: Sugar warned that my job title is the weakest of us all. I applied to be a photographer and now I'm doing all sorts of chores: video editing, graphic design and a bit of IT. She said I really need to work hard to not be redundant for it.

Able: And Victoria is after my job now.

Charlie: She's trying to take over fashion? With her sense of style?

Able: She gets plenty invitations lately, galas, salons, private views, that kind of thing. I think she's found some contact in the industry or something. Last week she interviewed a socialite without me.

Baker: Yeah she asked me to go with her as photographer. But I told her I have shit to do. I knew she was asking for a translator really.

Roger: Did anyone go with her?

Able: You weren't there so she asked Item to go with her. Speaking of which, how did Item get back? Are you and Love coming back?

Roger: Yeah she just went back before the curtailment is really issued. We're trying to do that, too.

Charlie: Hope you get back soon enough.

Baker: Hope we're still here by then. Sigh.

Roger felt bad lying to them, but an order from King is a royal decree. He put down his porta and sighed as he thought that the patamedia team might be wiped out after this license crisis.

"What's wrong?" Said Love.

"Nothing." Roger didn't know where to start.

Their turn came. Roger went to the counter and said: "Can me and my associate do it together?"

"Doesn't she speak B?"

Roger answered: "Of course she does, we're just traveling together, so I thought."

"Ok, let her come." The officer made a gesture, "first time on Planet D?"

“Yes.” Roger said.

“What kind of business are you doing here?”

“It’s stated on the invitation letter. We’re here for some training, as new employees. And some meetings.”

“What kind of meetings? With whom?” The officer asked officially, but was already stamping on Roger’s papers.

“Just our colleagues and partners on Planet D. Trying to brief us on how everything works before we go back.”

“And you will go back afterwards?” The officer perused Love’s papers.

“Yes. After four days, as stated in the travel plan.”

“Good.” The officer raised his stamp, but paused. He looked at the papers once again. Roger refrained from asking if there’s a problem.

The officer raised his eyes at Love. “you’ve been here before, haven’t you?”

“Yeah. Sorry I forgot to tell you.” Love answered the question innocently, but somehow Roger felt that she knew this would come up and was prepared for the question.

“And you didn’t have a permit last time?”

“No, I thought a Planet B permit was enough, but your colleague was really nice and gave me a temporary leave.” Love explained, with an innocence Roger had never seen, “I thought it was all sorted so I forgot to mention it. Sorry!”

“Why didn’t you say that!” The officer stamped her papers, “hop along now.” Roger wasn’t quite sure what had happened but felt amazed by her performance.

Present, Planet B

The arrival hall is huge. Roger has never been to this space station because it orbits too far away from Gigapolis. Roger looks at Planet B from the window with awe again. It is the same view he saw 2 months ago when he

left for Planet C. The huge city that spans one-sixth of the surface, and the dark red ponds intersperse on the gigantic land mass.

Love beckons him to follow. She is observably in a good mood, giddy almost. Roger feels safe again after the domestic flight. Roger pushes the trolley of luggage and finally catches up. Love is checking out the shops on the station.

“Too bad we can’t shop duty-free.” Love finds out that there’s nothing to buy, but she seems to enjoy browsing.

“Did you bring anything for the guys at your office? Item brought sweets and snacks from Nordington for the whole company.”

“Hope they’ve finished Item’s items when we get there.” Roger chuckles a little.

Love turns back, smiles while biting her lower lip: “Don’t be daft, they were gone within the day! You know those people.”

And those people just begin to text.

Able: Roger, have you heard? Sugar is merging the patamedia team with the editorial team. We’re all moving downstairs to the open office now.

Charlie: At least Victoria won’t be getting fashion this time. You’re going to work under the fashion editor now.

Able: Yeah, that’s right. But...

Charlie: What?

Able: I don’t know. I have a bad feeling about this.

Baker: I’m feeling more redundant everyday now. The editorial team had IT and design team at their disposal. Can I just be a photojournalist?

Charlie: You know that they sometimes ask Love to take pictures when you’re not available, right? Or anyone from the design team. They don’t have very high standards.

Baker: Shit.

Roger and Love reach the end of the arrival hall. Love looks at Roger and says: “Are you sure you have to take the shuttle?”

Roger hesitates. Love has repeatedly told him that unlike back home, the teleportation on Planet B is 100% safe. However, he still feels a strong distrust of technology that he does not understand. After what he'd witnessed last time, it felt a lot more than just a paranoid reaction.

Love looks conflicted too: "I can take the shuttle with you—"

"I'll teleport with you. I'll try anything once." Roger decides.

"You sure?" Love looks concerned, but Roger has made up his mind. If he is ever going to be blown to bits, it might as well be beside her.

Roger walks into the transporter with Love and two other people. The operator goes through the safety instructions to which only Roger was listening. It's a very dark circular chamber equipped with a large teleportation machine. It can send six people at once, with their luggage. Roger searches for a handle to hold in the dark but touches Love's hand. He tries to draw it back in awkwardness, but she takes his hand firmly.

The operator asks: "Hello everybody, my name Sepp, are we ready? Did everyone catch the safety instructions?"

"Just beam us down already!" Some impatient voice exclaims.

A sudden ray of light infuses the dark chamber and Roger feels nothing for a while. Then he starts to feel the gravity of Planet B. He opens his eyes. He is still holding Love's hands, and he is in one piece, again.

Roger walks out of the teleportation chamber feeling reborn. He looks at Love and says: "Can I give you a hug?"

Love turns her head and smiles, "Of course."

Chapter 4: Serpentine

I try to remember exactly how Bill and I met. We must have been introduced, somehow. But that doesn't matter much now. Just assume that we naturally started speaking.

It was an auroral afternoon when we lifted off from Gigapolis to the space station. By we, I mean Baker, Victoria and I. Victoria was pursuing a story about "Rich Kids from Planet C", a project she thought up after seeing a documentary series about children of energy tycoons from Planet M living on Planet A. For reasons unknown, Sugar approved this topic, but warned her about the sensitive nature of it. After a lengthy brainstorm with the whole office, the project was finally settled. It would consist of interviews and first-hand observations and all materials would have to be approved by the interviewees. The interviewees would include sons and daughters of multi-millionaires, showbiz bosses and government officials. Able wanted to come, but to her dismay, Victoria claimed access to that glamorous world was "exclusive".

A few days later, Victoria messaged me and asked if I could go to an event with her. I watched as her avatar performed pre-set coquetry poses. It was so painful I had to agree. Also, getting my credit on this project would secure my position if they really didn't have enough permits to go around. Later Baker told me in the group chat that he also got drafted by Victoria to her grand event as photographer.

Able: I thought it was exclusive?

Able: Anyway, what sort of event is it?

Me: She just said it's a party, but there's also a dress code.

Baker: Which she doesn't know yet.

Charlie: Well good luck lads!

Me: Aren't you the lucky one, leaving us like that.

Able: Keep me updated, @Baker @Roger.

The day before we took off, Victoria's avatar appeared in my bedroom again, this time with Baker's – apparently, she created a group for the three of us. Baker messaged me in private that he really didn't want to speak because he'd been having a little bit of domestic quarrel (one of many since the letter from Immigration Department arrived). I told him that I'd do the talking, but in the end Victoria did it. She told us that we were meeting up the next morning at a private launching pad for a shuttle to the party.

Baker: It's in space?

Victoria: Of course! They are rich kids, what did you expect? Don't they do a lot of illegal races in space, too?

Me: What's the dress code btw?

Victoria: In Mech-Boom period style. I'm wearing a lot of lace and a corset.

Baker: How am I supposed to get an outfit before tomorrow?

Victoria: Just put on a black suit, nobody is looking at you.

Baker: I don't have black suit, I'll just wear a black jacket. What about you, Roger?

Me: I happen have a black suit, and a waistcoat. Actually, a bowler hat, too. Sorry, Baker.

The next morning, we embarked on the short and unnecessarily luxurious OverCab ferry voyage to the space station where the themed secret gathering was taking place. On our way there, over the complimentary Champagne, Victoria started to explain the party to us.

Although the organisers themselves were shrouded in mystery, the event itself was meant to be the first of a series of themed parties across the globe in specific secret locations. These invitation-only events required the participants to dress up according to the themes of each night and would serve highest-standard pan-media performance as well as top-end catering. Victoria, according to Victoria, had some connections in the high society that landed her four invitations. But for this project she took me and Baker instead of her

boyfriend. She took Baker for photos, but why me? Love and Able agreed it was because I spoke better B. The group chat concluded that it was because I was the best B speaker in the office.

For this first event, the mysterious organisers chose as the location an abandoned former factory-turned-theme-park in orbit around Planet B. The station was built by Sir Montgomery Serpentine during the height of the Mech Boom about a hundred and fifty years ago, supplying robots, mechs and machines to colonies around the galaxy in freight ships.

Battlebots were sent to pacify local insurgences on Planet D while winged cavalry was being phased out in the age of mechanics. The robot industry soon waned due to various concerns and legislations before robots were banned altogether 102 years ago. The factory then closed its doors but the robot revolt that followed had now become a cause célèbre. Public opinion sided with the poor sentient robots who had lost their purpose of life and were about to be “decommissioned” and the government and Serpentine and Company gave in. They granted them autonomy on the station. The only robot colony in the history of the galaxy was born exactly 100 years ago, without the knowledge of the Planet B public or even its parliament. That was probably why the organisers chose the place to begin with.

Fast forward 50 years. The last head of the Serpentine family, Alastair III, tried to revive the family business by getting political and legal support to reclaim the station itself as family property, threatening to evict the robotic residents of the satellite. Alastair III’s reasoning was although the station was built with state permission and subsidies, the factory was not the government’s to give to the robots. After a short court hearing, the two sides reached settlement. The robots got to stay on the station but had to work for the new theme park Serpentine & Co. had planned to build on the station. It featured the most advanced AI automatic control system at the time and boasted its ability to run without human supervision.

A journalist leaked copies of nearly all the documents concerning the park to the public, just before the park was set to open. An investigation ensued, and the park closed amidst the scandal of slave labour. The Planet B

government also came under fire for consenting to build a robot colony offworld while banning robots on the planet. The station was then shut down and all the robots decommissioned in a covert operation by the special forces. No violence was reported on the station. After the initial outrage and some riots in the streets of Gigapolis, Alastair III quietly disappeared into obscurity, rumoured to have become a recluse offworld. I tried to look it up on the Grid with my porta only to find out that the documents on these events were still classified. The station had since then become a dead colony floating in space without being used or demolished. Several attempts to convert it into a museum had failed due to the lack of public interest and being blocked by officials.

We arrived at the ferry hub on the station just when this side of the planet was getting dark. The station was one of the large artificial satellites orbiting Planet B and could be spotted on earth with naked eye. It was cylinder-shaped and rotated around its axis to create artificial gravity. All the individual modules of the stations were fitted on the inner shell of the station, with the central core cleared for the axis where the centrifuge motors and life-support centres located.

The reception was already a little crowded as it was about 30 minutes after the time of entrance marked on the invitations. “We’re too early!” exclaimed Victoria, “to be fashionably late, we need to go back to our ferry and have another round of pre-drink.”

Another 30 minutes passed, and we were back at the reception. Victoria eyed Baker to show the invitation on our behalf; she couldn’t be seen to do that herself. I took an info pack from the desk. There was a map and some background information on there, but these were readily available from the event page on the Grid.

“Who reads a map at parties?” asked Victoria.

Baker and I raised our hands, and I said: “Only this is a site-specific event at a theme park and possible museum site. I like being prepared.”

At the desk, a young C'er lady came from behind us and greeted Victoria. She dressed in voluminous dark bluish green velvet ball gown with delicate but mechanic jewellery. Baker and I were slightly smitten by the luxury.

"Hi Vicky! You made it! So great to see you here, I was a bit worried I'd be alone with all those boys. You look lovely in that fur by the way."

"Thanks Bea! I got it in an antique shop, you've got have fur for space travel don't you! It's so chilly even in Overcabs," answered Vicky, with similar enthusiasm.

"Great, I need to catch up with the boys now, I'll see you inside. Oh, by the way," she turned to me and Baker, "Great to see you, I'm Beatrice Riddle. You can call me Bea if you don't mind. So, you are Vicky's friends?"

"Colleagues." Baker answered before she could finish her sentence. Bea nodded awkwardly before being called by a man she introduced as her boyfriend. They hurried inside, passing two physically enhanced security guards.

The gate and reception point were still kept industrial, with just a "Roboland" logo added to the original rusted Serpentine & Co. sign. They kept the original cast iron gate of the factory after the refurbishment, but the lamps were upgraded to energy-saving types. We walked into the old factory after having our IDs and belongings checked by some spacesuit-clad bouncers and security guards dressed as workers of the factory. We were handed masquerade masks at the entrance. After a walk across the man-made garden/conservatory filled with exotic plants collected from all over the galaxy, we entered the Director's Residence—a large module of the station connected to the factory, where the main event was going to take place.

As soon as we entered the building, I sensed an odd atmosphere. We left our coats and cloaks at the cloakroom. I looked around and found Baker and Victoria had tragically under and over-dressed respectively. Baker was in his black bomber jacket and Victoria wore her corset, hoop skirt and fishnet not dissimilar to mannequins in lingerie shop window displays on the corners of highstreets. But the historical inaccuracy was soon overshadowed by a general sense of confusion in the gold-and-velvet foyer. I kept my ears peeled

in order to overhear some conversation between the masked participants. It seemed that there was no one in charge of the organising of the event and the hospitality crew was at loss where the guests should go after gathering at the grand foyer.

“What are they talking about?” Victoria approached me.

“Basically there’s no one in charge, the performers are not here and, neither is the food.” There was a solar storm on the other side of the planet and all shuttles to and from the surface were suspended.

“What about the drink?” Victoria looked around for reassurance.

“I think they were delivered all right,” I said, pointing a young B’ish man in full regalia of Winged Hussar Chieftain guzzling down a bottle of vintage red wine.

A message from Love popped onto my porta. I opened the message, still ignoring the one mother sent me a few days ago warning me against cyborgs on Planet B. Apparently, Love’s message was sent when we were still on the ferry but got delayed by the solar flare. She said that the event was on the news earlier and it seemed it was extremely disorganised and the participants had found themselves stranded on the satellite because of the solar flare. She was trying to stop me from going, but it was too late. A representative from the hospitality crew came forward and gave a speech.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I understand your plight and am sorry for the inconvenience the situation has caused. But we are equally...”

Someone interrupted him before he could carry on. People were protesting and shouting at each other all at the same time. The situation quickly lost control, and people began chanting and smashing plates. The catering crew promptly disappeared along with all the drinks. Without their beverages, the crowd went from restless to truly angry. The security guards in period costumes went from haphazardly trying to pacify the mob to standing down and let them do what they want. The chanting had now become “we want booze” as the crowd marched down the hall to track down the crew, with cutlery and empty glasses in their hands. Only a few people stayed, including most security guards and two cartoonishly bodyguard-looking people in suits

and shades. Bea was with a group of about 20 young C'ers, and they were talking to some of the conspicuously bodyguard looking people. Then she saw us and waved us to join them.

“Come, Vicky! Tell me what’s going on?” Bea pointed at the horned I’ish man with glasses, who was having an argument with one of the young men. The young man was about my age and was trying to convince the bodyguard-looking man that they were perfectly safe without him.

“Is that guy his bodyguard?” I asked. A message from Victoria popped up on my porta: *These are the Rich Kids*. I looked again at these well-dressed young C'er men and women, realising why Victoria’s connection was a key to the project.

These “Rich Kids from Planet C”, affectionately known as the “Reich Kidz” by *Stuff & Things*, were known to have bodyguards accompanying them, and were also known for being rather mischievous after getting rid of them. The conversation between the group negotiator and the bodyguard revolved around duty and safety. The Rich Kid, on the other hand, tried to reassure the bodyguard that they were going to just stay here and asked him to have some fun himself.

“Normally it’s pretty easy with hired I’ish bodyguards,” explained Bea, in a low voice, “It’s the C’ers that are hard to send away. They are all sent by the Alien Ministry back home (I suspect they might actually be Alien Intelligence Agents). So how’s Bill doing? Has he fixed a price with the guy yet?”

I asked if Bill meant the negotiator of their group. She nodded. I started to translate what was happening to her. They seemed to have agreed upon the price of the bribe, but the bodyguard was still very concerned for their safety on the station during a solar flare. As I interpreted the dialogue, the Rich Kids started to surround me. Bea explained that they’d always left the talking to Bill without knowing much about how he got rid of all the bodyguards. Bea’s promise of introducing them properly to the group rekindled Victoria’s interest in the whole event, and she started to ask about who’s who. The only person I’d heard of was a guy named George, son of a Politburo member.

I wasn't really paying attention because I was almost transfixed by how this young person called Bill dealt with the situation. He deftly switched between coaxing and intimidation, supported by reason and rhetoric. His grammar was sometimes off, but he always managed to get his message through.

Bill was roughly my age, slim but not exactly tall. He was wearing early Mech-Boom style evening suit with embroidered waistcoat and cravat, instead of white tie. Gold sparkle on his cufflinks, watch chain, collar pin, cravat pin and monocle. Bea explained that he usually wore glasses but had contact lenses to complete the monocle look.

After bribing the bodyguard into going down to find the kitchen, Bill turned to me and said: "I heard you translating for them, thanks. I wasn't sure what I was talking about myself half the time. I'm Bill, by the way."

I took his extended hand and shook it. I gave him my name, to which Bea added that I was a friend of Vicky's. Vicky joined the conversation by disparaging the place and talking about how amazing her last secret party was. Everyone nodded but said nothing. Baker and I happened to know that Victoria had virtually begged Bea to take her there. During the event, she had to follow Bea everywhere because she didn't really know what the party was about or anyone present. One of Able's friends in fashion was there and asked her if she knew this strange person from the *Daily*, and it became the topic for a day in our little group chat.

Bea took the responsibility of talking to Victoria. Bill asked what I did at the *Daily* while Baker got asked to take some group photos for the rest of the gang. I told him that I wrote under the political editor. Bill's eyes lit up and seemed to remember something important: "Didn't you write the piece on the budget last year? Yeah, that one was really informative, thoroughly enjoyed it."

I was surprised that a (child of a) member of the elite would actually subscribe to the *Daily*, but I said: "Yeah, I write for both printed and Gridded platforms, I hope to bring some more seriousness to the *Daily*."

"I think you're doing it right. It's much more balanced than before."

I complimented his getup so we wouldn't run out of topics. He answered: "I wanted to come with ruffles and frills, but that's not period correct. So I came like this. A bit dull to be honest. You're not too shabby yourself, actually. Monochrome shines every time."

Bea tried to get everyone to introduce themselves to the three of us, but I couldn't really remember any of the names.

Commotion started from the back of the building, not far from where we stood. Screams and running reverberated through the halls of the living quarters. A stampede of posh young B'ers rushed through the airlocks and crashed into the module we were standing in. Before I could shout "run!" Bill had already grabbed Bea and their entire group followed him. The three of us followed him out into the hub before the herd caught up. I peered back at the gate, only to find out that we had lost half the party. What was left was me, Baker, Victoria, Bea and her boyfriend, Bill, George and about 15 other people standing in the hangar.

The hangar was on fire. Strong smoke ascended into the ventilation duct. The docks were all closed and a security guard was trying to put out the fire with his cup of coffee. The engineers and pilots were nowhere to be seen. I went and asked the guard what had happened. he just pointed behind me and fainted. I looked back.

A horde of party-goers dressed in the fashion of Mech-Boom ran through the gates, as if chased by ghosts. Some tripped, some fell, some stepped on the fallen, but most came through. The first ones stopped as they saw the fire, and got knocked down by the second wave, who in turn stopped. The second wave stood on the first wave's heads before they fell and the third arrived. Before too long, a puddle of B'ish aliens tiled the space hub of the station. Then the robots rolled in.

They gradually filled the hangar with their number. They looked exactly like the exhibits from old museums I used to visit when I was a child. Metal body in humanoid and other shapes, steady and mechanic. But they looked

brand new, or in as new condition. Their eye-like sensors shone a dark light, and each step they took it produced a metallic rattle. The machines had steel claws for hands, but they were much slower than we expected from the panic they'd caused. They moved towards us. We stood still in shock. They passed us and started to put out the fire with their built-in extinguishers.

We watched the robots for a moment. They started dragging the wounded party-goers away by their feet and disappeared into the station. "I think we should get out of here before they notice us." Bill's whisper was hard to hear amid the screams. Most of us concurred, so we followed him. Slowly, we climbed on top of a space shuttle which had been left alone after the flame had been put out. Baker and I opened an air duct vent above and helped everyone up into the duct. Bill asked George to lead the pack but decided to go last to look out for the robots. Just after Baker got up, and it was my turn, a robot finally seemed to notice us and started to approach. Bill yanked me by the sleeve and told Baker that we would meet them on the other side.

"Do you know where the other side is?"

"No idea, just follow the duct. Stations like this usually have a vent in every compartment. We can meet them as soon as we lose the robots."

Surprisingly, the robots were not as aggressive as we imagined. They were just chasing us but didn't seem very concerned about catching us. They followed us at a speed that allowed us to adjust our pacing and breaths, without weapons or brandishing their tools. While I was running, I started to wonder what they'd do if they really got us. Then they got someone.

A party-goer walked in from one side of the hallway and was caught right between the robots and us. Before he could react, the robots tore him into pieces and kept their course. I looked at Bill. He shook his head and told me to accelerate.

It was hard to run when we need to keep the vent duct in sight. But the maze-like structure in this old living quarter was an advantage. After several turns, we finally lost the pursuers. We found ourselves in a chapel. It wasn't as "mechanic" as we imagined a chapel on Roboland would look like. One

would never expect space robots had religion. I stood looking at the ornate lectern, imagining how the machines found faith in the fairy tale that humans had thought up a thousand years ago.

Bill looked at the scripture and tapped the dust-covered screen. A two-dimensional projection of a human female in fine dress appeared on the wall. While we pondered the crudeness of the Mech-Boom technology, it started to tell the story of Roboland. We hushed it lest the robot patrol heard us. It lowered its volume to minimum and spoke virtually through subtitles. It told us that the chapel was built for the Serpentine family and human employees on this station. The robots found solace for slavery in the sermons since day one. That was why they kept the tradition after taking over. They seemed to have rewritten the Holy Book pretty extensively. Now the God is a female AI. If AI had gender. The projection told us that the AI was taking back control of the system after waking up from the coma, and then she disappeared.

There was a thumping sound above us. I looked up and saw Baker trying to open a vent from inside the air duct. Bill climbed up the lectern and helped George get down. The rest of the team followed. Bea complained about the smoke from the hangar going into the duct.

Victoria started to tell a story she heard somewhere about the robots worshipping a demon-god. Bill had to read out parts of the rewritten scripture to convince other that it wasn't the case.

"If the Goddess is gaining control like the projection said," I said after a sudden realisation, "does that mean the CCTV monitoring are also coming back?"

We looked at the corner of the ceiling. a light flashed from the camera and it was adjusting its movement by looking around and randomly zooming in and out.

A couple of robot patrols stopped at the door of the chapel. We all hid behind the pews, waiting for them to go.

"Someone is here, I swear!" one of them said.

"Don't swear in the house of Goddess," shushed the other.

“Sorry. I heard voices talking about demon-gods and someone reading out the Holy Book!”

“You’re hearing things.”

“I heard it! Must be an Epiphany!”

“You know it’s impossible. The Goddess is still rebooting, there won’t be any Epiphanies for at least an hour.”

“Why else did we just wake up after that attack? I thought we were dead!”

“That’s true, and the human soldiers are all gone, just some masquerade left.”

“Goddess save us!”

“Amen.”

They left. We sneaked out through the side doors.

Although all connections with the Grid were cut the moment the robots rolled out, Baker took out the map he picked up at the reception. It seemed that we were proceeding to the factory areas of the station.

Baker pointed out that there must be some escape pods outside the factory module, in case of emergencies. It was a health and safety requirement since the first space factory opened. But after so many years and phases, anyone could have taken them.

We arrived at the factory fairly easily. These areas were not open to public for this event so we had to manually activate the power and air vent. Bill helped Baker and I get up to the control room via an old ladder. The emergency air pocket released into the control room was spread too thin, so we had to turn the air circulator on before we suffocated. When we finally turned on the power and took a look around the factory plant, we gasped at the scale of it.

The enormous space held equally gigantic machinery. The huge machines were for making machines. There was not much legroom for us to move around the module. The dust on the machines gave the room a look of undersaturated or even grayscale 2-D photography from the Mech-Boom era. Some of the posh Kidz started coughing and took out their handkerchiefs to

cover their mouths. Baker and I climbed down the ladder and saw most of the machines were missing parts. It must have been long since the robots here reproduced any offspring. Bill reminded us that if the central AI had already been awoken, the robots must have been informed about the sudden surge of power and air in this module of the station.

We went through the factory as fast as we could and arrived at the backup hangar for life-pods. There were none. Judging from the dust, there might never have been any.

“What do we do now!?” Bea’s red eyes and tears might partly have been induced by the heavy dust.

“We go to the laboratory.” Bill checked the evacuation map, without looking at her.

“What if that doesn’t work? I don’t want to die here! I mean,” Bea hesitated, “we can’t die here, especially you.”

“It’ll work,” Bill said, “there must be some kind of communication apparatus at the lab. We can try to contact Gigapolis.”

A muffled scream resounded in the factory module. We all stopped and tried to figure out where that came from. I held my breath. the sound of the vent was the only thing I could hear. I could see Bill and another Kid, but everyone else was blocked by the machines.

“Who was that?” Bill asked, “are you ok?”

“Robots, run!” someone shouted from the other end of the factory. Panicking people started rushing towards our end of the module but I still didn’t see the robots. I started running anyway.

We left the factory module running and arrived at the laboratories. We basically ran through the lab without a chance to look for escape pods or com-app. We ran through module after module, turning on air vents as we went, leaving traces for the robots to chase. We arrived at a double-decked module with stairs at both ends. Bill switched on the air vent and we waited for the air to fill the next module. While waiting, I started to count how many of us were still together. There were only 12 of us left, about 10 were missing.

That was when I saw the robots again. It seemed that they had stopped following us for a long time. But they came from above. The vent creaked and broke, and about a dozen robots dropped on the floor. Because of the low level of artificial gravity, they bounced back and stood before us, with claws and screwdrivers drawn. It made sense because the surest way to follow humans was follow the oxygen.

The AI was directing them. They had become smarter and more menacing since we saw them last. We started to slowly back off to the module behind us. The hatch opened and —

A B'ish man in a black cape and a top hat appeared at the top of the stairs in the room looking down at us. The lights dimmed and a shrill high-pitched buzz mixed with a pulsing low-frequency hum coming from the speakers behind him. The frequencies shifted and soon I became unable to hear both sounds, only feeling the low-end pulse flowing through my body. The man released a huge quantity of metal strips into the corridors where the robots were having the standoff with us.

A confusion started among the robots. They started to turn and shuffle restlessly, as if trying to figure out where they were. The man spoke: “They are now blinded and deaf. I’ve also blocked their communication with the system. Come, now!”

Bill approached the shadow and demanded: “Are you a guest? Or are you one of the hosts?”

“I am no guest, but I’m not your host exactly. I am the owner of this space station.”

I could tell that the man standing at the end of the stairs was Alastair Serpentine III because he was standing right underneath his own portrait. The painting was well done and was almost exact, apart from the left of his head had now been completely replaced by robotic enhancements. Night-vision, 5.1 microphones and water-cooling—all adhered to typical late Mech Boom era

technology and aesthetics. I started to suspect that beneath the gloves he might also have mechanical hands.

He saw us staring into the gigantic picture behind him, looked back and turned to us. He posed as in the picture, trying to break the ice. After seeing us still confused, he said: "Come on, aren't you running from the robots?" And led the way further into the module.

We stood still. I suggested that we put it to a vote. Serpentine saved our lives but we did not know him. This could be a trap. But it seemed that only Baker and I really cared about democracy. Victoria said nothing. The Kidz all looked at Bill. "What do you think?" asked George.

Bill followed him. The rest of us followed him. People talked amongst each other, but no one seemed to doubt Bill's decision. Baker looked rather agitated.

"What's wrong?" I inquired.

"That's cyborg Alastair Serpentine leading us, and his murderous robots are chasing us! Do you trust him?"

"Better than the robots, I have to say," Victoria jumped into the conversation, "plus, he probably still owns this place legally."

"We have no choice. And yes, this guy probably knows the place better than anyone else." I tried to not roll my eyes.

"That's the problem." Baker stopped and said, "I think he might be a bit pissed off that I hacked the system here."

"You what?" I stopped and quietly asked, waiting for everyone to pass us by.

"I have to keep my job, Sugar said I was in most precarious position. My wife... I needed a scoop, something Vicky or you can't get. Something juicy and fresh."

Now I understood why the robots were so aggressive after the AI system got rebooted. The cyber-attack from Baker must have triggered further self-defence mechanism from the station.

"Can you try to get in the central AI system and stop the robots?" I asked, without much hope.

“I tried, it shut down all wireless connection. I’ll need a terminal at least. But I think the defence must be fiercer there. I feel it’s actively trying to find me.”

“Seems we have to follow them now,” I looked back, the lights were back and the noise stopped as the robots started to regain their senses, “or they’ll actually find you.”

Serpentine was oddly quiet. He had a peculiar physique, even for a B’er. He had disproportionately long limbs and a relatively small torso. His head was also ever so slightly bigger than usual. From what I’d read about him, he disappeared after the decommission of Roboland and the liquidation of his company. It was assumed that he went offworld for retirement. But of course, this satellite was technically still offworld.

For more than a dozen times, Bill tried to get something out of him, but all Serpentine said was: “I will tell you everything once we get to my Lair. There is no time,” and “no the robots can’t find us there.”

We followed Serpentine and Bill down a hidden trapdoor/hatch and we entered a maintenance shaft. The shaft led us out of the station, into a transparent corridor attached to the outer shell of the satellite. We took a minute to admire the star-scape outside the station before we climbed back into the shaft inside the station.

We soon arrived at what Serpentine described as his “Lair” – a secret module inside the central axis of the station. “It’s not in any of the floorplans,” said Serpentine. Me and Baker compared our maps. The entire axis was marked simply as “off-limit”.

The Lair was richly decorated, much like a member’s club from yesteryear. Oak panelled walls and ceilings created a cuboid room inside the cylindrical space station module. I looked at the plush chairs and wondered how much it would have cost to bring all these up to space decades ago.

Serpentine closed the hatch door behind us and turned on the machines in the cabin. They weren’t antique-looking as the valve-driven ones in the factory. The solid-state console didn’t have exposed parts because it didn’t

require as much ventilation, but it did emit some heat when Serpentine switched it on. Compared to the Mech-Boom era machinery, the huge console in the Lair looked as if someone tried to build a modern-day comput-o-matic with parts produced half a century ago. Tapes were spinning, and lights were blinking. It looked like a stage set or a theme park, which it was.

A robot in the corner lit up and awakened. It moved each of its six limbs and looked around while zooming in and out. It stood up with its hind legs and greeted Serpentine with something analogical to bowing, which scared those who were at rear of the group during the chase. Similar to the machinery in the room, the robot looked at least half a century more advanced than the ones outside. Victoria nudged her way to the front, beside Bill and questioned Serpentine: “If you are Alastair III, you must be over a hundred years old! Did you modify yourself to look younger?”

Serpentine paused, and looked at her, asked back: “Is that really the question you want to ask first?”

“What happened? Can you stop this?” Bill put out his choice.

“Why are you here?” I gave my question.

“One at a time.” Serpentine sat down, taking a bag of space-tea from the android-servant which he named Reggie the Valet. “I am indeed Alastair Serpentine III and I am 77 years old. I am a cyborg, I have done what I could to keep healthy.” He looked at Victoria, and then at Bill.

“The cyber-attack triggered the restart of the defence program,” said Serpentine. I looked at Baker, who kept staring at his feet. One drop of sweat glided down his cheek.

“And yes, I know a way to stop this.” He smiled. “However, I don’t want to attempt that. That is to do with the reason why I am here.” He looked at me. His eyes were piercing, but a little too mechanic.

“I never left the station when they closed it. I had to stay here—this module, this time capsule, this mausoleum of Annabel!”

He paused for dramatic effect. But I saw from his joints that his movements were a little too precise to be human. It looked like that he was more machine than man.

“She was my childhood sweetheart, love of my life and my young bride.”

“Oh, did she die? You poor thing,” said Victoria, wiping a tear from her eye.

“No, she lives. She is immortal now, in a way.”

“No, you didn’t.” Bill exclaimed. It felt pretty obvious, with all the OOPArts-looking comput-o-matic terminal behind the cyborg.

When the park was shut down, she was attacked by a mob for being Alastair’s fiancée. They tore her out of her levi-hansom and tied her up to a stake. They beat and threatened to burn her. Serpentine got there in time, shot three people with his blaster and brought her home.

That was when the siege on his mansion started. They had to fly back up here. But by then it was too late to save her. He transferred her memories and consciousness into this machine before she died. The old cyborg told us that he had no choice but to perform the untested transfer. But human consciousness and memory was too big to process for ordinary computational machines available at the time. So he came up with an idea and brought her to the axis. He grafted her brain with a prototype artificial nerve system built for early cyborgs and thus connected her with the central operating system of the station. He was able to store her mind in the station’s core and replaced the entire operational system with her. The brain was abandoned after the transfer and she took the place of the all-knowing AI presiding over the daily life of the robots on the park premises. She became the station, as well as the God that was worshipped by the robots. The console in the Lair was the terminal interface he built to access his lover.

She was shut down when the power was cut after the final raid of the Roboland, which happened days after the transfer. Serpentine was able to put her into a coma before the blackout to avoid any damage to the delicate system. After the raid, he turned her back on again. But with only one solar-powered cell available, he could only run her core consciousness without access to most of her memory or ability to operate the station. But that was enough for him, he could talk to her again and share his day with her. At the same time, he reduced the organic parts on himself to survive and bide his

time, hoping one day he could revive her completely. “She wanted to remember, too,” said the old man.

When the organisers restarted the station, he was overjoyed. He started the revival process almost immediately, while keeping a watchful eye on the organisers and decorators, lest they trespass into the axis. He repaired the axis to such a perfect state that they never had to send an engineer up to check. Using all the surveillance equipment, he found out that the organisers only planned one event and would leave the place alone afterwards. He felt so happy he could almost see the “happily ever after” with Anabel. That was before Baker hacked the AI.

She found out someone was prying inside her, touching on several sensitive documents, which triggered her defence, paused by Serpentine when he put her to sleep. This time, the defence came with a vengeance. She maximised all her firewalls, shut down wireless connection and sent all robots to patrolling position. Any human presence was dealt with the same vigour as what they unleashed to the secret taskforce 50 years ago. Only this time, the humans were unarmed and the robots were prepared.

“I have tried everything, even rebooted her once. That was the blackout you experienced earlier. The only option left, is to format her again, deleting everything since the invasion 50 years ago. That’s pretty much two days after I digitised her. Everything we shared for the past 50 years would be gone. Not to mention I have been updating her and the station all these years. If she returns to her original version, it might not be compatible with the station now. I might lose her forever! All these years will be gone. All my effort will be undone. All the sacrifice, all the cybernetic enhancement will be in vain.”

“And you will save hundreds of lives,” Bill said, “all these young people coming to the event. They are being hunted by these robots, because of her paranoia.”

“I’m afraid you are the only ones alive on this station by now.” Reggie checked the terminal and interrupted, “she has grown very efficient with hunting down humans.”

I looked back at Baker. He was as pale as a sheet of parchment and had sneaked back with his spin-o-matic turned on. Everyone else remained silent and some sat down.

Bill stood up and asked Serpentine if there was a way out from his Lair to the spacedocks. If we were the only ones left, we could all get back in one ride.

“You can’t go back to the hangar. It has been completely occupied by the robots now.” Reggie kept his eyes on the screens, but the camera angles were getting strange as he spoke, almost every screen was showing some black space or part of a wall. “I don’t think she wants us to see what she was up to anymore, master Alastair.”

“She suspects. How sweet,” said Serpentine, with a reminiscing smile, “you’ve disappeared for too long, she starts to guess where you are now.”

“That’s why we need to leave this station as soon as we can,” Bill stepped closer to him. “You don’t want her robots to break into here and find us with you, do you?”

“She can’t find me here, it was programmed against her. I have my precautions. But you’re right, you should go now if you’re to leave at all,” he explained, “Anabel has turned all her eyes away just to stop me looking through them. But since she had blinded herself, you can now go without her looking. All you need to do is to avoid—”

I jumped into the conversation: “But the hangars are overrun!”

“Then there’s the old shuttle I arrived here on,” Serpentine replied, “but I have no idea if it still works. Even if it does, it doesn’t have an auto-pilot mode, and it can only fit three people, including the pilot. Can anyone of you fly a half-a-century-old space shuttle during a solar flare?”

Bea’s boyfriend had a license, but he’d never really flied manually ever since getting it.

George stepped in and said that his friend Paul was in a racing club and was able to fly just about anything.

“We’re all in that club, George,” Bill intercepted.

“But you can’t go now, not when we’re not sure if it works!” George protested and insisted that Paul going instead.

“I don’t mind ferrying you back and forth a few times and come back.” Reggie raised his upper arm, not noticing some of us were cringing at the idea of being driven by a robot.

Bill went back to his group and tried to pacify the hostility against the robot. When he came back, he asked Serpentine: “We are grateful for the offer. What do you want in return?”

“Of course, you wouldn’t trust someone who won’t want something from you. I see a politician, or a statesman in you. What I want is peace. I know you’re all important people. What happened on this station would blow a hole in Planet B society.

“I don’t want more inspections or demolition of the station. I want you to use the last inch of your influence to stop that. It’ll be especially advantageous if you can use a diplomatic difficulty to stall the investigation. Just buy me some time before I can launch the station out of its orbit.

“I’ve been planning to fly the station further into the galaxy, out of the Planet B jurisdiction. But I’ll need at least three to six months to do that. Promise me that you’ll give me that and I’ll let Reggie fly—”

“Deal.” Bill didn’t wait for him to finish his sentence because he understood how desperate the old man was. As long as he believed that these Kidz have the power to sway future investigations, we’d have a chance.

Reggie bowed and left to check the shuttle.

Victoria decided that we should draw lots to decide who goes first. Me, Baker and Bill declined to go first. Some men said the ladies should go first, but Victoria said that was sexist. So Bea and her boyfriend were recommended to go first.

Serpentine sat there and drank his tea, not at all interested in us. Bill sat down beside him, stared into his eyes and said: “How much of you is already robotic?”

“72%. I’m a borderline android.”

“Are you going to do anything about the robots?”

“No, they’ll return to normal when all threats are neutralised. When you’re all gone, they’ll just carry on as if the last 50 years never happened,” he whistled a little after that sentence, “unless, of course, you fail to stall the investigation and more humans come onboard. Then Anabel will have to start phase two of her defence mechanism.”

“Which is?” Bill asked.

“Crashing the station to Gigapolis. My father added that to the system and Annabel took it up when the raid happened, to avenge herself and the robots. I stopped it once. I hope we can stop it from happening again, together.”

Bill came over and said: “I don’t trust him. Who knows how much he could control the system? We have to be ready to take our chances at the hangar.”

Baker turned back from his spin-o-matic and whispered: “I’m afraid phase two is already initiated.”

“What?”

Serpentine typed furiously on the console, but Annabel had blocked him. He turned back to Baker and smiled: “How do you know that?”

“I... I connected my spin-o-matic to a socket on your console.” Baker stammered.

“She’s blocking me, but you managed to get in there. How curious.” Serpentine sat back.

Before anyone could speak, Reggie returned with a workshop apron and oil on his face. He said the shuttle was ready and asked if Bea and her boyfriend wish to leave now.

While I was ushering Bea into the maintenance shaft, Victoria sat beside Baker and started reading his screen.

“You’re already in the Operating System! Can’t you just stop the robots and the crashing?”

“Sorry?” Serpentine turned back to them.

“We’re going now, wish us luck!” Bea drew the attention back to her and left with Reggie and her boyfriend. After they were gone, Serpentine moved to Baker and stood towering above him.

Bill took a candlestick and removed the candles. He held it firmly behind his back and approached the cyborg from his left side.

I didn't know if Baker could stop the station from crashing, even if we stopped Serpentine from threatening him. I wanted to avoid violence, but I had to defend Baker if Serpentine wanted to do him harm. I stepped slowly to our host's right side just in case. Bill cleared his throat.

"Mr Serpentine?" Serpentine turned his head away from Baker. Baker broke a vase and put a shard at his throat, "There must be a manual override to Anabel from here, any sane engineer would put one on his end of the system."

I rushed to his spin-o-matic. There was an Access Denied sign flashing on his screen but also a hacking warning. Anabel had invaded Baker's terminal. Which meant she knew which socket Baker plugged into and therefore where we were.

Baker turned to the Kidz, "Annabel knows where we are now, if we don't do something, the Robots will come here and kill us all."

"It was you who hacked her earlier, right?" The cyborg asked calmly. "She can't find us through my terminal here, it uses a proxy to hide my location."

Baker slashed Serpentine's shoulder as a warning. A milk-white fluid oozed out of the wound.

Detecting threat, Serpentine's bionic left hand grabbed Baker's shard-holding arm and tore it away from himself. But the motion was so fierce that he pulled Baker's arm out of its socket.

It was a scream that I had never heard before. A pool of blood formed at our feet. I stared at the scene and felt myself nearly sucked into the red. It was redder than I had thought it would be.

Bill broke the spell and rushed to hit Serpentine's head with the candlestick. Milky fluid drizzled down his forehead, and he took a few steps back. He slipped in Baker's blood and fell. Victoria let out a scream which morphed into laughter. The Kidz started doing the same. The maddening symphony of screams turned into a huge laugh that filled the space. Insanity

had taken hold of the room. I slapped myself across the face to feel something and moved. Baker had fainted by the time I reached him and tried to put some pressure on the wound with my shirt and belt.

Serpentine stood up and the laughing stopped. Fear gripped everyone as it should.

Reggie's voice came out of one of the speakers on the console: "We're ready to take off. Is everything OK?"

Bill grabbed the microphone frantically: "Yes! Yes, go, now!"

"Roger," I looked up a little and Reggie continued, "real-time transmission will stop now once we take off. We'll be sending messages from now on."

The shuttle took off. I looked out of the porthole and saw it leaving the station. It grew smaller in the porthole, then stopped and slowly turned back. Bill tried to send a message through but before he could do that, the shuttle exploded without a sound. Debris flew in every direction and slowly fell into orbit. Silence befell the room once more.

An audio message played itself on the console. It came from the shuttle. Reggie's voice spoke.

"Master Alastair, I'm sorry but I cannot proceed. Lady Annabel has taken over the shuttle. She was trying to recruit me but it's against my code to betray you. She already knows the Lair exists and the humans are hiding. She is sending all her robots to find you.

"She is flying us back to the main dock where the robots would be waiting for us. If she gets us alive, she will have ways to extract your location from us whatever we do."

Bea cut in: "Bill, we've put it to a vote. We'll detonate Reggie's micro-reactor so they won't capture us. But you'll need to get out soon. Send my love to the Direktor." Her boyfriend sent the same greeting to our dear leader. I almost forgot some of them had direct access to the top of the party elite back home on Planet C.

Reggie continued: "Master Alastair. Forgive me for being blunt, but Lady Annabel is not the same girl you knew for all these years. I have never seen

such aggression and cunning. You have to stop her before she crashes the station to earth.”

The message cut off there.

Bill turned back to Serpentine, who was shaking uncontrollably. When he realised that every eye was on him, he stopped and smiled.

“You see, when I replaced the original system with Annabel, I left a copy in there just in case I’ll one day need some brainstem function to operate the station directly, bypassing Annabel. However, it seems that copy has duplicated itself and merged with the brain, which is Annabel. You can see that she has retriggered the command to crash the station. This is the power of my father’s coding.

“I’ll have to leave you now, Lady and Gentlemen. I’m going into the Axis to see if I can get him out of Annabel’s mind.” He stood up.

Hours passed. The silence was lengthening time at a rate close to near lightspeed traveling. Victoria tried to start a conversation. But no one seemed to be in the mood. I stared at the screen of Serpentine’s console, the terminal to Annabel. It kept showing random screensaver loops. I started to memorise the pattern and sequence of it. I seemed to be able to predict the next loop, and the next. I got bored quickly.

I knew I should be thinking of a way to escape. We had been too dependent on Bill’s decisions. I looked at him. He was absorbed in the screensaver and was smiling every time the loop changed. I looked at Victoria. She was playing with her Portacom. I took out mine. But there was no connection of any kind. The power ran out a few seconds later.

I couldn’t think of a viable solution to the situation apart from depending on Serpentine shutting down the station and formatting Annabel. I tried to use the terminal, but Annabel has completely blocked it out. I kept giving commands for several minutes before I gave up completely, finding her unresponsive. Baker’s spin-o-matic had been disconnected, to prevent Annabel from finding us.

“Do you think we can connect your spin-o-matic to her again? Maybe we can hack into this thing deeper and see where Serpentine’s at,” I said. “Baker?”

“He’s dead.” Bill sat beside Baker, felt his pulse again and shook his head.

I sat back in silence, again, and returned to watching the screensaver on the terminal.

The terminal started beeping and blooping all of a sudden. I stood and saw a window popping up, it said: “system reset, formatting memory. 3%.” The number increased rapidly.

We held our breaths and watched until it moved up to 30%. Bill said, in an authoritative tone: “We need to prepare for our departure, so we can leave as soon the reset is done and we know we’re safe.”

The plan was, after the system is reset, we all move down back to the maintenance shaft, leaving Baker behind. The five remaining Kidz would stay in the shaft with Victoria while Bill and I go out and check if all the robots are disabled. It’d be best if we could do that before Serpentine came back.

Serpentine did not return when the system was reset. His terminal to Annabel was not blocked anymore and the screensaver didn’t come back after the reset. I moved to the console and tried to enter some simple commands to Annabel. I avoided using the microphone for dictation, because she might be asking who I was or where Serpentine had gone.

I asked her to report on the current status on the station. She replied with a concise “situation: normal” on screen.

Bill tried to inquire about the robots, but she gave the answer: “unknown. Monitoring over robots disabled.”

“That could mean the robots are disabled. Or she just lost control over them,” Bill concluded.

Victoria reminded us that we needed to leave. Serpentine might be heading back.

We got out of the Lair and went back the way we came from. Bill and I left the rest of them at the part of the shaft where they could see the stars.

The robots were very much able when we got out of the trapdoor where we first met Serpentine. Bill looked at me with a “oh fuck” look but I suggested that we wait and watch.

“The system is not shut down, it’s reset. She’s also lost track of what the robots are doing. They might be just doing what they were doing before Annabel found out that Baker was hacking her.”

After a while we noticed they didn’t seem to be patrolling any more. They were simply repairing all the damages done to the corridor during the chase.

We waited till they left before we took our chances and got out of the hatch. We stood in the corner and observed the robots more closely, ready to sprint. They seemed to be just walking around or chatting to each other like... people. We stared amazed, as they gradually dispersed into other cabins or modules. We decided to interact with one next time.

A lone robot strolled into the hallway and Bill walked directly towards it. I was surprised but more surprised was the robot. It stopped and processed for nearly a minute before it nodded to Bill and passed him by. It looked back once and quickened its steps. Bill waved at me and we both stood there. Three more robots passed us by, one looked back. All clear.

We went back, collected the gang, and headed back to the dock, the way we came. The robot-making machines were in full swing while a dozen of robots cleaned the dusty machines. When we crossed back to the chapel, there were a few robots praying. We passed them by quietly.

We turned to living quarters of the station this time, having no need to climb the vents anymore. On our way through, we saw robots cooking oil-based dinners, reading electronic newspapers or playing chess with each other. Some of them peered out at us curiously; but others stopped them for being rude. They behaved just like humans living their lives. The station now looked like just a normal robotic colony, if that kind of thing ever existed.

By the time we got to the hangar, it was all cleared up. Fire extinguished, dead bodies taken away. The shuttles were there, too. Two robotic engineers

were standing beside the spacecrafts and filing the paper in their hands. Bill told us to stay and walked toward them with open arms. He started talking with them, but we couldn't hear the words.

He returned a few moments later. He said: "The solar flare is nearly over. Gorō here offers to drive us back."

"What?"

"As we thought, the reset is successful. They are a little confused but generally friendly." Bill pointed at an inconspicuous space shuttle, "I didn't tell them that they aren't supposed to be active, but I told him to land somewhere far from the city to avoid being spotted."

As if asking for permission, George said: "Can they take us back to Planet C? Or to the Spaceport station on the outer orbit? We are not going back to Planet B, we want to go home."

Gorō the robot heard it and came to us: "We can get you to the spaceport Station 1, mister. I'll get my colleague Shirō and report the request to Station Control." Then he walked away while making calls.

Bill looked George in the eye and said: "I can't stop you if you've decided. Take care. I'm not going back." They left to a corner to discuss what to tell the folks at home. "We need to tell the same story when we leave," said Bill before he went.

Victoria and I got on the shuttle first, as instructed, and waited for departure.

Victoria had been unnaturally quiet. I asked her if she was all right.

"I'm OK. I'm just thinking about Baker. Have you met his wife, Pattie? I missed their wedding last month." Victoria was fiddling with her porta again.

"No, I missed it too. I was on Planet C," I said.

"I thought you were stuck there. Love came back with you, right?"

"Yeah, they haven't issued anything yet, so we just got back the normal way, didn't get stopped."

"So... you and Love, huh?"

"What about us?"

"Nothing. King's not gonna approve that."

“It’s not how it looks.” I started missing Love. They say that when you feel you’re dying, you’ll think of the one you love. But, Love didn’t pop up when I was there with Serpentine or the robots. The thought of her only came to me when I felt safe. What did it mean?

Gorō came back. He was very friendly but was also oddly quiet. He wasn’t at all curious about us, or what had happened. I didn’t know how robots cope with discrepancies like this. But the last fifty years was blank to them.

As we got clearance from the control centre of the station, Victoria yelled: “Got connection!” We all drew out our portas. The flare was finally over. I plugged mine into the shuttle for power and turned it on. Love had sent 237 messages. I called her back. She was crying all the time, so I couldn’t make out what she said. But I made sure that she heard that I was all right. Bill came back and said: “We were never on this station. Don’t tell anyone about it. We never met.”

We took off.

Chapter 5: Ophelia

It was a cold morning when Charlie knocked on the door to Baker's widow's house. Charlie was the only one who'd been here, but Love came with us. Victoria has been called back to the office to handle the PR crisis she created, so she couldn't make it. After seeing Baker's parents off at the spaceport the day before, Pattie was heading back to Planet C the next morning herself.

Pattie opened the door to let us in. We nodded, acknowledging each other, but there were no words exchanged. We had been sort of introduced at the funeral. But it was a very hushed affair because of the sensitive nature of the Roboland incident. The fact that no one was reporting on it was what scared me the most. The police were struggling to get access to the space station because it had strayed from the orbit after the explosion. They had no idea people were on there before the missing person reports. The only explanation was that the exclusiveness of the gathering ensured that almost all participants came from families belonging to the political or business elite. None of their families would want to publicise the incident. So far no one had sought after me or Victoria.

Everything about Roboland was classified for political reasons and officially we were never there. The galactic elite, including Planet C authority kept pressuring their Planet B counterpart for answers and their children. It seemed to be a matter of time before someone found out who survived the incident. But someone, or some force had been shielding us from being noticed. For that was the only rational explanation why weren't yet visited by cops or spooks. Many of us had been suspended from our jobs because of the permit situation, me and Love included. Some of the more senior staff including Sugar remained because they were already citizens of this planet. Victoria and Item were registered with King's other company Starsea so they were safe for the time being. Able still had her study permit valid, so she was ok for now, too. King promised to hire her.

The living room was spacious. Baker used to brag about how big the living room was when he first bought this place a little over a year ago. The mortgage had still over 10 years to go. The flat was decorated to Pattie's taste. Lavender coloured and scented wallpaper matched the upholstery which showed a darker hue of lilac. It looked simple to the point of bland, but cosy with lovely little details here and there. Some travel souvenirs and toys were strewn around the living room. Pattie stood in the middle in her mauve jumper.

"Do you want tea?" she asked curtly, after offering us seats.

"Yes! Yes please, thanks," Charlie answered quickly.

"A cup of tea would be lovely, thanks," realising Charlie had nothing more to add, Love picked up the conversation, "we just want to check if you're okay and let you know that if there's anything you need, we're here to help you."

"It's not like there's anything you can do, even if you want to," Pattie moved slowly towards the kitchen, touching an empty space on the wall. A nail above it indicated a framed picture once occupied the place.

Noticing us again, she said: "Sorry, thanks, I really appreciate the gesture," and proceeded to the kitchen.

It was true that there wasn't anything we could do. Without her husband's work permit, she had to leave the planet to avoid deportation.

Pattie brought us plum tea, raisin scones and strawberry jam. She walked to the window and tended her orchids absentmindedly. Love approached her and whispered into her ear. Pattie started crying on her shoulder. Charlie and I looked at each other, baffled. It wasn't that I couldn't understand her feelings, it was more that we weren't able to respond.

"We'll go out and have a cigarette," said Charlie. Pattie nodded while Love patted her back and gave us an "I got this" look.

Both suns shone distantly outside, and the cold breeze swept across our faces. Charlie offered me a cigarette. I took out mine and he withdrew. Charlie sighed and asked: "How's the *Daily*?"

"Worse. We can't work even as freelance now. The immigration department might find out."

“Shit. Did you look for another job?”

“I’ve been looking, but time is tight. Most probation periods are too long and there are simply not enough permits to go around in most companies. I heard you got a job?” In fact, I had just heard it that morning from Love.

“Yeah, sort of. My travel documents are still with the Immigration office. They won’t return it. So it’s more like freelancing, part time kind of stuff.” He shrugged and took long drag on the cigarette.

“Where do you work now?” I was curious who could be this bold, accepting someone who didn’t have any documents.

“Stuff ’n’ Things,” he grinned and looked at me, “fuck the non-compete clause, right?”

“Hahaha, that’s great news. You’re gonna earn a lot more than us. I heard that they’re more of a one-man operation? How does he manage?”

“Yeah, just Keith and several assistants. He picks the content from Planet B tabloids and the assistants will get freelance translators to translate the text and edit it. He’ll then stuff ’n’ things-ify the article and that’s it. I work both as a translator and editor.” Charlie finished the cigarette, looked inside and lit another.

“Love will probably message me if she’s done pacifying Pattie.” I checked my porta before lighting my second.

“What happened up there? You were there weren’t you?”

“Are you asking as a friend or as a S&T editor?” I half joked.

“Both.” He turned to me and kept his eyes fixed on mine, and spoke earnestly. “If we are going to run a story, we have to do it right. Keith agrees that we need to do it from a personal point of view. You’ll be anonymous, of course, nobody else would know you were there.”

“They will, eventually. But I’ll think about it. The rumours on the Grid are too crazy and insidious.” S&T did spread some of that rumour, before all those articles were wiped out and the topic banned. Even if I did the interview, nothing would be published before the ban got lifted, if it got lifted. But once it did, it’d be my interview telling the truth as I experienced it. Not a bad deal anyway. But I might have to ask Victoria’s permission, and Bill’s if I ever found

him. Bill disappeared almost immediately after we parted ways after landing 12 kilometres outside Gigapolis.

“I heard there was another one who got away.” Charlie snubbed his cigarette and approached me.

“What do you mean? I got back with Victoria, if there was anyone who took another shuttle or an escape pod, we wouldn’t know that, would we?” I gave my well-rehearsed testimony.

“Thought you might say that,” Charlie turned back and looked inside again, “You know we’re not the only ones looking to find you and that other person? You might want to find out who that person is before someone dangerous comes to you.”

My porta vibrated. It was Love calling us in. Charlie grinned again and gave me an “after you” gesture.

Pattie had drawn her sangria-coloured curtains and turned on the lights. A sea of purple opened before our eyes and I felt a little dazed. I sat down and had some more tea to calm myself. We exchanged what we knew about the current state of the *Daily*. Victoria didn’t really understand why Victoria wasn’t suspended.

Charlie told us that it was because King sensed something was going wrong. So he wanted to test if Starsea can be used to hire journalists as a plan B. She sent in her application the same time as Charlie, but Charlie applied with the *Daily*. That was why she stayed on and he was still in limbo. At least, Keith seemed willing to take him on once he was free to apply again. We, on the other hand, were still waiting for the immigration department’s consent to be hired by Starsea. It might take long. But the good thing was, we hadn’t received the letter telling us to leave yet.

We bid farewell to Pattie after another hour. She seemed determined to live her own life after returning to Planet C. But, if possible, she said, she would fulfil Baker’s dream of having their own photography studio. “That’d be sweet,”

she said, "I think he'd like that. A little widow in her studio." She blushed and said goodbye again.

Charlie had another appointment later so he left to grab the levitram. Without turning her head, Love asked if I'd like to go somewhere else with her. I agreed to the suggestion with no hesitation. Things had been awkward between me and Love because of all the secrecy surrounding Roboland. Bill and Victoria and I had decided that we do not talk to anyone about what happened, so people around us would have deniability when questioned by agents from any planet.

Love knew I wasn't telling her everything. That was probably the reason she didn't ask. She wasn't saying much to me all week since we got back. She might be up to something, but I couldn't be sure. I might just find out now we had the whole afternoon to ourselves.

"Where do you want to go?" I asked.

"I don't know. Maybe some vintage shops," she said, fixated on her porta.

"Okay, we might need to take a levitram too." I peeked over her shoulder. She wasn't checking the maps but chatting with someone.

"It's Able, think she's kind of in trouble."

"What kind of trouble?"

"With work. She lives pretty close. There's a Starhub just 10 minutes' walk from here. Let meet her there." She led the way.

Despite taking a wrong turn along the way, we got there before Able did. This was the first time I visited a Starhub branch since I came back. The smell of coffee permeated the place. I looked around and there wasn't any sign of hot food. Love took a seat and tasked me with the mission of ordering for her. I couldn't quite decide what she'd like. I tried as hard as I could and remembered what we had back on the Moon of Planet D. I ordered the same: two cinnamon and gooseberry teas.

Able emerged from the crowd, while I was waiting for my order. I tried to greet her from a distance, but she didn't see me. I finally managed to catch

her attention when she nearly passed me by, but Love was already waving at her. She quickly greeted me, but before I could ask her what she wanted, she'd already gone to sit next to Love.

Able had already started her story by the time I brought the tea back. It sounded like it had something to do with Victoria.

"Roger, can you get Able something to drink, too, please?" Love looked up before I could get any more detail.

I watched them from the queue while waiting for my turn. Love listened as Able spoke vigorously. When my order was ready, Love had already begun to speak. I took the coffee back to the table.

"Yeah, that makes sense," said Able, nodding to Love. "Oh thanks Roger!"

"You should go with her, you can't let her have everything," Love continued. As if reminded by Able's latte, Love sipped her coffee.

"What did I miss?" I sat down and drank my lukewarm coffee.

"Not much," said Love, "we're just getting to your part."

"My part?"

"Yes, you take pictures, do you?" Able asked.

"A little bit."

They started to explain the situation to me. Before Able got suspended, she booked an interview with a C'er celebrity designer based in Gigapolis. But it seemed that she had gone missing since the Roboland event. Not being able to contact her in any way, they now needed another feature interview for the new issue.

Naturally, Victoria came in and saved the day. She found Ophelia, a Planet C-born B'ish celebrity fashion buyer to fill the spot. However, Victoria demanded to do the interview with Able. Able realised that it was probably because Victoria didn't want to embarrass herself by not understanding the interviewee. Love suggested that Able goes with Victoria but bring me with her as the photographer and videographer. I did make videos with Baker before, but he was always the cameraman. Love insisted that this way Able would be able to lead the conversation herself.

So I agreed to the plan and we decided to meet in the Starhub outside the Ophelia's home, two days later at 9AM. It'd be an hour before the interview, 30 minutes before meeting up with Victoria. Able left soon after the plan was made and went home to prepare for the interview, because she knew Victoria never does research before the morning of the interview.

"Sorry, I had to know what the matter was before involving you," said Love while she reached out to my hand.

"No worries, I don't mind. That was a good plan by the way," I said, finishing my coffee.

"Hmm," she said.

Silence.

I felt that she was giving me a cue to talk about Roboland. But instead, I looked behind her at the people queueing at the counter, getting their coffee. Lounge music sounded in the shop, which I hadn't noticed among the clattering china and loud conversations. From what I've overheard, no one was talking about Roboland yet. I should feel relieved if I don't think into it too hard, I said to myself.

"What do you think? Of the plan, I mean." She asked.

"It's a good plan, but I need to do some research as well. Like who this person is and what she does and stuff. Make sure she's really a semi-celebrity like Victoria said."

"Good idea. Also, you can use my camera. Do you want to come to my place and pick it up today? We can have dinner together."

"Yeah, I'd love that." It felt good not having to go to the office every day.

Two days later, I met Able at the empty Starhub in the fancy neighbourhood where Ophelia lived. It was just before 9, when the three of us planned to meet. The shop had been opened for a while, but the staff were still rearranging the chairs after the morning cleaning.

The Starhub was visibly larger and better decorated compared to the one near Able's place. The wallpaper was of a better quality and a darker colour, instead of the garish bright in other Starhubs that were supposed to appeal to young people. Same could be said with the wooden floor and vintage-inspired décor. Four or five people scattered around the shop. Lounge music played clearly. Seemed they didn't manage to attract the clientele living in the pre-Mech Boom terraced houses along the crescent.

Victoria didn't send in the questions to Able. She was bringing them in for discussion. She claimed that "Feefee" and her were very good friends so there wasn't need to be so formal.

Victoria finally showed up around 9:50, wearing her yellowish orange dress.

"I just did some research on Feefee and it's very exciting," she said beamingly, with a large ice coffee in her hand, "I just found out that her dad Polonius has based his business on Planet C for ages and her mom is actually a C'er. She definitely can speak C."

"And?" Able said motionlessly.

Sensing the tension, I chimed in: "It appears that she came to live on Planet B with her brother Laertes before she started school though."

Actually, about her dad: he's been working closely with the C'ish government on teleportation technology and other space travel related researches it's suspected that he's already joined the C citizenship. It's possible that both her parents are C'ers now.

"So she spent years in Nordington before she moved here, Roger, you're from Nordington, right? You guys must have a lot to talk about. But I have an ex who's from N-ton as well. But he's not like you. Anyway, let me see your questions, Able."

"What about your questions, Victoria?" I demanded.

"I'm just looking at her questions and see what needs to be added," She answered brusquely, "this won't do."

"What?" I didn't follow her line.

She pointed at a line on the screen and took over the spin-o-matic: “I don’t think our readers would understand such pedantic questions about influence and practice. I guess I have to step in and ask something people would actually read.”

“But this one is for the print edition,” exclaimed Able, “the fashion section has always been professional and informed. We’re not a celebrity magazine!”

“That’s why that nobody reads the print edition anymore. I’m in charge of this interview now, I’ll explain to the editor.” Victoria added some questions about Ophelia’s days on Planet C and her brother’s going back to Nordington to work in the family business.

“Is that it?” I asked, “are you done?”

“Yeah,” she looked at the time (10:32) on the spin-o-matic screen and smiled, “fashionably late, let’s go.”

We knocked on a recently painted pink door in a sea of black wooden doors on the crescent. A small and slim lady opened the door and welcomed us in. She was dressed in pink, of course. She introduced herself as Ophelia. She wore heavy facial make up including baby blue eyeliner and glittering pink lipstick. Plastic bauble, woolly pompom and all sorts of colourful trinkets dangled from ossicone to toe. The visible parts of the house were a combination of shades of pink and pastel blue, with furry wall and fluffy handles.

We took off our shoes at the door and floated down the hallway. It seemed that she had put on the anti-gravity device used for space exploration, the kind they use when landing on supermassive planets or near black holes. But this one seemed to be turned all the way up to the same level of centrifugal gravity simulators on some space colonies. I checked my watch immediately; these machines were rumoured to twist and bend time occasionally. The arms were a little wobbly, but nothing too serious. Our hostess floated deeper into the house and beckoned us to enter. But Able seemed to have trouble navigating herself in the low gravity environment. She kept leaning to her left as she moved forward. She almost toppled herself trying to correct her course. After another failed try, she stopped. I approached her and found her having a minor

panic attack. I helped her to breathe normally and guided her to find which way up was. Victoria followed Feefee down the corridor and turned back to tell us to hurry.

I helped Able to find her space legs and told her to imagine that she was on a space station. We utilised hops and inertia to navigate ourselves following Victoria, who was floating freely in Ophelia's corridor. Arriving the end of the corridor, Ophelia and Victoria floated upwards and rose to the floor above. Able and I looked at each other and followed them. The anti-gravity was particularly strong, so we floated as if in water up to the next level.

We arrived at a "near zero-g" sitting room where the interview would be conducted. It was a sea of blue with the pink Ophelia sitting in the middle, cushions floating around her. As the orange coloured Victoria drifted around in the pale blue, Able tried to overcome weightlessness and set up her spin-o-matic for the interview. But the moving parts inside the spin-o-matic wouldn't spin without gravity. Ophelia floated across the room to hand her a miniature centrifuge for the spin-o-matic. I suddenly realised that we hadn't had the chance to introduce ourselves. I fumbled in my pocket to get a card to hand to Ophelia, but Victoria drifted this way and said: "this is Roger the photographer, this is Able" and flew away.

I paused for a moment to consider if I should still bother to give her my card. Then the thought came that I shouldn't leave any evidence of still working for the *Daily*. I messaged Able to make sure that she didn't hand out her card. But letting Victoria have her way was a little irritating.

"And I'm Ophelia, it's nice meeting you both today." Ophelia introduced herself again, somewhat absentmindedly, as if she'd forgot she'd already said that. She brought out some tea in sealed packaging for micro-gravity consumption and floated back to her spot with all the cushions surrounding her. We caught the inbound bags of tea and started to work on the straws.

Victoria floated closer to Ophelia and introduced herself somewhat formally: "I'm Victoria from the *Daily Seer*, I'm in charge of the Patamedia department," both me and Able looked up with eyebrows above our foreheads,

but she continued, "I'm conducting this interview for our readers both here and on Planet C. So I think it'd be better if we do it in C."

"Sorry? But I can't really..." Ophelia was as surprised as we were.

"Don't be shy, Feefee~ It's on your Grid profile, your mom is a C'er, isn't she?" Victoria swam even closer towards Feefee.

"Vivi, are you serious?" She acted a little timid, "maybe it'd be better to stick to the arrangement we had with your supervisor, Sugar."

"Arrange... ment?" Vivi hesitated and looked my way for help. I whispered the C phrase (for there was no single word for it) for "arrangement". She nodded silently and agreed with Sugar's arrangement.

Victoria was hamstrung by language. For the next hour, Able took the lead. Victoria tried to ask some gossipy questions that she'd told us about e.g.: would she date a C'er and why, but had problem understanding the answers. She soon eclipsed into having her fourth pack of tea and staring at her porta. Able was also having some difficulty, but it was with hiding her grin.

I filmed Feefee giving her answers and took photos at the same time. The holo-cameras issued by the Daily were outdated but performed adequately for interviews. The only problem was how to set them up in a microgravity environment. In the end I managed to fix them on the wall with duct tape. But for photos I had to use the one borrowed from Love. Reminiscing about the night I got the camera, I found myself having the same trouble as Able.

The questions were mostly fashion related, with Victoria pitching in with something about the high society on Planet B and the balls and dinner parties she'd. been to. She wasn't particularly interested in these but answered anyway. Victoria followed up with a question about her brother's visit next month with the Direktor's delegation.

"I don't know much about it. Actually, I don't know much about my dad's company in general. And I tend to not get into any political conversation."

I didn't know if that was true but that did deter Victoria from asking more questions about the Direktor's visit and her family business.

It was almost lunch time when Able finished the last follow-up questions and started to wrap things up. Victoria suddenly jumped in with a question she formulated during her last 3 drinks: “How do you feel now that your ex-boyfriend and your best friend were both killed on Roboland?” I knew that she was referring to Bea and her boyfriend but wasn’t sure about Able. We weren’t supposed to talk about Roboland.

I thought we weren’t supposed to talk about Roboland.

“What?” The room stood still, as if the air had congealed under the pressure. An empty tea packet flew by and hit Ophelia in the face.

She blinked: “What do you mean ‘killed’? Do you know where they are?”

I rushed to stop the filming and took out the memory units from the holocams. I turned my head and saw Ophelia and Victoria in a complete meltdown. Victoria seemed to have lost the ability to speak and was sweating excessively. Ophelia was screaming in both B and C just to get any reaction from Victoria. I gently tugged Ophelia’s shoulders and she floated away from the stunned Victoria.

Trying to calm her down reminded me of an old film scene. I said sorry to Ophelia before I slapped her across the face, but in a very controlled fashion. She punched me in the nose and nearly broke it. I rushed to the tissue box floating above me and stopped the bleeding. She calmed down gradually while apologising and searching for a first aid kit. It worked just as planned.

I checked behind curtains, closed all windows, doors and hatches to ensure no one was listening in. I began by asking everyone to turn their porta off. After they did, I turned back to Ophelia and recounted the Roboland affair. I told her about the solar flare, the booze, the robots and the cuborg aristocrat, his lover the AI, and realised it all sounded like a sci-fi B movie. But I did omit Bill’s involvement and didn’t mention Baker and Victoria.

Victoria slipped past and interrupted: “We weren’t supposed to talk about it, Roger! Feefee, I didn’t know that’d happen when I asked Bea for the invitation!”

Ophelia shook her head and glided away through a hatch and downstairs. I wanted to follow but didn't think it appropriate. I nudged Victoria a little, but she still seemed to be in shock. She was crying hard with tears flying around the room. The tears converged and formed a tiny globe in the middle of the room.

A huge ball of water floated out of the hatch, with Ophelia in the centre. It looked like she was in a bubble, only the water was inside. She lay face up, in a giant clear blob drifting mid-air. The three of us stayed still for 5 seconds, trying to comprehend what we were looking at. I gave up and dived into the ball, trying to reach her. Against immense surface tension I pushed through and entered globe of water. It was very disorientating once I was inside. I couldn't tell which way was up. But soon enough, I felt and grabbed her arm. I began fishing her out of the ball but couldn't see which way I should pull her to. It seemed whichever way I swam, I got no closer to the surface. Small bubbles and large air pockets ran every way, blocking my already blurred sight. I started to run out of strength and oxygen. And a Ophelia struggled harder.

I began looking for bubbles drifting around in the water to see if there was any oxygen in them. But it was getting harder and harder to move in the water and the ball seemed to grow bigger by the minute because of the stream of water still supplying water from the tap in the bathroom. I started to think it might be the end.

We dropped. On the wet carpet. It hurt a little. But I could breathe again. Able had found the terminal to turned off the gravity conditioner in the room. Ophelia had stopped breathing and her heartbeat was very weak. Conjuring up all the memories of health & safety sessions I had at school, I began performing CPR on Ophelia. She coughed and started to cry after a lengthy revival.

But the water was still on, and the rooms downstairs were flooded. I rushed down the hatch and into the bathroom to turn off the tap. As soon as I climbed back up, I collapsed on the wet cushions Ophelia used to recline on. I couldn't move a single muscle.

I can't really remember how we left the house, but I remember Ophelia asked for a card of mine at the end. I found a wet and creased card of Romeo from Starsea Consultation and gave it to her, hoping the name was blurred enough.. In exchange, I asked her for the contact detail of the *C'ing Times* journalist she talked to. Because if those were the people who wanted the info on Roboland, I really needed to be careful.

C'ing Times was an interplanetary media outlet founded by some dissidents from Planet C. They started from Planet A and expanded to most all inhabited planets, moons and colonies apart from those close to Planet C. They were staunchly anti-C'ish Government. Their news ranged from analysis of the government's insidious intents to exclusives from inside sources to even incredible sexual scandals of party leaders. Most of their news was made up, but sometimes they did get some sort of inside stories just to keep their readers interested. It was also well documented that they received funding from Planet A and B government and cooperate with their intelligence agencies. Of course, they were in turn under heavy monitoring from Planet C intelligence agents. That was one of the main reasons why I didn't want to have anything to do with them. There had long been urban legends that people took their newspaper or even fliers by mistake and got summoned and questioned by the Planet C embassy in Gigapolis.

However, if they were onto the Roboland business, I had to see what they were up to. They were almost certainly those dangerous people Bill referred to, but I wasn't sure. I found a Starhub near Alien Quarter to sit down and do some research on the journalist. Without Baker's Grid expertise, my research had become normal Grid search plus some forum archive diving. It was very tiresome, but I finally found the journalist who was digging the Roboland case.

His name was Bertie Lancer. From a wealthy Nordington family, Lancer left the planet for school at the age of 10. His father was arrested in the last corruption purge 8 years ago when he was a teenager. His mother came and joined him on Planet B a year later and they were part of the dissident circle

ever since. He joined the *Times* three years ago and had written articles on various fields. He had a sophisticated touch in his approach and was one of the better writers from that publication. He had been doing investigative projects since last year and produced two quality pieces on power struggles amongst the Nordington elite. His career had been impressive, producing better journalism for an almost gutter propaganda than I did for a supposedly serious publication. I started to feel jealous. On the other hand, I start to think if Lancer could do this, Charlie might be able to do something he wanted for *S&T*. I smiled and took out my porta to send a message to Lancer.

I stopped. I didn't know if it was wise to approach them directly. But I had to know how far they were on this, especially how much the B'ish agents knew about this. And, if possible, who Bill was. So, I started to draft the message as a fellow journalist wanting to get in the loop. I carefully introduced myself and asked some general question about the visible-from-earth explosion of the space station. I also offered to give him my side of "research" as a trade.

There was no reply for twenty minutes. I decided I should let him think it over. I left the Starhub and headed home. I got off the levitram two stops earlier for shopping. I didn't normally come to this area, because it was said to be dangerous at night because of all the horned men from the moon of Planet I. They were mostly friendly but caution was to be practiced. There were chemical attacks reported in this part of the city rather recently, and among the case the victims were a C'er couple and their baby. They got chemically burned very badly and the culprit was never caught. However, they did catch the person responsible within three hours after a similar attack on B'ish teenagers in a club took place in a more affluent neighbourhood a week later. It caused quite a stir among C'ers here while I was back on Planet C but died down almost immediately.

I was going to a C'er supermarket. It was the only place near my home where I could buy original C'ish food and ingredients for traditional C'ish cuisine. I wasn't a very good cook, but I felt like making some noodles myself tonight. The moment I stepped into the shop I noticed that there was a newspaper stand added to the shop while I was away. I wasn't surprised to

find that the *Daily* was there side by side with the special printed edition of *Stuff & Things* (they were mostly Patamedia subscription exclusive). Then I noticed that they had the new edition of the *C'ing Times* available, too.

I stood there and sweated for a minute. I looked at the shop owner Rick, who was sitting at the counter, and looked back at the stand. I didn't know he was political. I'd even chatted with him when the card machine's Grid connection was being erratic. Now was this shop under surveillance? Should I have come here? Will I be on the *List* if I ever talk to old Ricky? I slowly backed off towards the door, before the Rick called me by my name.

"Hey Roger," he waved, "how do you like our news stand? I got the *Daily* here, too!"

What do I do? I thought to myself and waved sheepishly and walked into the depth of the shop.

Just as I was wondering if I should just walk away through the fire exit, Rick approached me with a box of frozen C'ish pastry.

"Hey Roger, this company is promoting their new line of frozen pastries, do you want to have one and try it? Tell me if it's good and I'll see if I'll buy some off them." Rick put it in my basket and smiled.

It was a good brand, I used to have their gyoza from time to time, but not very often because they were expensive. But this was not the problem. The problem was getting free stuff from Rick might put me in an awkward position. If Rick was one of "those people", this would give an unnecessary impression to who every was monitoring him that I was a friend of his. Especially as I was planning to meet a reporter from the *Times*. Just as I struggled to come up with an answer, my porta rang and I ran out to take the call. There weren't any suspicious people about, which was lucky.

"Hello?" I tried to be cautious with unknown numbers.

"Can I speak to Roger please? It's Bertie." I was afraid he'd say, "*from the Times*", and get picked up by interception bots.

"This is him. Do you want to meet up?"

"Yeah, actually, do you want to come around now?"

“Now?” I looked at the frozen pastry given by Rick, “sure. Where shall we meet?”

“I’ll send you the address.” He hung up.

He sent a holographic image of a hand-written address. Bots don’t usually go through pictures, unless looking for nudes.

The address was a nightclub not very far from Alien Quarter. It took me some time to get the right levitram, but after that it was very simple. The club was in a rather hip area of Gigapolis, but gentrification had taken its toll. New apartments were being built and closed clubs could be seen all along the tram route. I found the club in a dark narrow lane just off the high street. It was a tiny building with one glass door. The walls and the door were covered with old and new posters on top of each other. Packs of people hung round its doors. The place doubled as a café during the day and held various events in evenings. People were talking and smoking outside the door and among them I saw Lancer. He was wearing the same hat as in his profile picture on the *Times’* site. However, he was with two other people which could make the exchange of intelligence difficult, but I’d manage.

I walked towards him and introduced myself. Bill quickly looked up and nodded. The two people he was just talking to turned to face me. They were Ophelia and Bill. Ophelia was in a pink velvet with white lace over it. Bill was in a similar suit to the time we were at the themed party among the stars. Bertie laughed and said they were just talking about me. They were all amazed by the fact that all of them knew me but barely knew each other. Bertie himself, of course, introduced me as a friend from the patamedia business, met on a conference. Bill shook my hand and said we’d met at a party a while ago. Ophelia, on the other hand was very calm when she told the others that we’d had an interview earlier this morning.

The problem now, was how much Lancer knew about the incident and did Ophelia tell him anything yet? But since Bill was there, we could direct the conversation to some other direction together.

I feel that I haven't stressed enough the fact that Bill was there. I knew that the world was small, but never thought the C'ish scene on the planet was this small. Maybe it was because a lot of it got blown up a week ago. But still, we weren't really from the same world. If Bill was a child of a party elite or ultra-rich, it would be quite dangerous for him and his family for him to associate with someone like Bertie Lancer.

How did they meet? I asked that question to help myself blend into the role they set for me.

"Us?" Bertie looked at Bill, "we used to race together when we were teens, you know, spaceships and stuff. Now we just go to the same literary salon. You know Beatrice Riddle used to host them, may she rest in peace. Bill is a lot more liberal than I expected from a Reich Kid. May the most of them rest in peace."

Silence. I glanced at Ophelia. Her smile froze.

I chimed in before they could continue: "That's a shame. I always wanted to find a proper literary salon."

Bill gave me a "good job" look: "They were more like parties, really. But we're going to do some new ones, in Bea's memory. Right, Ophelia?"

"Yeah, I'm hosting it," Ophelia came alive again, "but my house is a bit flooded at the moment." She winked at me.

"It'll be a great place to meet people and learn things. Especially for people like us." Bertie nodded at me.

Everyone suddenly had some kind of secret understanding with me. I began to think that they might have similar secret understandings between them. It might not be wise to refuse so I said: "Great, definitely count me in. By the way, I still don't have your contact details, Bill."

Bill exchanged Grid ID with me. Ophelia stuck her head between us: "Hey Roger, I only have your business card, can have your personal contact as well?"

"Of course." I had to.

Everyone outside began to shuffle into the club and the current of people brought us along.

“What’s on the bill today?” Bill asked, before I formulated an appropriate way to ask the same question without using the word “bill”.

“A C’ish experimental music group.” Bertie checked the door. That explained the excessive C’ish faces and language we encountered here. Didn’t they know about this before they came?

Ophelia said with anticipation: “Last time I was here, a J’an experimental group brought loads of toy instruments and percussion stuff. Hope they have something as good this time.”

The bouncer let us in on sight. I didn’t want to ask who it was that go us in. The music was a combination of dissonance and noise, but not in a very good way. We left after the second song started. We went back to the high street and searched for somewhere to sit down. But everywhere was packed with people just left the closing clubs looking for food.

We strolled down the street, still searching for a place to sit. That’s when I realised that we were already in the Alien Quarter. It was much closer than I expected. Therefore, the first place with empty tables we saw was Robomen. We all stood still, staring at Naomi. It was hard to imagine what she looked like in the eyes of Bill or in the mind of Ophelia. But Bertie was considerate enough to say: “Let’s call it a night, maybe?” Then we all said goodbye to each other. Bill shook my hand again and told me to come when the next salon was arranged. Ophelia also invited me to the next event, but reminded me to not tell Vicky about it. “I think it might be a more intimate gathering, so...” She smiled awkwardly.

Bertie stuffed a large envelope into my bag when we were about to part ways. He whispered in my ears: “Read this, speak soon,” and left without looking back.

I took the envelope out as soon as I could. It was already wet.

The pastry had defrosted, and the stuffing was everywhere in my bag.

Chapter 6: Bill

It was surreal to be taking the same levitram to the *Daily* again. I hadn't taken this route for many moons now, but every building I passed through, the gooseberry and cinnamon tea persisted on the billboards although the season had already passed. The drab decoration and miniature versions of the same ads inside the tram felt so familiar as I'd never stopped taking this trip.

The second sun peeked out of the clouds right above my head, it was early afternoon. I opened the window of the tram so that the lukewarm early spring air could flow in a bit. The morning chilliness from last night's rain had gone completely, but a hint of freshness from the shower remained. To think about it, I had never taken levitram to the office at this hour before. When they used to call me back for emergencies during weekends or holidays I'd always taken the Overcab. But that didn't matter now.

I was heading back to the office when I should've definitely been laying low and waiting for the permit shitstorm to blow over. Sugar told me to come at this time because if the immigration officers were to inspect the office unannounced, they'd come first thing in the morning. The story went that they might pay you a visit at your home in the small hours so that you had no time to prepare for them. We once did a story about a young C'er applying for a permit who got raided this way because the inter-departmental miscommunication within the internal ministry (who governed immigration and policing). Being found out working for the *Daily* without a permit would put the new application in peril. For all we know, the afternoon would be the safest time to risk it.

The reason I was on my way to the office, was of course to deliver the pictures I took during the eventful interview we did with Ophelia. Transmitting the photos via the Grid was too risky. The internal ministry had access to all data sent and received by any alien and they weren't afraid to use that despite some high court challenges. To avoid leaving traces on the Grid, I had to take my chances and deliver them to the office in person. All my colleagues were way too busy to collect it from my place.

A clearly inebriated B'ish man stood closer to where I sat. I began feeling a little uneasy. I'd seen videos and even holographic films of harassment to aliens on public transport. But he passed me by and walked up to a B'ish woman with a bionic forearm.

The drunken man began taunting her for being a cyborg and telling her that Gigapolis didn't welcome the likes of her. Everyone in the tram fell silent, and the man with a bionic forearm endured. Several people buzzed the "Stop" button while others quietly drew their portas to film this scene on video or holo film. I waited eagerly to get off at the next.

Just as I exited the tram with six others, I heard from behind me that the bionic woman served in the Royal Space Force and fought cyborg terrorists 15 years ago. That was how she lost part of her arm. She walked off after us, with one or two people clapping behind her. The drunkard shouted at them and they fell silent again.

Luckily I was only one stop early and about a ten-minute-walk away from the office building. It was the first time I'd come here since the night of attack on Petitbourg, when I worked overtime a day before my "holiday". Everything was as familiar as it was strange. The buildings in the area seemed to have been refurbished, or at least redecorated. The new year ornaments that used to be forever dangling on the outer walls regardless the time of year were now gone and the walls themselves seemed to have been cleaned.

I could not help the nostalgia and headed to the Starhub for a coffee, as I had done during the past couple of years. I might not be able to come back after this day. But the actual buying action felt more like a muscle memory, for I was more preoccupied in adjusting how I should feel coming back to the *Daily* after so long. I left the coffee shop and headed for our office.

The Daily Seer was located in a four-storey town house converted for business. It was sandwiched by a rather reputable C'ish law firm and a municipal agency with no specific function. The post-Mech Boom look of the squatty terraced house with all its subdued grey bricks gave a look of familiarity

and intimacy. At the same time, the somewhat esteemed neighbours gave the company authority. That was my conjecture of King's thoughts, anyway.

Jig at reception was rather surprised to see me. She quickly called Sugar to pick me up. While waiting for Sugar coming down from the first-floor office, I started to look around inside the building for familiarities and changes. The reception room was located next to the entrance of the house, but the door was a little down the hallway. That made it a little awkward to get to the reception since it was not the first thing you see when you enter the building. At the end of the hallway was the editorial office for the print edition and beside it a staircase leading up to the patamedia office where I used to work. A conference room sat on the second floor and the Starsea office on the third, along with advertisement and King's personal office suite. The interior of the building was somewhat bland, and that made it hard to remember the details. King had refurbished the building about five years ago and got rid of all the signs of Post-Mech decoration style and applied the minimalism that had just caught on back then.

Sugar came down the stairs and greeted me: "Long time no see, you've got a new haircut, eh? How's everything? How's Love?"

I tried my best answering all these questions from her, but I kept getting distracted by the fact that we were heading to the editorial office instead of the patamedia.

"Sugar, why are we not going upstairs?" I asked.

"Oh, I was just up there having a meeting with the Seastar staff. Ah, you don't know yet. We have merged the patamedia department with the editorial team. The old Pata office is empty now, but the Susport TV from back home is coming this week to use it as their base for covering the Direktor's visit."

Arriving at the editorial office, I was surprised that it wasn't crowded at all after the merging of two teams. There were only about half a dozen people in the office. The *Daily* had lost so much of its staff now I understood why the patamedia outlet hadn't been very active on the Grid. Everyone was a bit surprised that I was here, possibly because Sugar didn't tell anyone lest it went

on record somewhere for the immigration officers to pick up. Able was working hard at her desk and did not see me come in. I hadn't spoken to her for a while.

I greeted Able at her desk. She looked like she hadn't rested since we last met. Her hair was fixed back with a hairband and her eyes were red, contrasting the pale, haggard face. She slowly looked up at me and said: "Ah you're here already. Just put the memory disk here." And went back to work on her spin-o-matic.

"You look terrible, Able. Everything alright?" I was more than a little concerned.

"Victoria gave up all the work she took from fashion and asked to be transferred to advertisement after the interview. Now the fashion editor is enjoying her maternity leave, everything is on me. Sugar has just been made the editor-in-chief last week, although she's never done a day's editing. So basically, everything's shit." She lowered her voice at the end of the sentence.

"What happened to the old editor-in-chief, Fox?"

"You haven't heard? She's going back to Planet C, but I don't think it's the permit problem, she's got a permanent permit," she explained, "but we are gonna try and find out at the goodbye party next week, you coming?"

"If I'm invited." I was not really in the mood for parties, and I found my position in the company a little awkward since the permit fiasco. Actually, almost all of the people who were caught in the permit problem had either gone back to Planet C or changed jobs. Only Love and me were still here waiting for the new application. Item had transferred to Planet D for Starsea business and Charlie'd gone to *Stuff & Things*. I wasn't quite sure why Able hadn't left yet, as others on probation like Charlie all quit because the lack of prospect of getting a permit even if they passed. Maybe just like us, she had a reason not to return to Planet C.

After the chat with Able, I went upstairs to the old office of the patamedia department to gather the stuff and things I left there (including a special printed issue of *S&T*). The empty room finally began to give me a fit of nostalgia. I

began remembering all the overtime I worked and the jokes we told. Everything was where it was when I last left it, including half a packet of cigarettes, except my enamel cup. I went down to the pantry in the basement after stuffing everything in my bag. Someone might have taken it down and washed it since I left. But it was nowhere to be found.

I instinctively suspected Sugar. After all she displayed a disproportionate interest towards it before I left for Planet C. I headed back to the editorial office trying to ask if Sugar knew where my mug was. I bumped into her on the stairs. She grabbed my hand and led me up the stairs, “come here, no time to explain!” she said.

I took my hand back and followed her back upstairs to the empty patamedia office, where my cup miraculously reappeared on my desk. She quickly went to the back of the office just as I put the cup in my bag, saying: “The inspection is here. I thought they only come first thing in the morning or just before closing time. But they’re here, Jig is stalling them as long as she can. Shoot, how does this open?” She tried the third key to open the door to fire escape.

“Do I just run?” I asked, feeling the absurdity here. But the adrenaline rose nonetheless.

“Walk, don’t run,” she gave the venturous answer, and continued, “don’t be seen in the vicinity of the building, try to get to one tram stop away before you take it. Buy something so you have an excuse to be here. Go to the lawyer next door if you got caught right away.”

She managed to open the door after another try. I passed through the spider webs and dust to find myself on the wobbly fire escape stairs. This exit route had been reserved mostly for (not so) surprise birthday cakes and King’s surprise visits to the offices upstairs. I looked down the stairs and saw no one in the back alley formed of back doors of restaurants and bins. The narrow lanes seemed clear. Before I went, Sugar told me that King was not on the planet today but promised that he’d call me and Love as soon as he got any update from the immigration department. “Things are not as easy these days, since they appointed the new internal secretary.”

I quickly left the building via the cast iron stairs while trying not to notice the loose bolts and broken screw on the staircase. After landing in one piece, I looked around the alley, waved at Sugar upstairs and watched her closing the door. It seemed stuck a little so she dragged the door rather hard and slammed it shut. The fire escape stairwell felt the force and the exit and platform on first floor detached itself from the building. After it stopped swaying and found an unsteady balance, I navigated myself through the damp brick alleys before emerging on the main street.

I kept facing the shop windows in case of being spotted on the surveillance cameras on lamp posts and street corners. These belonged to the B'ish Internal Intelligence, under the Internal Minister, same as the immigration department. I doubt if the immigration department would actually demand the footage if they didn't know I was here today. But I'd heard that the new minister was rather anti-immigration so better be on the safe side. I entered a supermarket and bought some food for dinner. Then I remembered I was supposed to go to the party, or salon as they called it, hosted by Ophelia this afternoon. But they didn't actually say if dinner was provided so I might as well prepare some food myself. Needing to go home for dinner could also serve as an excuse if I needed to leave early. I didn't really care for party, not at the moment.

I took the next levitram and got back home, this time incident-free. I bought some snacks from the C'er supermarket for Love and got dragged into a discussion about whether C'ish students should return to Planet C after graduation between the boss and his friend and hangers on in the shop. The friend was helping to load the snacks onto the shelves, so I had to approach them.

10 minutes later I finally arrived home and got up the stairs back to my flat. My flatmates had moved out earlier this month and that was when I asked Love to move in with me. She opened the door for me and took the shopping from my hand after kissing me on the cheek. She disappeared into the kitchen

while I took off my shoes. I entered the kitchen. She turned to me: “Thanks for the snacks!” With visible joy.

After we moved to the sitting room, she pointed at a chair and said: “That’s a bit wobbly. But actually I think it’s just a loose screw or two. But we don’t have any screw drivers.”

“I’ll get some next time I go out, or you can take a look on the Grid,” I said. Then I remembered that she wanted to support local businesses, so I said: “I’ll go down to the hardware shop next time I go out.”

I sat down on a couch nearby and told her about the cup and the inspection, and, of course, King’s promise to update us again. She savoured the snack for a few seconds, offered me one and said: “Hope the inspection goes well. They’ve been waiting for that for, like, a month now? They’re targeting C’ish firms, probably has something to do with the trade dispute with Planet A.”

“How’s that affecting us here?”

“Planet A keeps accusing companies of C origin of spying and monitoring C’ish people abroad and calls upon its allies to investigate. I suspect the suspension of license is a result of that.”

“Are you spying, or monitoring?” I joked.

“Of course not, we’re not popular enough for the official to ask us anyway.”

I laughed.

“How’s your work today?” I asked, turning on the holographic projector.

“I just submitted that hologram loop they wanted. Doing freelance is so much better than sitting in the office at the *Daily* daily. If only they issued permits for freelance work.”

“Yeah, if only.” I absentmindedly watched the news about conspiracy theories around the disappearance of some billionaire heiress and secret underground gatherings. People on the Grid seemed to suspect witchcraft, but I was pretty sure I’d seen her on Roboland.

“Roger, when is the salon you were going to?” Love finished the snack and spoke.

“I think the doors are opening in 30 minutes. I should get ready.” I stood up and emptied my bag, “you sure you don’t want to come?”

“Yeah, I’m afraid I’d roll my eyes in front of those posh kids.”

“You’d do just fine,” I said, but she didn’t change her mind on that.

I took the invitation, got myself ready, kissed Love goodbye and left the house.

I took another levitram back to Ophelia’s three-storey town house in central Gigapolis. It wasn’t far from where I lived but it felt that time had been dragged longer like flying pass a black hole, or something like that. If the alleged “disappearance” of the posh kids was getting reported more, the police might be able to investigate in the light and forced to share their information to the public. I knew that the last thing I need was attention from the authorities. But secretly I hoped that I could use the press to make my case with the permit.

I was a little lost in thought and got off the tram one stop late. I walked to Ophelia’s house from the tram stop. There were visibly more levimobiles parked on the road near her house than the last time. And there were people at the door, smoking and talking amongst themselves. I approached the small crowd and tried to find the hostess, or Bertie, or Bill. A B’ish man in porter’s livery and several security guards stood at the makeshift reception and took names and invitations. I approached the porter and showed him the formal invitation that was delivered to me by post a week ago. After giving me an envelope of small gifts to guests, the porter politely let me in and reminded me of the weightless condition in the house.

I floated my way into the house. It looked more different from my last visit than I had expected. Gone was the pink and Ophelia had replaced it with a milky white wall paint, and beige coloured carpet. In the place of the furry cuteness of the furniture was classy natural wood finish and brownish textile. Ophelia had fixed some seats and tables on the ceiling this time, although most guests were still free-floating in the corridor.

A maid directed me to the cloakroom. I deposited my bag and navigated myself through the maze-like hallways, stairs and poles trying to find a familiar

face. Finally I saw Ophelia surrounded by two male guest who had clearly had one beer too many and kept badgering her about Bea and some kind of “wild orgie” that got her killed. I looked around and no one seemed to want to intervene. That was probably because many people attending the event came because they wanted some gossip about the mass disappearance within the elite class.

“Ophelia?” I floated towards them and greeted her.

“Roger, you made it!” She looked gladder than she should be and flew to embrace me, away from those two people.

“I’m so happy you came! Bertie and Bill are not here yet. Bill said he’d come later but I can’t get hold of Bertie,” She said, “anyway, make yourself at home. The bar is just upstairs. Do you like what I did with the house?”

“Yes, It’s very classy, bit different from what I expected, though.”

“A change of mood, perhaps. I was never the cutesy kind anyway. I almost forgot, I invited King too, but unfortunately he’s offworld right now. Do you want me to introduce you to anyone? Most of the people are pretty nice normally. But since the Incident, there seemed to be a lot of people just want gossip. I suspect there are journos in here, too. You excluded.”

“I don’t doubt it.” But I too, wanted to learn something about the Incident, especially its aftermath from this gathering. I wondered how much Bill told her or Bertie about it.

I heard arguing from the door. It seemed that gate crashing had finally begun. But the security staff made sure that the offenders soon dispersed without incident before anyone called the police. I made way through clusters of guests and catering staff and found the bar. It was temporarily fixed on a wall, adding to the disorientation. I adjusted myself to be on the same plane with the bartender. I asked for any non-alcoholic drink, so they gave me iced tea in a squeeze bag that starlines gave you on voyages. It was surprisingly good, considering it looked like space food. While I was having my tea, I noticed someone on the ceiling.

It was Alex, a prominent C'ish dissident and human rights lawyer who had been granted asylum on Planet B. Talking to her was a C'ish university professor called Robin who I had interviewed a little over a year ago and some students. I remembered that Robin taught C'ish economy and B-C relations, Love said that she went to one of his seminars once and never returned. I decided to listen in to their conversation.

“—but it is arguably the best possible state that we can achieve—” said the professor.

“How do you argue that? Robin, the system is broken, take healthcare—” the dissident lawyer broke him off just before being broken off herself.

“The healthcare reform is underway, give the collective leadership a chance. The new minister is quite able, I hear.” The Professor asked one of his students go and fetch another drink.

“I bet you hear from very close inside sources. You can't fix healthcare by reforming healthcare alone, and deregulation is hardly the way to go—”

“—isn't free market what you rightists always advocate, along with 'liberalism' and your version of 'democracy'? Now look at who's the socialist!”

Alex rolled her eyes and said: “You can't just give healthcare to the market when half the nation is still in poverty. The pharma corporations and insurance companies will eat the patients alive.”

“Listen, I don't think you understand it carefully. They are not going to just sell the healthcare system to these wolves, not at all! They are merely trying to let market shake off the bureaucracy a little and inject some funds and incentive to the healthcare and social care systems. You should know how capitalism works. With these investments, the government can provide better service and the competition from the private sector will undoubtedly help the public service maximise its efficiency. It's a win-win. Thank you.” The professor received his drink.

“I've never liked it when people talk politics, it always ends up in someone getting offended, or getting 'disappeared',” said Ophelia from behind me, drinking with a straw from her space drink. I looked back at her, missing Alex's

answer, but I was really curious what my hostess thought about these conversations. Her father was the founder and CEO of a giant tech company that was involved in half of Planet C's technological advances. Many of their projects were state-backed and their monopoly in space colony construction was almost certainly permitted or even encouraged by the state. Their latest move was exporting teleportation ports and artificial gravity systems to Planets A and B. They were much cheaper and more advanced than their A and B-ish competitors' products. They took the industry by storm, supposedly with state subsidy of course. That was why her opinion intrigued me, given that her family collaborated with the regime extensively. As a matter of fact, much of their wealth came from that collaboration. They were rich because they were allowed to be.

"Disappeared? On this planet?" I asked, loudly enough for Alex and Robin to hear.

"Not necessarily, normally in space ports around Planet C. Or other third-party planets," she answered absentmindedly, not interested in the subject.

"If you mean the former *Times* editor Ted, he was arrested because he broke the law," Robin said coldly, "treason, apparently."

"Only that the arrest happened 12 days after his disappearance at the spaceport. In Nordington." I said, before Alex could say the same, "He was kidnapped by the Military Intelligence."

"You don't know that," said the scholar, "what's your name again? Romeo or something? I remember you from—" His students were taking their portas out, trying to film or photograph me.

Alex stood between me and them and said: "Yes he does, and so do I. So do you. And you know why. It's because the state visit from the Direktor next week, isn't? And please don't report the young man to your boss, he isn't hurting you, is he?"

Ophelia took my hand floated away from them with me, saying: "I'm bored, let's get out before anyone is offended, or disappeared."

"Is Bertie alright?" I asked, because I just realised the connection between the Ted business and the Direktor's visit.

“I think so. He said the *Times* is going to close for four days next week. We’re thinking about going somewhere with friends. Bill might be coming. You wanna come, too?” She didn’t look at me but started going up a pole to the room upstairs.

“Yes, I’d love to come. Would that be intruding?” I refrained from looking up her skirt as she went up.

“I don’t know, would you?” she said while climbed her own bookshelf, looking for something, “have you met Alex before? She’s lovely, isn’t she?”

“Charming, yes, and very intelligent. Saved my hide down there,” I said, trying to find out what she was looking for.

“I’m looking for a book Ted sent me the other day,” She said while still searching for the book, in the same absentminded tone, “before he went back and got disappeared. But I feel someone might have took it. That’s what happens when you host a party with all these dissidents and collaborators together under one roof. You never know who’s gonna go through your stuff.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, is the book important?”

“I don’t know, I thought it was a joke from Ted. He told me to give it to a journalist if he gets arrested. So, you’re a journalist, why not give it to you?”

“I’m pretty sure he meant someone from the *Times*.”

“Oh yes! I think I already gave it to Bertie! That’s why it wasn’t there. Never mind, it was the Direktor’s new book, about robotics and space colonisation, I think.”

“I’ve heard about it, it’s not that new now. It came out about a year ago.” I said, realising that Serpentine’s amusement park would serve as a perfect case study for the Direktor’s monogram.

“Anyway, read the sixth chapter, Ted said in the note. There’s a clue in there, he said.”

“What is it?” I got properly curious by now.

“You know I don’t read books. You can just buy a copy yourself, or wait for Bertie to finish reading it. Ok now I have to host them a little, or they’ll think we’re up to something in here.”

I looked around and realised this wasn't the library as I expected it to be but Ophelia's bedroom. I blushed a little and went down through the pole a few minutes after she did.

I floated back to the bar and got myself another iced tea. The drawing room had become a little more crowded than before, since the fashionably late had arrived. Alex was still on the ceiling but Robin and his students had left. I approached Alex, working hard on thinking of a joke about Robin's "disappearance". But I was already in front of her before I could think of anything better than "where has Robin disappeared to?"

"I see you didn't get disappeared after all," she said with a smile, "Robin's got a bit offended, so he went home with one of the girls."

"Good for him, but I fear one day they won't be shamed as easily." I was thinking that he'd be emboldened if there were more people like his students. And I honestly believed that there would be more.

"Are you a student?" She looked at me again.

"No, but I'll take that as a compliment." I knew that I looked younger than I was, but it's the first time a fellow C'er said something like that.

"I thought you might be studying politics or economics, or law," she smiled, and said, "people your age generally don't care about all this. In fact, to some people, the longer they stay offworld, the more they love their planet and the Party with it."

"I might not be the age you think I am. But I get it. I feel my love for Planet C grows, but not for the Party. I really want to save my world but I find it impossible. But most young people are still disproportionately insensitive about politics. But who can help it? It's not like they can vote," I said more wryly than I intended. Truth is, there was the formality of voting for the predetermined candidates back home, and the youth here on Planet B had the right to vote freely but they cared equally little about it.

"No, but they can still be involved by debating it, or become volunteers, or spread the truth. Isn't that what we are free to do here?" the lawyer asked, without knowing I was a journalist, or a former one, at least.

“But the truth is relative, isn’t it?” I said, “the *Times* claims to be spreading it, but they are just as bad as state-run media in mudslinging and misleading the public. Actually, there is no neutral reporting or even comparatively less biased reporting regarding Planet C politics.”

“There is no such thing as unbiased reporting, as long as humans are doing it. But you can still find some quality writing on the Grid if you search for it,” said the lawyer, “actually, robotic journalism can be a very good idea if it was permitted. Did you know Planet C was going to deregulate robots?”

“No, really? With unemployment in such a state?” A drop of drink flew out of my straw into the air, making me notice there were many floating droplets in the room, splashing into people’s clothes without being noticed.

“They’re just trying to accelerate the space colonisation program. Building those artificial colonies will need as many robots as humans, if not more. Also, building robots also requires workers,” the lawyer explained.

It sounded like some sort of conspiracy theory to me. Not only was making robots with machine the standard since the MechBoom more than a hundred years ago, but also because the space colonisation scheme was a long-time conspiracy theory by itself. Inhabitable colonies had rarely been built, even by much more advanced civilisations like Planet A or B, and none of them could last long. Roboland was more of a space station than colony, and its inhabitants were, at its peak, 85% robotic so they need very little organic environment than living humans.

I didn’t want to dispute her, so I pretended to have seen someone I knew and took leave from her to fly to the adjacent room. I found there three overdressed young men huddling around a spin-o-matic terminal. The tall one said to me: “Close the door!” I did and turned back to them.

“You’re wearing specs, do you know much about using these machines?” Another man said to me.

“I can take a look. What’s the problem?” I wasn’t as good at tech as Baker, but I did learn a thing or two from him.

“Look here, we seem to have found the controls to the artificial gravity. See, it’s now set at a high reduction rate. How can we turn it off?” The third man said.

“Why would you want to do that?” I asked.

“For a laugh, of course,” the first man said.

“All right.” I began to look at the system. I didn’t want to cause any problems but really wanted to humour them a little and blend in.

That was when I saw Bill’s face in the window. Apparently, he had floated up utilising the anti-gravity field generated from within the house that spilled into the immediate surroundings of the building itself. He waved at me awkwardly and pointed up before he went up and disappeared from my view.

“Was that Billie?” the second man asked, looking at the rest of us.

“Looks like it. What’s he doing out there flying around?” The third man turned to me, about to say something.

“Should I turn the anti-grav off or turn it to twice the gravity?” I asked them immediately.

“Stop it, you idiot!” The first man was visibly shaken but laughed along after seeing my smirk. The group kept on laughing with themselves while I sneaked out of the room and went upstairs. I floated back to the hole with a pole.

Ophelia was at the top of the hole waiting for me. She said quickly after pulling me up: “Bill is here, it’s urgent.”

She led me into a small study and locked the door behind her. Bill was floating at the desk drinking from a ball of water suspended mid-air.

“Roger, you’re here. Do you have any work permit problems?” Bill asked urgently.

“Why do you ask?” The question took me by surprise.

“Bertie told me about the *Daily* got their license revoked. I’m wondering if you’re sponsored by them, that’s all.” He calmed down a little, after sipping the whole ball in.

“Yes, I’m still waiting for them to transfer me into Seastar, King’s other enterprise.”

“I wouldn’t put all my eggs in his basket, though,” said Ophelia, “my dad says he’s bit of snake, and that’s generally bad.”

“Anyway,” continued Bill, “the police will be here very soon. Bertie asked me to come here first. If they get you, they might ask you about Roboland so they mustn’t get you.”

“I see, but why are they here now?” I started to fear my earlier appearance at the *Daily* might have been seen.

“They are here for the dissidents. Get Alex out, too, if she’s here, and the others,” said Bill, “they’re going to detain them till the Direktor goes home from his visit.”

“On what ground?” I asked, after seeing Ophelia out.

“Yes, but they might easily find drugs or even blasters here. A girl I knew got raped by a guest after getting too drunk at one of these parties. It won’t even be necessary to press charges. They’ll just put them through the bureaucracy and scandal could keep these people busy till the end of the state visit,” Bill said, looking at the window for any suspicious vehicle.

“They’re here!” he said quietly. Bill led me to the other side of the floor and opened the window in a guestroom, directly above the control room downstairs where I met the three men, “let’s get out of here before anyone gets taken away.”

As per his instruction, I leaned closely towards the wall and stepped out of the window. I held the bricks as support points as I went down gradually, passing the control room. There I saw Ophelia at work on the terminal.

“What are you doing?” I said.

“You just go, I’m turning the thing off after you’re gone!” said Ophelia.

We nodded to each other, though I didn’t really understand. Bill and I accelerated to the ground floor. I looked down and saw Alex and three others already on the ground fleeing the house.

Then the gravity came on, twice as strong than normal. We dropped one storey to the ground but were more or less fine. Bill tore his expensive-looking chino but he didn't seem to mind. I scraped the palm of my right hand a little.

I could hear all the cups, glasses and dishes dropping to the floor, along with the guests. Quick screams and angry complaints ensued. The officers sounded like they dropped especially heavily, with a thud and a few grunts. As we sneaked under the ground floor window, we heard them angrily demanding to see the man of the house. We tried to pick up speed, but the doubled gravity kept our feet heavy. It must've been a sight to watch as we struggled to run.

Bill led me through the back alleys of the Post- MechBoom townhouses. The buildings were generally three or four storeys high and the shadows were already blocking out the setting suns.

"Where are we going?" I stopped and asked, "to Bertie's?"

"Something like that. We're going to the *Times*." Bill looked back and grinned.

"Is that wise?" I said. He might have protection from his dad or whatever, but if I set a step near that almost-always-watched building, I risked being seen and blacklisted, or worse.

"Don't worry, you won't be seen. You can wait at the opposite side of the street while I get in and see Bertie's." Bill continued while calling an Overcab with his porta.

"Why are we going there again?" I asked. I didn't understand why I had to be there.

"I need to see him to get some info on how Alex and co. would be treated when (not if) they get caught. And maybe get Bertie to one of my safehouses if they are onto him too. As for you, Bertie got you a press pass for the Direktor's visit. Don't worry, there won't be any links to the *Times* itself." The cab arrived and Bill got in after I did.

"Why—?"

"Bertie can't get in there, of course." He looked at the driver, from the rear-view mirror and said in C.

“So I’ll have to.”

“You will produce a report for Bertie to work his talent and spin some sort of a conspiracy theory, while smuggling in a few truths here and there,” Bill said, opening the car window to let the noise in, “That’s the way they do it. All the baseless trash reporting was the smokescreen against the people watching them. Just in case they use their influence here to close down the establishment.”

We arrived at the street where the *Times*’s office was located and got out of the cab. But it was already surrounded by vehicles from the immigration department and the police, plus many bystanders.

“I got a bad feeling about this,” said Bill, pointing the opposite side of road, “You go to the Starhub over there, I’ll try and find out what’s going on.”

“Don’t get caught.” I said to him, as much as to myself.

I went into the Starhub and tried to find a place to sit. Then I remembered a story I found while looking for stuff to report. A few weeks ago, three horned young men from the moon of Planet I with customary modifications sat in a Starhub on Planet A and waited for their friend before ordering, but the barista asked them to order or leave. They said they were waiting for someone therefore refused to leave. The barista promptly called the police on them and they got arrested. This reminded me to order something before sitting down.

The coffee shop was not busy at this hour. People were hurrying home or to pubs and clubs, coffee was hardly the beverage of choice. I quickly ordered myself a hot chocolate and sat down. The interior of this shop was relatively standard, with synthetic wood floorboard and ceiling, plus beige vinyl wall covering. However, this outlet had some features that I had never seen in other Starhubs. The chairs were huge old leather covered armchairs that you’d normally see in antique furniture shops and markets. Looking around the café I found the reason.

There were some old two-dimensional photos of the building. It had been a pub since the MechBoom times and several decades afterwards. They probably inherited the chairs from the pub. I used to think the franchising would

require standards over everything. It seemed that they kept something unique with this one. I drank my chocolate and smiled for no reason.

Bill called me on my porta, to my surprise. Did I give him my number last time? I answered the call, he didn't say much but asked me to meet me at where we got off the cab. There would be another car waiting.

I rushed out without my chocolate. Bill was waving at me from outside the car. I got in the car after him. Bertie was inside, wounded in the leg.

"Hello Roger, don't mind me. Hurt my leg jumping off the last storey from the fire escape," said Bertie, "seems they want us to close down even the Direktor's visit. Preferably indefinitely."

Bill was driving Bertie's car. He turned to me and said urgently: "He can't get caught. I found him behind the building with a broken leg."

"We should get him to a hospital," I said, "he's bleeding."

"He'll wait until he bleeds out in a hospital. I know a doctor," said Bill, "it's also safe, those thugs won't find him there."

"Sorry Roger I didn't have time to go back to my desk and get the press pass for you." With my help, Bertie tightened the makeshift bandage he had on his knee.

"It's alright," I said. I started to think that I might have a way to get one, but I thought I'd better keep quiet before I sent some messages and began arranging that.

"Anyway, what we want to know was how much the space colonisation has progressed and how does it relate to the robots," explained Bill, "wanted to save it for later but now it doesn't matter."

"We wanted both the official answer and possibly some rumours. But I couldn't get in for the official version so we thought you might have wanted to join the press pool for once." Bertie tried to lie down on the seat, but there wasn't enough space.

"I might have a way to obtain a press pass," I said, after getting some replies from my porta.

"How?" Bill nearly stopped the car.

“I have a friend at *Stuff 'n' Things*, he said he might be able to help me out.” I just got a message from Charlie, telling me he'd get me a pass as an freelance and he was going as well.

“Wonderful,” said Bill, “and we're here.”

The car stopped at an inconspicuous clinic with signs written in both C and B: Herbal Cures. We got in. The shop reeked stale herb and heavy incense that reminded me of my grandmother's house.

A very small C'er man came out of the backroom. He must have been one of those from the southern hemisphere, a long way away from Nordington. They considered themselves a different people but were never recognised by the Planetary government. They spoke a different language, but they learned common C language mandatorily at school. He blinked and said: “Welcome, Bill. You never come! How yer dad?”

“He's very fine, in fact he's coming to this planet soon” Bill helped Bertie on a bed while answering haphazardly.

So, his father would be coming with the Direktor. Was he with alien ministry or trade ministry, or with intelligence or military? I kept wondering.

“Let me look,” said the doctor, putting on a pair of specs. He came out from behind the high counter and approached the sofa-bed Bill had put Bertie in.

“Broken leg, huh?” said he, “we get him inside. I cure him.” The doctor quickly held Bertie's legs and waited Bill to lift the shoulders.

The doctor saw me when he lifted Bertie: “Oh, a new person. What yer name? Me the doctor.”

“Who?” I said, much to his annoyance.

“You stay here. We cure him inside,” he decided, “better go home. Yer not needed.”

Bill looked at me awkwardly and said: “This might take a while. Maybe you should go home. The tram stop is very close. I'll message you later.”

I looked at Bertie, who was still in pain and asked him: “What's in the book Ted gave Ophelia, the Direktor's new book?”

“It just some hints, you need to find out about it next week. Ask about the robot deregulation. Ah!” The doctor injected anaesthetic with a dart-like syringe while Bertie was speaking.

“And the Direktor’s health...” Bertie fell unconscious before finishing his sentence.

“Let’s go,” said the doctor briefly, “You go home. You see him soon.”

With no other choice, I collected my things and left after they carried Bertie inside and the “operation” light partially lit up.

Chapter 7: George

Love woke me up early in the morning. The weather was artificially adjusted for the ceremonies and photo-ops. Both suns shone brightly without a cloud in sight. I sat up in bed and looked at her.

“You’re really going?” she asked me, taking shirts out from the wardrobe, picking out the look I should wear today.

“Yeah, this is important. I have to know.” I got out of the bed and kissed her.

“I just don’t know why this whole Bill business concerns you so much.” She finally decided on my outfit and put everything on the bed.

“Me neither. I just feel that there’s a big story behind it. With robots and stuff. I must find out.” I got up and started my Spin-o-matic and began checking the morning news.

“You journos,” she sighed and shook her head, “just keep out of trouble, will you?”

She left the bedroom and said: “I still got a video to edit, or more accurately, salvage. They really don’t know how to shoot one. I miss the days working with Baker.”

She was working as a freelance designer and video editor, taking jobs from the *Daily* and its competitors in C language marketing and advertisement, including *Stuff & Things*.

I logged onto a C language news site. Navigating through different C language site can be a daunting task for new journalists who wants to find some degree of truth. Like I had discussed with Alex at the salon, the political context of Planet C made people extremely divided, and it was near impossible to find neutral reporting. Objective reporting, however out there to be found, for the initiated.

I began with a site called the *Post*, known for its to the point opinions and objectivity. However, since it was approved by the state with partial state funding behind it, they’d normally avoid discussing the central government or

its officials unless they were already disgraced. Unlike most “permitted” sites, this site didn’t bother itself with reporting how successful the Direktor’s Grand Tour was or quote his speech in full. Because of a new law passed last year, only state agency or fully state-owned newspapers could report current affairs, others could only repost or quote them in reporting. Ever since then, this partially state-owned site confined itself to opinions and analysis. The only problem was, while they didn’t tell obvious lies to make the government look good, they never really criticised or said anything damaging openly either.

The second site I accessed was a public-owned media site from Planet B. The B government set up the site in order to inform some of their C speaking subjects in former colonies in the star system where Planet C was located. In fact, most mainstream media outlets around the more advanced world now had their C versions. Unlike most other sites that were banned on Planet C, these ones were not run by dissidents or hostile foreign agencies thus not agit-prop or salacious rumours against the C state, but surprisingly objective with their reporting. The opinions, however, were mostly written by columnists that were of the aforementioned militant dissident persuasion.

After ignoring a couple of pieces on how the Direktor’s charm offensive had been futile, and that they fired the alien minister for it, I finally found some useful information on what he actually promoted on the planets he’d already been to on this tour. He’d been trying to make deals on C’ish made teleportation systems, presumably made by Polonius’s company, since Ophelia sent me a message with her avatar telling me to say hi to her brother Laertes if I ever see him with the delegation. Importation of these machines was blocked by Planet A and B among others due mostly to security concerns. They suspected that C intelligence could be able to gather molecular data of alien citizens through back doors, even politicians and leaders.

But in star systems closer to home, the Direktor had a different tactic. Intimidation and bribery accompanied each other in these dealings. Planet C was pushing for their space colonisation programme to its neighbours, effectively asking them to give up space for the C government to build artificial colonies in. The Direktor had come out to the fore after the “collective

leadership” of seven of his most trusted believers had run the country to the edge of crisis. One of the first things he did after taking control was starting a “Back to Space” movement at home, aside from firing and replacing his cabinet. He made the decision after pollution and climate change had ruined the majority of inhabitable land on Planet C, especially the rural continents. The population of Nordington had long reached its limit but the population of the Planet had been aging rapidly, creating a shortage of labour. Analysts said that by sending the elderly into space homes, the planet may yet survive its problems. However, others said that the colonies would be built as arks for the elite while the poor on the planet suffer. Of course, there were people who declare that these colonies were built for military purposes. I didn’t see any conflicts between the theories.

It seemed that by investing heavily into these worlds, their government had granted Planet C space to build their cylinder-shaped mega-stations. The Planet M government even supported the idea of building a space port and a station together with C backing on and near a moon of their planet. However, things didn’t go as expected for the Direktor on Planet A. The Planet A government was already in dispute with Planet C over mining issues; the Direktor’s visit not only did not alleviate the proposed sanctions against Planet C, but created more problems surrounding investment and trade. Indeed, I had just received the routine vidcall from my mother telling me that Father’s office has just been raided by the Planet A authorities, along with many C’er companies there, allegedly for tax purposes. But the corporation, though A’an in name, deals a lot with Planet C and there are rumours that its owners have ties with the C government. The Direktor openly accused the Planet A government of protectionism and was said to have banged his shoes on the desk during a meeting at the League of Worlds.

However, Planet B was a different story. The B’ish government had been cash-strapped for almost a decade now and a recession was in sight. After narrowly beating the left-leaning opposition, the re-elected prime minister was propped up by a populist party with far-right tendencies. Heimrich, the leader of People’s Objectives Party (POP) was named interior minister in the coalition.

Apart from frequent immigration crackdowns, POP also demanded healthcare and pension reforms in return for supporting the prime minister during votes. The PM desperately needed alien investment to save the economy and possibly infrastructure. Their long-term partner and ally, Planet A had turned to protectionism and nationalism after a financial crisis a few years back that Planet B was also recovering from. Planet C luckily avoided the crisis because it had semi-closed financing was not readily accessible to alien capital and did not connect with the interplanetary market.

Now it was time for the C capital to be released into the galaxy; so decided the Direktor and his group of advisors. But the rest of the galaxy was suspicious about it. Now it seemed that Planet B might just be the first one to have a taste of the C investment. Teleportation systems and space colonies weren't the only things the Direktor brought. With him came a train of C'ish private businessmen and representatives from state-owned corporations to invest in public transportation, clean energy, tech and services.

I skimmed over some less credible sites and read some rumours about how unhappy some factions within the ruling class on Planet C were with the Direktor's new economy and trade policies, as well as the space colonisation scheme. The sources claimed that the Direktor's authority had diminished significantly since the beginning of the Tour, especially amongst some parts in the military. Scholars were writing to refute his new economic and territorial expansions, his latest one-man-rule instead of the collective leadership until just fairly recently and so on. They might be disappeared or too famous to be touched or even already offworld, but I had lost interest by now. I began to think that making the dissent incredibly boring might also be a way for the censors to make people care less.

I dressed myself quickly and went down to bid goodbye to Love. She was not in a good mood, but I had no time for it. She stopped me after seeing me in the corridor putting a couple of letters addressed to me and her in my briefcase, and said: "Can you get a screwdriver if you see a shop on your way? The chair is getting worse every day." After telling her I didn't have the time to

shop, and I might not be back for dinner, I thanked her again for the camera. I left the house, and got myself an Overcab.

I met Charlie at a launchpad an hour away from my place. We had booked a shuttle to get up to the massive mothership that the Direktor was traveling on. The prime minister was invited to meet with the Direktor on the ship before they landed in Gigapolis together. Meeting the Direktor on practically Planet C turf was considered a humiliation for PM by many, especially when agreeing to it almost certainly indicated PM wouldn't be challenging the Direktor on civil rights or even the expansionism. The POP leader openly criticized the PM for it, but said it wouldn't affect the coalition, yet.

Charlie was waiting for me in the waiting room. He greeted me before handing me the press pass and brief.

"Here, your name is Romeo," said Charlie, "Sorry it came a bit last minute."

"That's alright, I did some research last night, and this morning actually."

I started reading the brief.

"It's quite irregular for the Direktor to do this. They usually only grant press passes to mainstream media, possibly because they know no one watches them anymore. I reckon they want to have a bigger push on the Grid," said Charlie, "they almost invited the *Times*, not taking questions of course, to show how open they are. But they decided against it at the last minute. I booked an early shuttle so we can get to chat with others in the press pool this time. It's the first time we patamedia reporters get to be invited to the pool."

"Yeah, can't let the TV stations and newspapers look down on us. Although everybody accesses them via the Grid instead of holographic television or print." I skimmed through the brief, almost identical from the one Iem got me from the Direktor's Planet D visit a couple of days before.

"By the way, you're supposed to be my photographer, did you bring a camera?" Charlie stood up and checked the launch schedule again.

"Yeah. I've done this once before with Able and Victoria," I said, wondering how Ophelia had been since the raid.

“Roger,” Charlie looked at me and said in a serious tone of voice, “why do you want to come here? I didn’t know you’re interested in politics.”

“No, I’m not, I’m here for the same reason as you, networking.”

“Did you get a job, by the way? I don’t think King could get the licence back this time. The internal ministry is completely determined to get rid as many as aliens as possible.”

“Not just yet,” I said. I had almost forgot about this for the last few days. Now I started to feel pressure again.

“Do you want to actually join us?” he pointed at my press pass, “not too bad is it? I talked to my boss about it the other day, he said he could shorten your probation if you’re interested.”

“Really? I’ll give a good think about it. Thanks, Charlie!” I answered without thinking too deeply into it.

“But of course, it’d be better if you provide an exclusive on Roboland. When you’re ready to talk about it, of course,” Charlie stood up, “we just want to know if any sons and daughters of famous businesspeople were there, and preferably beat the *Times* to it. No political figures needed haha.”

Our shuttle was ready to launch so we gathered all our stuff and joined the queue. I started thinking about what it’d be like working with *Stuff & Things*. It wouldn’t be too bad, as long as I could get a permit. Although translating tabloid news wouldn’t be my first choice for a career, *S&T* did make a lot money. Plus, since Love had already moved in, she could get a partner permit to stay and possibly keep working freelance. I had to check on the policy with partner permit and propose the idea to her, but it sounded like a pretty good life.

Charlie already started networking in the queue to the shuttle, so I joined in. I handed out all the Romeo cards I took from Item back in Nordington.

The people in front of us came from a regional TV station based on Planet C. I never knew they did interplanetary news too, but they seemed to be equally surprised that *S&T*, a Grid-based patamedia outlet, could get a place amongst the proper journalists like them. Charlie explained that *S&T*’s

readership easily surpassed the peak time ratings of their news programmes on television. But still, it was hard to talk to them since they were more interested in if Charlie's boss really left work early every afternoon and drove his sports levicar around till the first sun set.

The pair after us in the queue worked for a B'ish newspaper from Petitbourg called Petitbourg Business Gazette (PBG), specialising in economies and finance. They were much friendlier than those planetmen of ours. But anyway, they were more interested in how we were selected into the pool than what *S&T* really was or discussing the printed brief and the later press conference with us. I had never been to a press conference before. But today I was just a photographer called Romeo, so it wasn't really my problem. On the other hand, getting someone to ask the spokesperson about the space colonisation was instead my quest, for Charlie couldn't risk *S&T* to get answers for these questions considered "negative" to the image of Planet C. Getting rumours from our colleagues all around the galaxy was my second quest.

The alien press always asked controversial questions. What I needed was to find someone who had already prepared to ask about these colonies, and slip in a few ideas through small talk. These Petitbourgers were much more concerned with the huge debt the C government had amounted with their stellar projects to talk about even trade disputes, let alone spatial expansionism. I had to keep entertaining them with small talk until Charlie rescued me by shifting the topic to sports.

I asked Bill if there was a teleportation option before I left. He told me that the Direktor was too paranoid for it even though he was trying to sell it. Onboard the shuttle I found out that we sat beside a member of the TV crew from Planet C. In the awkward silence, Charlie started some more sports topics that I barely understood. It went surprisingly well. One of them even decided to exchange chat accounts with us. I, on the other hand, got myself rather preoccupied with the shuttle's safety instructions. I had never taken this kind of small shuttles before, if you discount Hans's freighter.

The stewardesses disappeared into their compartment after making sure everyone had had their seatbelt on. When I thought we were about to lift off, a C'er security guard came in. He wore a strange helmet that covers both eyes and both ossicones.

"That's the new AR helmets that does facial recognition. They cross reference that to the information they have on us," Charlie whispers to my ear before saying to the alien journalists around us, "smile, you're on camera." They awkwardly did.

The guard left after staring at us all for an extended period of time and rebooted the helmet twice and hitting it from a 45 degree angle. "Enjoy your voyage," he said without looking back.

I heard praying while the pilot gave the countdown to launch.

"Ten, nine, eight—"

"Romeo, listen to me—" Charlie whispered.

"—seven, six, five—"

"I think we'll be watched as soon as we dock on the mothership—"

"—four, three—"

"I think you'd better be careful—" the noise in the cabin made him whisper louder, on the verge of turning into normal speech.

"—two, one—"

"Or better still, I think you should just—"

"Lift off!!"

I couldn't hear what he said, but I could guess about eighty percent. I shook my head the way that was somewhere between "I can't hear you" and "No way." I hope he understood.

The stewardess invited the passengers to open the shades over the windows. It was a sublime view of stars. The celestial bodies shone brightly in the distance, and somewhere amongst them was the sun of Planet C. I started to enjoy the sense of silence space brought with it. As things around me got increasingly chaotic, a moment of calm was really appreciated.

Neither me nor Charlie knew what to say next. He looked at me, as if waiting for me to answer his last remark.

I looked out of the window again and said: "You know, it's the first time I've been in space since... never mind."

"Are you ok? I can begin to imagine how it must feels." Charlie was taken aback a little.

"I'm ok. However, this is not the first time I experienced weightlessness since the incident." We were practically afloat, only held to the seats by the loose seatbelts since the shades were opened.

The gigantic Mothership appeared in the windows. We'd seen it in the news many times but looking at it in person at such a short distance made me notice things I hadn't taken to account before. It was clearly of the conventional cylindrical structure but concealed in a shell for aesthetic reasons. It resembled the old helium giant airships that used to hover in the skies of many worlds. It was once a strategic bombing vehicle during the Mech-Boom. Although the main body was in a greyish white, like any other space craft, the fins were painted blood red, symbolising the blood of Martyrs during the rise of the Direktor and his Party of Revolutionaries. The emblem of the C nation was painted on one of the fins. It was a golden star and a cogwheel around it, plus a raygun.

The pilot's voice sounded again: "We are arriving at our destination, the Mothership Direktor Wilson." The C'ish reporters all started to untie their seatbelts, some of them already floating in the cabin or reaching for the overhead bin.

The stewardesses swam out of their compartment and tried to pacify the eager journalists and cameramen and put them back to their seats in vain. A slight bump during the docking sent several suitcases out of the bin and floating freely in the cabin. The stewardesses rushed to intercept them before they hit someone on the head.

And the luggage dropped, along with the stewardesses and passengers, on the floor, with a thud in unison. The pilot gave the light to signal it was ok

to unbind ourselves, for the shuttle had successfully docked and the artificial gravity had come on.

Looking out the window at the docking bay, I suddenly felt awe. This was the great mothership that carried the Direktor through the stars. The banners, the slogans, the flags (B'ish and C'ish), the uniforms and the armbands reminded me of an age long forgotten. That was before the Direktor decided to cede his power to the collective leadership and open the market to the universe. Before the Party favoured economic growth over the arms race with Planet A. Since then, he had been content with being just the head of state and national symbol instead of the absolute god and monarch he used to be. Although I had stopped believing in the Direktor for a long time, I could still feel his divinity after being physically immersed in this environment.

As soon we disembarked the shuttle, a group of usherettes in long overcoats and red armbands approached to speak to each one of the passengers and check our papers before guiding us to the security check. I thought the check at the launchpad was strict, but this time they asked us to strip in a box and wait for them to check everything on our persons. The cameraman sat beside us on the shuttle got his porta gone through by the security personnel. We were met by our usherettes who then led us to the media lounge where we could get refreshments and wait for instructions.

The room was richly decorated, giving the illusion that we were actually in a building, on a planet. The gold-coloured pillars matched with the wine-coloured carpet and the podium decorated with gold foil. The crystal chandelier surprised me with its burning candles. Apart from the luxury it presented, it was also a sign of technological confidence over the ship's ability to provide stable gravity and air. Several photographers were still pointing their lenses at the antique light. I took a few 3-dimensional pictures of it, as it was technically my job.

"I got reception again, and the Grid, too." Charlie had already turned his porta back on again.

“Yeah, the connection is rather good, never expected that on a C’ish ship, haha, thought they’d block all our sites,” an A’n reporter joked to us.

A C’er presenter walked up to him. I’d seen her on television a few times when I went back home. She stood in front of him and said: “The Grid in C is completely open, as long as they adhere to C’ish laws. If you have difficulties accessing some of your sites on Planet C, you might think about why you need to break the law while being a guest in our world as these sites violate laws and regulations of Planet C.” She walked away without looking back, leaving the A’n completely speechless. Eyebrows were raised, and eyes were rolled. Charlie ignored the embarrassment and continued chatting with the A’n. He seemed very keen on networking with those people.

The usherettes returned and spoke to some of the reporters in hushed tones. The one that ushered us approached us and said: “I’m sorry there seemed to be a mistake. We don’t have enough rooms for everybody here so I’m afraid we can’t squeeze you into the press conference. Please wait here or go to the bar down the hall after the briefing. Everything will proceed as normal afterwards. And you’re most welcome to the press dinner and party this evening.”

“Why is that? Why is it us?” asked Charlie, unable to contain his disappointment.

I looked around and understood. They were asking all the Grid based patamedia outlets to refrain from attending the press conference with the Leader. None of the news agencies, mainstream newspapers or TV stations were asked.

“Is this something to do with our medium? Why aren’t you asking them to give up their place for us?” I randomly pointed at someone not being spoken to by usherettes. I quickly realised that it was the *Post* so I changed the direction of my finger at a provincial paper that was on the shuttle with us. They seemed an easier target than the *Post* people. They looked at me, more confused than surprised.

“I’m sorry, I can’t help you with that.” She quickly left, after realising she might say something wrong, like I did, if she stayed on in the conversation.

“Seems you’re right. They’re picking out patamedia people. Maybe just quality control, or maybe they think *S&T* might dare to write about the Direktor the way we write about the B’ish PM,” he said, chuckling a little to himself, “anyway, let’s get something to eat, I haven’t had anything since last night. They have some pastry over there.” He led the way and I followed to the long table.

The *Petitbourg Business Gazette* reporters were at the table, with wine from the bar in their hands. We greeted each other, since we hadn’t seen each other since we all stripped naked in little boxes at the docking bay.

“The pastry is actually alright,” said their photographer, pointing at the half empty basket, “try one.”

I helped myself to a nutty pastry roll after grabbing some tea. They were both better than I thought.

“I heard they only have great food when there were aliens present, is it true?” asked the Petitbourger.

“I don’t know, I never been to one of these at home. I won’t have a press pass back on Planet C because we aren’t registered as press there,” said Charlie, munching his pastry.

A group of suited men came into the room. One of them announced that the press brief would begin in a minute and the acting foreign minister would do it.

“I heard the old minister was arrested yesterday, corruption charges,” whispered Charlie, sipping his tea.

“Aren’t they all corrupt?” his petitbourger friend whispered back.

George stepped into the room and stood at the podium. Among hushed discussion about the youth of the bureaucrat, I stood aghast. It had never occurred to me that he was that important when we met on Roboland, even though I did assume that he was a son of some official or collaborator

businessman. How did he get that position? I knew that the last minister had been fired during this trip, but George was merely a student/dropout last time I saw him. I wasn't sure if I should walk to the front and get noticed or hide my face. I didn't know his ascension in status meant it was safer or more dangerous for me to be here. So I just acted naturally, without thinking about it too much.

"He's so young!" exclaimed the aliens.

"That's the son of a marshal. The Direktor's already setting up a clique with the second gens in his new cabinet. He wants them to bolster up the crown prince when he's in charge of our direction," Charlie said.

"Is it really a prince, though? Could be a princess, no one's ever seen him, or her," I said, "I heard he or she is studying on Planet A, is it true?"

"How would I know? Maybe you can ask your friend Ophelia." Charlie peered at me.

I looked at him for a few seconds, and said: "Yeah, she might know something about it. But maybe Victoria should be the one to ask her."

"Or Able. I doubt if Victoria could speak with her much, I heard Ophelia doesn't speak much C." He sipped his tea again.

For the next 15 minutes or so, I could barely concentrate on what George had to say. I was glad that Charlie didn't pursue the Ophelia topic further, and gladder that he didn't bring up Roboland or connect that with George. But I couldn't help thinking how much Charlie knew about everything. Was it him, or was it the true face of *S&T*, a rumour collecting tabloid intelligence agency?

George gave a simple plan of the afternoon, and from what I gathered from intermittently listening, we were able to witness the meeting of the Direktor and the prime minister, and some of us could have accesses to parts of the state dinner. The rest of us would go to the press dinner. After the dinner, all of the press members would proceed to the party again. I probably would have to go home by that time.

He finished the briefing and it was time for questions. Someone asked about the details of what the two leaders would talk about. I wasn't listening

when he talked about the topics, but I hadn't bothered to ask. George said he had been clear, but he repeated the section. I spaced out during that again.

One of the *PBG* reporters raised her hand and asked: "Why are the patamedia outlets excluded from the press conference with the Direktor pre-meeting? If it's you don't have the space, why is the joint conference open to all? Are you discriminating against Grid-based media?"

George paused for a few seconds and spoke: "I understand your concerns. But we do have a real estate problem at the press conference because it will be held in the Direktor's onboard office. So, we have to prioritise the media outlets that make maximal impact. We have no bias against Grid-based patamedia audiences but still, satellite television and planetary newspaper are selected over the niche media. Thank you."

He then left without taking further questions. Another member of his staff had to take the podium and announce that the press conference would commence as planned in 15 minutes.

"Now you just have to remind the Petitbourger about the space colonies and robots again," said Charlie, putting down his empty tea cup, "don't get caught though."

The traditional press moved to the Direktor's hexagonal office as planned. Charlie moved to speak to other Grid-based journos and restarted his networking mission. I began to feel that he had actually been tasked by his boss to network with all these media people. I didn't get a chance to talk with the *PBG* people again. It seemed that route was blocked. I had to think of something before the press dinner and get some information there. Otherwise the only chance I'd have left was at the party, where I'd be relatively free to ask around in the casual atmosphere safely on the ground of Planet B. That would mean going home late. Love wasn't in a great mood when I left, I didn't know what she'd say if I told her I'd be getting home late.

The door to the press lounge opened and a tiny usherette entered. She shuffled her feet towards me and spoke in a very low voice: "Please follow me, sir, the acting minister wishes to speak with you."

So he saw me. I began planning our dialogue almost immediately. I didn't know whether there'd be other people with him, and how they view the Roboland incident. The best I'd do was to go along with what he wanted to say and improvise.

She led me into a small study and opened the door. George was sitting in a velvety chair fixed to the floor. He was haphazardly watching holographic television of the Direktor's solo press conference, only the Direktor hadn't showed up yet. I stepped inside the carpeted room. He stood up to shake my hands. The usherette shuffled her feet out and left.

"Thanks for coming, Roger, I mean Romeo. So you're freelancing for *Stuff and Things* now. You know I used to subscribe to them on the Grid, too, back when I lived here. Anyway, I'd have got you to that conference no matter what if I'd known you were here. Take a seat. What do you want to drink?" He walked towards a celestial globe and opened it, revealing a selection of beverages inside.

"Do you have any Planet J whiskies?"

"Yes, I do," said George, "on the rocks?"

"With soda water please," I said.

While George was busy at the bar globe, I started looking around the room, or cabin, as we were still aboard a ship. I came to wonder how they managed to reduce the weight for lift-off, with all the velvet and wood panels.

"The ship was built in space by Planet G engineers, if you're wondering." George handed me my drink and sat back into his plush chair, about three metres away from me.

"They fired the Alien Minister because Planet A banned the use of Polonius's teleportation system. They suspected that the Alien Intelligence Agency tapped them," George said, in a good mood, "so I'm made the acting minister. Oh, Ophelia's brother Laertes left with the old minister because the B'ish parliament wants him for questioning."

"I see." I felt that he knew everything about me and my purpose here.

He leaned his head my way and said: “Do you know where Bill is at the moment? He... sort of dropped off our radar since around last week. Did he go to Ophelia’s salon?”

I nearly choked over my soda, but concealed my surprise by sipping slowly and smiled at the same time.

“Do you mean you’re watching him, on Planet B territory?” I tried to shift the conversation away.

“It’s for his own safety, I was able to do that in person before. But as you can see, after Roboland, I got a little busy.”

“The raid on Ophelia’s house, did you arrange it?” I digressed a little further.

“Someone at the party called the police. Everybody’s going to blame us if a dissident got arrested here on a drugs charge. Probably just some overzealous informant.”

“And the *Times*?”

“Oh, that one is us. They got some dirt on the colonisation programme so the Military Intelligence moved first. Don’t tell anyone. But I believe all the papers are with your friend Bernie—I mean Bertie. And we have reasons to believe Bill has him.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” I put down my drink.

“Listen, Roger. I care about Bill a lot more than you do, believe me I know what’s best for him,” George stood up and walked towards me, “I don’t know why he makes friends with the likes of Bertie, but he must turn him in before—”

I sensed that he was about to say something he shouldn’t.

“Before the Military Intelligence finds him. If you meet Bill, tell him that my men at the Alien Intelligence Agency can guarantee Bertie’s safety and wellbeing, as long as he gives up all the documents. MI aren’t as nice, though. MI fucking hates his guts! They’d love to see the downfall of Bill and his family, let’s put it this way. If he’s determined to hide Bertie, hide him well, don’t get caught, at least not by MI.” He sat back and stopped speaking.

“If he does have the guy, ...Bertie or Bernie, can’t you help him hide the guy, or even get him offworld?”

“Hell no. That’s gross negligence, if found out.” George loosened his button and said: “Listen Roger, I’m on your side, your friend Baker, may he rest in peace, gave his life to save us all. You and Bill risked your lives, too. I trust you. But I can’t instruct the AIA to help a subversive. That said, what I can do is give you a safehouse, a car and maybe some guns, for Bill, only. Let’s just hope that he doesn’t really have Bertie. The MI won’t touch Bill, of course, not yet. So the guns might not be necessary.”

I looked at him and nodded, not expecting him to be so candid, or maybe just desperate. He looked at the hologram and said: “the press conference is almost over, you better go back and join the press before the B’ish PM arrives. You don’t want to miss the handshake,” he said, smiling dryly, “I’ll have to be there too. My people will find you later to make those arrangements.”

I got up and reached for the door but turned back to him and said: “Thank you. There’s another thing, what do you know about deregulating robots on Planet C?”

George froze for a second, still smiling but made no movement or sound. He bit his lips and said: “You see, Romeo, there are things that I’m not allowed to discuss. But I assure you there isn’t any grand conspiracy that we’re scheming.”

“Fair enough, thanks George.” I made for the door once again.

“Let’s hope you really have access to Bill now. Good luck.” George waved at me and redid his tie, “Oh I forgot to tell you, he might soon be called back to Nordington. Tell him that when you see him.”

Just before I exited, he called me again and said: “I may be able to pull some strings about your permit, too. Depending on how things work out.”

I nodded and left. Of course he knew about my permit.

I went back to the lounge, guided by the small usherette. There was Charlie, relieved but somewhat agitated.

“What did they want from you? Did they know what you’re here for?” he asked, as soon as the usherette left us alone.

“I don’t know, they didn’t even mention that, I don’t think they care.” I said, trying to find something to say after the inevitable next question.

“So why do they want you?” Charlie.

“Nothing, just catching up. We met on Roboland.” I said, hoping he’d buy that.

Charlie paused for a few seconds and said: “Of course you did!” He could barely contain his excitement.

“But that doesn’t mean I’m giving you that interview, though.” I have to stop him before he got ideas.

“Yes, I understand. Completely. I just got some info from those guys—” he eyed the A’n Grid site *Bluesit* journalists and said: “they got some documents on money funnelled through offworld banks and shell companies established in the galactic asteroid belt. One whistle blower claimed that he had obtained further papers proving that it was Planet C behind all this, either for bribing officials or actual investment. They also have uncorroborated sources saying that the Direktor is carrying a huge amount of gold and crystals on this ship for bribery. Are you listening?”

I was thinking about what Bertie had with him. Was it connected to this? If so, if *Bluesit* published it now, maybe MI wouldn’t go after him anymore. But he didn’t even mention robots and the Direktor’s book on cybernetics. So, I didn’t believe that they were that easy to please, especially if their purpose was to bring down Bill and his family. I perfunctorily answered Charlie: “Sorry, I zoned out as soon as you started talking finance.”

“I thought you wanted stuff like this,” said Charlie.

The other reporters came back to the lounge from the press conference, racing for the table and the drinks on it. Charlie and I had to make way for them. I was glad that the topic could now go away, but I wanted to approach them and ask something about robots. Before I had a chance, the announcer came back with the journalists and said the prime minister’s shuttle was already docking the Mothership and we were to wait at the docking bay for the hand shake and photo op.

“It’s your turn now, photographer,” said Charlie.

We were led out again by usherettes back to the docking bay. This time the security checkpoints were removed, and a stage was erected in its place. I was put with the rest of the photographers in the front. I found the docking bay rather dwarfing, looking from the tiny seat they'd assigned me. The guards around the space were rather tall in person, but from a distance, they looked quite small under all the huge banners and posters.

While waiting for the politicians, I realised that this would be the first time I saw the Direktor in person. I had seen the prime minister once when I was sent to cover their party convention during the election last year. Sugar couldn't get tickets for the main event, so we went to some forums in the town holding it. The prime minister made a surprise appearance there. She was rather unpleasant, even as a politician. Always eager to assert authority when with people she deemed inferior, but she was weak when with people with power over her. Unfortunately, she always considered the electorates as the former.

But the Direktor was a different matter. My impression of him mostly came from holographic TV and C'ish patamedia sites. I usually slide straight through these headlines and ignore the articles altogether. However, I had been following his Grand Tour closely since the beginning, knowing that something important might occur. It was said his prolonged tour was a show of confidence when the outside speculated that there were voices of discontent within his party. The tour also showed how healthy and able the Direktor still was, an answer to concerns over his health, how long he could rule over the planet and ultimately, succession.

Then I saw the Direktor. He appeared much larger in person than when seen on Holographic TV. Standing in the light, every movement of his seemed to have been amplified. It looked strangely familiar. His jerky movement and solemn manner reminded me of my childhood. All the morning flag-raising ceremonies and the holographic Direktor looking over us seemed to come

back. I felt I was still the first grader sitting wide-eyed, watching the educational films of the Direktor's greatest feats.

His uniform emitted some sort of glow and the medals glittered in the light. I felt blinded by the aura he let out to the extent that I began to doubt if there was some sort of psychic mind control happening in the hall because his smile looked fatherly and benign. I pinched myself and felt more like myself. At least I could see that he was just a person waiting awkwardly at the end of the red carpet for the prime minister to emerge from the hatch of her shuttle.

George stood by his side. He peered at me and then looked at a general by the Direktor's side. I couldn't recall the name of that general, but I remember seeing his holographic face on TV many years ago. He looked a lot smaller than how he was projected back then. The drums rolled. They were ready for the ceremony.

The prime minister came out of the tiny shuttle that she arrived in. She nearly tripped herself walking down the stairs but pretended to be dancing a jig before she regained her composure quickly. The Direktor approached her from the other end of the carpet and they met in the middle. I readied Love's camera and aimed at the two, hand on shutter, as if a trigger. After a moment of silent anticipation, they shook hands. The whole group around me shot their volley of snaps at the historic moment, which wasn't really that historic. They seemed to forget the Direktor meeting the PM's predecessor in Nordington. But that hardly mattered now, I'd done my job, and I could get out now. Their talk and joint news conference interested me very little for I knew she would not ask anything about the robots and he wouldn't take questions. The band started to play the national anthems of both planets. I started packing.

I looked up again after packing the camera and saw a suited man whispering something to George. George looked at the general, who smiled back to him, and left with the man.

My porta vibrated. It was Bill. I walked out of the crowd of cameramen and went to a quiet corner, avoiding usherettes and security guards. I answered

the phone. Bill said: "They took Bertie. I'll see you at the banquet," and hung up.

The small usherette shuffled her feet towards me again and asked me to accompany her. I looked at the stage and George had gone. So had the general. I followed her to an office near the axis of the cylindrical ship. Many smoking young men sat in the tiny dimly lit room. There were maps on one wall, a large screen on the other and many monitors in between. George stood at one end of the room, smoking fiercely and drinking whisky straight from a bottle.

"They got him. MI got Bertie. Oh, welcome to the Crisis Room." George handed me a cigarette, but I turned him down just to save a little air.

"This is Roger, but you should call him Romeo for now. Some of you might remember him from Roboland, the rest of you should," George said to the room and turned to me, "anyway, the Military Intelligence operatives have abducted a B'ish citizen on B'ish turf, which is pretty serious."

"Where do you think they're taking him?" I asked, thinking it might be here.

"Not here, that much we know," George said, "Paul, brief us on what you have."

The young man called Paul stood up, walked to the centre, shook my hand and said: "I'm Paul, acting director of the Alien Intelligence Agency." He began reading from the sheet he had: "Someone, supposedly Bill had already called Gigapolis police on the disappearance of Bertie, probably in hoping to create a diplomatic crisis for us."

"Guess it's my job to ask the Internal Department to stop police from arresting those pricks," said George, "we think he will approach you, Romeo."

"Me?" He already had, I thought to myself.

"Yes, we can't monitor calls on alien turf, not while their head of government is here anyway. So, let me know when he does," Paul continued, "his next course of action, from what we know about him, will be going to the banquet held in the Direktor's honour tonight. We believe he'll make a scene so that they have to release Bertie."

“But that’s insane!” I could hardly believe that he was calling that a plan, but it did adhere to what Bill just said to me.

“Of course, that’ll be gambling with his future, or even life,” said George, “but since he hasn’t contacted us yet, we believe that’s what he’d do. There isn’t a better plan for him now.”

“The better plan,” said a voice in the dark, “is to arrest General Archer of MI, right here. AIA controls this ship. If you can get the space force onboard, we can get rid of him, or even the whole MI thing altogether.”

“I don’t really want to start a coup while the Direktor is visiting an alien world,” said George, “and the Direktor will never let such thing happen. I’ll let this one pass this time. Think before you speak next time, lest you lose your head, Richard.”

Richard went silent. Paul started speaking again: “After the Direktor finishes his little chat with PM, they would take his shuttle together down to Gigapolis. We’ll go with them, but you, Romeo, will have to travel with the rest of the press.

“After your landing, the usherettes will try to guide you to the press dinner, instead of the state banquet with few selected mainstream media representatives. But don’t follow them. One of our agents will meet you at the landing pad and bring you to the banquet through our back channel. There you’ll wait for Bill.”

“How will he get in?” I interrupted the briefing.

“We presume he’d have ways. Unless, of course, we stop him. But we can’t,” Paul shrugged.

“Why is that?” This made less and less sense to me now.

Paul looked at George. George shook his head and said: “Look, Romeo, what we ask you to do is very simple: find and stop Bill from interrupting the banquet. Our people are on the case trying to find where Bertie is held by MI agents. We have some pretty solid leads. It’s just a matter of time, then we’ll let the B’ish police rescue him. The MI will evacuate before they ever get close to their black site. They can’t afford getting caught.”

“How long will it take?” I started to feel that Bill’s mission might be necessary, for I had heard of MI’s means of torture on their black sites.

“A day or two, if they’re not expecting us.” George’s assertion didn’t inspire much confidence.

“It’s time,” said Richard, pointing at one of the monitor screens, where the two leaders had just started their joint conference, “you better go back to get a shot now, if you need one.”

I reminded myself of the mission that I carried when I agreed to come here and thought about how to raise questions about cybernetics and space colonisation. George shook his head at me as soon as he saw I was about to speak. So I decided to keep quiet.

They sent me out of the Crisis Room back to the axis of the ship, but I soon got totally lost. I noticed that the cabins around the axis were all unmarked. The chance of me seeing something I shouldn’t was so high that I had a mind of going back to the Crisis Room and ask them about the way back. But then I might overhear something I shouldn’t. So, I kept walking down the corridor, hoping to find an exit to get me away from the axis.

Seeing a corner at the end of the corridor, I turned and encountered a room with open doors on the other side. Before I could look away, I saw bionic prosthetics, cybernetic body parts and machineries for their installation. I quickly retraced my steps, but not before I could see who they were for— the seal of the Direktor of Planet C was on top of most of them.

I tried my best to block the thoughts of a cybernetically enhanced Direktor but failed. Everything now seemed to be connected, the end of outlawing robots and deregulation of cyborgs could be for a special specimen specifically.

Before my mind stopped wandering, I found myself back at the Crisis Room. My usherette was waiting for me at the door. She bowed and led the way, still shuffling her feet without a word. I almost believed I didn’t see anything back there. I followed her back to the docking bay. Charlie sent me a message saying he had already gone with another group of reporters on a shuttle back. He said he’d meet me at the press dinner or the party later if I

couldn't make it to the dinner. I was surprised that he did not demand an explanation. Maybe he just didn't want to leave Grid traces. I tried not to think about it.

The usherette got me onto the shuttle with a seat at the back, so I wouldn't be noticed if I snuck away to the banquet on the way to the dinner. The shuttle was even cruder compared to the one we took to get here. The rivets on the hull were big and visible. Signs of oxidation appeared on the corners of the shuttle. It apparently belonged to the Mothership, instead of the Planet B rental company that the Planet B Foreign Office outsourced its travelling to. It felt cramped inside the cabin, as the seats were narrower to accommodate more passengers. The upholstery was rather worn and torn, too.

The shuttle undocked without incident. But the noise really got me concerned about my own safety. We quickly changed orbit and the gravity of Planet B took hold. The re-entry was unpleasant. It could be because anything from the speed, the noise, to the discomfort of the seat. For the first time of my space travel history, I felt the heat of the re-entry. The air conditioning was on full blast, I could feel the cold air coming from overhead. But the seats were very warm, to the extent of being marginally hot. I think I fainted at this point because I don't recall the next forty minutes.

When I woke up, we'd already landed. This time no one freed themselves before the light came on. About two-thirds of the passengers were still unconscious and the rest were fearing the shuttle might skid off the runway. For a moment, I missed my spacesuit. I hoped Love hadn't thrown it away.

I thought about Love and how I should explain everything. Before I could come to a conclusion, I found myself the only one left on the shuttle, even the stewardesses were gone. A suited man with shades and earpiece stood at the front end of the cabin. He saw me seeing him and approached me. He showed me his AIA ID. I nodded knowingly, as I recalled that was what they do in the movies.

"Mr Montague, this way please," he said while tapping something on his earpiece, presumably some sort of code.

We quickly cut through the spacestrip. I looked up and found out the first sun had set and the second one was about to. I took out my porta, no incoming from Love. I started composing a message apologising for my likely late return. But the suited man put his hand on my screen and shook his head.

We arrived at the parking space outside the spacestrip. A black unmarked levimobile was waiting for me with engines running. I got in and Paul was inside.

“Hello Roger, we meet again. You might not remember me, but I was at Roboland as well,” we shook hands, “let me introduce myself properly, I’m the acting director of Alien Intelligence Agency and underminister of the Foreign and Alien Ministry.”

“I’m Roger, I mean Romeo, freelance journalist,” I said, “I mean, *Daily Seer*, no, I mean *Stuff & Things*.”

“It’s alright, working freelance is better for your position now.”

“Thanks.” I tried to look outside the window as we started, but the glass was too dark.

“We’re almost there,” said Paul after about forty minutes on the road.

He got a call on his porta. It sounded very urgent.

“What? We are almost there! Can’t you do something?” He hung up and turned to me, said, “Bill is already at the palace. George is delaying him. We need to get there quick.”

“Why don’t you just get some agents and confine him till the banquet is over, or just send him away?” I realised that this was what I found strange about the whole plan.

“Only his friends can stop him now, and George is not enough. He’s—”

“We’re here!” said the driver as he stopped the levimobile.

“Go, go, go!” Paul opened the door and held it for me.

We arrived at the back of the Grand Palace of the King of Planet B, the B Star System and Emperor of the Moon of Planet D. It was bigger than I remembered. I visited here when I first came to Gigapolis for university many

years ago and was not that impressed. But under the special lighting this evening, it looked indeed grand.

Several suited C'ers and B'ish men were waiting at the back gate waving us in. I ran toward them and they ushered me into a wide corridor, through many twists and turns that was too quick for me to even orientate myself.

I saw Bill, standing in the hallway, facing the huge oaken doors. In front of him was George, trying to persuade him not to open it. Four or five B'ish secret service agents and palace staff stood there, confused. Two AIA agents stood by George, trying to not get involved.

"Listen, Bill, we have their location now, as soon as the Direktor leaves Gigapolis for the prime minister's country house, we can get both the B'ish police, and their intelligence service to rescue your friend Bertie. The B'ish secret service has already agreed to that."

"Do you know what they did to Ted? The *Times* editor?" Bill said, yet to notice me, "do you know how they run their black sites?"

"Stop this, the secret service is still here!" said George before he saw me, "Ah, you're finally here. Can you please talk some sense into him? I should be inside now."

"Hi Bill," I said, smiling faintly at a surprised Bill.

"Of course, George, of course you'll get him to stop me," said Bill, "sorry Roger, they had to get you involved in this."

"You should go in there and tell them the truth. In front of the Prime Minister, the King and the Direktor," I said before staring into George's furious eyes.

The doors behind him opens and the glittery light nearly blinded us for a second.

"Come in, Junior." The voice of the Direktor pierced through the Banquet Hall and shook everyone at this side of the doors.

George looked terrified. He turned and faced the Direktor and all the hosts and guests, and announced: "William Wilson Jr, undersecretary of the Politbureau, second secretary of the People's Party of Revolutionaries!"

Bill walked in amongst thunderous applause. My memories cut off here.

Chapter 8: Paul

Love confronted me on the doorstep. It was past midnight and I finally made it back home. A black levisedan manned by the Alien Intelligence Agency operative called Richard parked with its engine running outside my door, ready to leave. Love stared into my eyes.

I waved at the agent, so he could leave and probably debrief Paul and George on my relationship issues. I was lost for words for a moment, but I knew I had to say something, so I began: "Sorry I forgot about the screwdriver."

"That's all right, I've ordered one on the Grid. Come in." She waved at Richard in the car, too, as he drove away.

We went to the living room where Love sat on the sofa facing the broken chair. She nodded at the chair, hinting that that was where I should sit. I sat on the chair. It was wobblier than it was yesterday.

The room was dark with curtains half-shut. The holographic television had been turned off and it smelt like she had started smoking again. The only working light was dimmed. We hadn't had the chance to replace all the bulbs in the light on the rather high ceiling, because the chair I was sitting on was too wobbly to stand on.

I braced myself and steadied the wobbly chair, balancing myself against the will of the piece of furniture. Love looked on with a slightly entertained look and said: "I saw you on holographic television today. You looked rather nice, crashing the banquet like that. They stopped the streaming though, haven't got a chance to record you."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to get that much exposure." We meant to stay low key until the permit thing gets sorted.

"Tell me now, how did you get into this mess? And who was that man in the car? I didn't see Charlie with you." She sat back with her eyes fixed on me.

I had a feeling that she would save me from all of it, if I just asked. Like she did back on Planet D... or did she? I really didn't want to involve her into

this maelstrom of danger, but she was the only person I could trust at this moment. Maybe apart from Bill. But they had already taken him away.

Before I could figure out what I should say and what I shouldn't, I had started to tell the whole story, from Robotland to the salon. I started feeling dizzy as the dawn began to break. Every time I took a break to gather my thoughts or have some water, I felt the silence in and around the house. The passing levimobiles every now and then only accentuated the quietness.

As I spoke, I realised that Love had already changed her clothes for going out after I left in the morning. I asked: "Were you going somewhere?"

"I was going to look for you. Though I really didn't know how I could get there. I thought of calling Able to get Ophelia. She saw you on the holoTV too; I thought of getting Sugar to pull some strings with her connection with State-owned media she used to work with; I even thought of calling King... if only he'd answer his porta."

"I'm sorry..."

"Do you have any idea how worried I've been? Even now? Why do you have to get yourself into troubles like this?" She managed to hold back her tears, only just, "now tell me what happened today, or was it yesterday?"

I began the story with how I parted with her in the morning, forgetting about the screwdriver almost instantly after closing the door behind me. She smiled faintly but resumed her poker face quickly.

I carried on with my story, up till the point of me encouraging Bill to protest at the state banquet.

"That's where I saw you on TV. They cut it off immediately after Bill began to yell at the Direktor. What happened?"

What happened was this:

Bill opened the gates to the banquet hall despite the efforts of Paul, Richard and the agents to stop him. All the cameras turned to him as soon as the doors opened, for he had just interrupted the Direktor's toast for the

friendship between the two planets. For some reason I had to follow him inside. Perhaps I was just trying to show support.

I heard George saying under his breath from behind: “Now you’ve made headline.”

It had turned out rather awkward for me. All the B’ish and C’ish dignitaries were whispering to each other in their full regalia, trying to find out who we were. Some of them got notified by their secretaries and secret service members but others remained confused.

I noticed some secret service agents and uniformed security guards had moved towards us and the cameramen area. Paul stepped near us, signaling them to stand down. Just as the cameramen were stopped, Bill spoke:

“Your majesty, my lords, ladies and gentlemen, I am William Wilson Jr., son of First Secretary William Wilson. I am here to protest the ill-treatment by the Planet C Military Intelligence of dissident citizens of Planet C and in some cases citizens of Planet B. The government of Planet B, however, is complicit in this by inaction.

“At this moment, not only is Ted Edwards, the editor of the *Times* now imprisoned, its editor Bertie Albertson has also been abducted just today—”

Before he could continue, the Direktor frowned, and everyone saw it. I could hear people gasping. General Archer quickly whispered into one of his aide’s ears and several suited men approached us. Bill signaled George and his men to stand down and agreed to follow those people away. Then they came for me.

“No,” said Bill, “he’s not coming with you, George brought him here to stop me. He is a civilian and more importantly my friend, you don’t want to know what happens when you mess with my friends.”

Paul intervened physically by stepping between me and the MI operatives. He politely asked them to let us go this one time, to avoid further escalation. They looked at the AIA spymaster, each other, then back at their boss next to Archer. The aide looked at Archer. Archer nodded impatiently. They left with Bill.

The Direktor left the table through a different door. The King looked positively embarrassed. The Prime Minister tried her best to save the banquet by proposing another toast. She sent a few people to go after the Direktor. The POP interior minister, Heimrich, had been smiling amusedly in the corner. He looked as if he was infected by some intergalactic virus that was spreading around Planet A recently, with a bloated face and purple skin. I realised that it was the first time I had seen many of these people in the flesh.

George brought me back to his temporary office in the palace where the banquet was being held. The B'ish secret service was watching us all the way with their stern faces.

After we sat down, George gave me a cup of Planet J Whiskey from a bottle taken out of his mobile cabinet of spirits. He poured himself one and then offered Paul to take a glass from the cabinet.

"Not yet, George, I've got some more work to do," said Paul. He left the room with an agent after excusing himself.

"That was tense," said George with limited relief, "Archer has his eyes on you, probably the PM and even Heimrich. That guy scares me, really. They said they nearly appointed him to be the foreign minister, but he chose the interior ministry. Imagine having a talk with him for two hours at an arm's length!"

"What will happen to Bill?" I interrupted.

"Nothing. The Direktor will probably give him some telling off and take him home, or something," George said after another gulp.

"Home?"

"I told you, they want him back. I don't think he's coming back. You saw the Direktor," he looked around the room, there were just two agents at the door, "he won't last long."

"He really is the son of..."

"—the Direktor? Not exactly, he's more like a clone," George said it so lightly I began to feel a bit of unease. Human cloning was strictly forbidden in the whole galaxy, like time travelling, to avoid ethical problems and paradoxes.

“Can I know this? Shouldn’t you be...”

“Killing you afterwards? Not at all, this will all come out some day. And we’ll place you under our protection anyway. You won’t be working as a journo any time soon.” George put down his drink.

“What do you mean by that? Are you going to confine me?”

“Not yet, this really should be Paul’s job to brief you on this. You’re under serious threat now, the MI notwithstanding, the B’ish Interior Intelligence, police, even immigration would have eyes on you now that Heimrich is in the game.”

“What do they want from me?”

“You and Bertie are like top political prizes now. You not only were on Roboland with us and helped Bertie get away from the initial II raid, you just appeared on live television with Bill during his first public appearance. That appearance was to plea for Bertie. You’re neither a collaborator nor a saboteur, Roger. We want you onboard with our new team of young people.

“The Direktor is putting together a new interim standing committee/government that looks more than the same old same old. That’s why I replace that old fart of an Alien Minister. With you and hopefully Bertie in, say the Propaganda Ministry (which I would also head in an acting capacity), even as consultants, this new team will look much more than just some Reich Kidz club. It’ll be a genuine outreach. At least that’s what I think. I was studying public relations, you know.

“And of course, our enemies know that, too. But Heimrich is different. He wants us to make a mess here so he can push a confidence vote on the PM and put more sanctions on us.”

Indeed, for General Archer, holding on to Bertie and getting me would politically destroy George and his faction of former Reich Kidz. But I didn’t realise that Heimrich also wanted to prove the ineptitude of the prime minister. Hope he wouldn’t deport me or anything for that reason.

“What about Bertie?”

“Bertie will be fine. The Direktor will release him, somehow, he always listens to Bill.”

“What if he doesn’t this time? General Archer seemed to have the upper hand now.” I readied myself for whatever answer he would come up with.

“We know where Bertie is being held. We’ll reexamine the option of calling local police, if the Interior Intelligence are really hostile, we’ll get him out ourselves.”

Paul came back with Richard and said: “Now we can move.”

George stood up and said to me: “Good luck. We’ll be watching you,” he looked at Paul and continued, “he’ll be anyway.”

Paul led me out of the room into the long corridor, under watching eyes of B’ish secret service. We then took a lift down to the underground car park of the palace.

I tried to strike up a conversation: “I didn’t know they had a car park under the palace, I thought this place was ancient.”

“No, it doesn’t exist,” he answered briefly and took me to an armed car after leaving Richard with me to carry me home and watch me.

“That was what happened, basically,” I concluded the tale, it was day already.

Love sat in silence for a while before she said: “So what are the letters you took this morning?”

I had almost forgot about them. Upon opening them, we realised they were from the interior ministry. The letters specified that we had 60 days to leave this planet, or face removal.

Love paused, then gave the letters back to me.

“That wasn’t unexpected,” she said calmly.

“Do you think it’s Heimrich?”

“No, he doesn’t control the postal service on this planet,” Love answered while putting the letters back into their envelopes, “I’m surprised they still use physical letters but magazines don’t sell.”

“I don’t know, what should we do now?” Perhaps it was the exhaustion, my mind had stopped working and fear had kicked in.

“You should go to bed now.” She stood up and took her bag with her.

“What about you?” I stood up after her.

“I need to calm my head. I’m going out. Alone.” She readjusted her outfit and went to the door. She left the house without another word, leaving me balancing on the swirling chair, wondering what my next step should be.

I blocked both my parents on my porta and tried to contact Charlie, but he wasn’t answering. The chat group fell silent, too. I really didn’t have anyone to talk to now.

I fell asleep on the sofa and woke up to a rapid knock on my door. I rushed to answer it and it was Ophelia in the afternoon sun.

“Ophelia! What happened?”

She broke down and cried, storming into the house and embraced me. I calmed her down and closed the door behind her. The AIA, the MI or the II could all be watching. I better not do anything that might get understood.

“I’m so scared, Roger, I don’t know who I should go to,” Ophelia said while I guided her into the living room and sat her on the sofa. I returned to the wobbly chair.

“First they got Bertie, now Bill, too.” She wiped some tears from her eyes. “I mean, who am I supposed to talk to? My dad always said never trust a Reich Kid, but he also said that ‘if you have to choose from MI and AIA, pick AIA’. Do you think I should talk to George? I don’t know that Paul guy very well.”

Before she could carry on, get a conclusion and leave, I interrupted: “What happened, Ophelia?”

“You don’t know?” she paused, “you don’t know yet?”

“What?”

She shook her head and turned on the holographic TV in the living room. It was already on the news channel:

The news anchor was presenting under the often overused “breaking news” banner the death of Alex the dissident lawyer. After briefly introducing her history as a human rights lawyer, including several cases that she fought

for the rights of dissidents until she became an outspoken dissident herself. She applied for asylum on Planet B 6 years ago, during an academic conference. She knew they'd arrest and jail her if she went back from the event.

The cumbersome asylum application process was discussed, and the anchor duly mentioned the immigration department and the former interior minister without disparaging them.

After that, the programme switched to a reconstruction of the circumstances of her death. A notification appeared in the projection saying, "enlarge if space is permitting". I tapped it on the holographic button.

The machine displayed a scaled projection of Ophelia's house. The voice of the anchor, a reporter on the scene and a police officer being interviewed formed a chorus heightening the disbelief that I had.

They suggested that she fell from Ophelia's balcony after getting drunk at a party last night. Her actual cause of death was not yet known, but it seemed rather suspicious to me. I had heard nothing about Ophelia holding a party last night.

"I was at home all night last night till someone called me early this morning telling me to get out of the house. There was no party. Then I heard the police coming to my house as I drove away. I couldn't find anywhere else to go so I came here."

I stood up and went to the kitchen, trying to process the influx of information. I reminded myself and said: "Do you want some coffee or tea?"

"A cup of hot chocolate would be perfect, if you don't have it, tea would be fine."

I checked the cupboards in the kitchen and found that we had some cocoa left. While I was heating the drink, I received an anonymous call on my porta. I closed the kitchen door, paused for a second and answered.

"Hey it's Bill." It was indeed his voice.

"Bill! Are you alright? Where are you?" I forced my voice down, trying not to disturb Ophelia.

"I can't tell you exactly where, but I'm still on the planet. Have you heard about Alex, the lawyer we saw from the salon?"

“Yes, I have. Ophelia is with me now.”

“Oh, good! I was going to talk to about it. Apparently someone inside the MI is secretly working for her dad and he had proof of General Archer ordering the assassination of Alex.”

“Had.”

“Yes they killed him but the proof is now hidden somewhere. That’s why the B’ish intelligence placed the murder scene on Ophelia’s house. They want to search the place.”

“What do they care? And what does Ophelia’s dad do?”

“He’s just a regular businessman with ties to the regime, so to speak. Heimrich and the II wants to solve the murder, it appears. I’ve gotta go.”

“Is George or Paul with you? What should I do now? Can they take Ophelia to safety?”

“No, I’m a bit cut off from the outside now. George is with the Direktor and all the other ministers. They’ve got a tight schedule today. I think Paul is somewhere near you, as he should be watching over your house. I really got to go now, try and contact them and get Bertie—”

He hung up, or got cut off. Ophelia entered the kitchen and asked: “Who was that?”

“It was Bill, he’s OK. Here’s your cocoa.” I gave her a mug of the cocoa I made absentmindedly, and began thinking about the whole thing.

Paul’s people couldn’t possibly be the only ones watching me, so everyone should know Love left this morning and Ophelia was here. I began to feel that it was precisely because all parties had eyes on us that we were still safe. MI, AIA and II were keeping each other at bay. But the B’ish were on their own turf, so they might be the first ones to make a move.

An idea struck me. I took a peek outside the house. There were two manned levimobiles parked outside. I went upstairs to our bedroom to get a better view. The bedroom was a mess. Love obviously had started and given up packing. I carefully tread around her dresses and got to the window. I saw another black levimobile at the corner of the house, with two men inside. There

might be more people in the buildings opposite the street, but I could only count the cars. If I went out and spoke to one of them, I might be able to find out which one was the AIA car. I might just be able to make contact with Paul this way. I took a few pictures of these unmarked vehicles before I went back to the kitchen and began to pick which car to approach first.

A levivan slowly glided into the street and landed itself on the side of the road. It took a few seconds to recognise the logo on its side. It was the state-run holographic television station of Planet B. Three or four engineers got off the van and began building holographic filming and transmission kit around the entrance of the house.

Another two cars and a van coming into the street from different directions. Many hoverbikes came in with reporters with or without hi-vis vests approaching my home. Some were already aiming their cameras at me. I had only a gauze curtain in my kitchen, so I instinctively took cover behind a cupboard facing against the window and started to plan my way back to the living room.

Ophelia entered the kitchen. Before I could warn her, a barrage of flashlights blinded her that she dropped to the floor. I leapt to cover her and half-carried her back to the living room. There were almost certainly lenses behind the backyard fences, so I shut the curtains tighter before they could figure out how to shoot above the fences.

Ophelia screamed from the couch: "What are we going to do? Are the police coming? I didn't know anything about Alex!"

"The police might be the best people to get us out, apart from maybe Paul." I peeped out from between the curtains and saw cameras being lifted over the fence. "I wonder why they're here. There are too many reasons."

"Check the Grid, I was going to tell you about it." Ophelia blinked heavily while she spoke, still teary from the flashlights.

Ophelia asked me if I could bring her some eye drops and I realised that I had left my porta on the windowsill of our bedroom after taking those pictures. I went back up to get them and remembered that I hadn't contacted Love since all this madness had gone on. I rang her on my porta, but she wouldn't answer.

I took another look from between the two pieces of curtains again. The crowd of journalists kept growing outside. I logged on to the Grid to see the reason for this congregation.

Apparently, someone had leaked to the media that I was the person next to Bill when he interrupted that banquet. The leaker analysed the minute-long footage circulating on the Grid and published my personal information (name, age, occupation and address) on a leakage site. But in a sub-topic I saw something genuinely terrifying: a post titled “The Background of Roger Rogers and Bill Wilson Jr”. A slight disturbance sounded outside and brought my attention back to the present.

Looking out of the window, I noticed something different.

Two C’ers came out of their parked levimobile and approached the crowd. I couldn’t recognise them from this distance, because they wore matching dark suits and AR sunglasses. In fact, I couldn’t even tell them apart. They braved the waves of people and knocked on my door. I walked down the stairs, thinking about which agency sent them.

Ophelia came out of the living room to meet me in the hallway. She looked more than a little nervous: “Who do you think is at the door?”

“I don’t know, but I don’t think they’ll break down the door with so many cameras on them.”

I moved toward the door slowly, avoiding the cameras as well as I could. I shouted at the door over the shutter noises.

“It’s Paul here, open the door please, Roger!” A familiar voice sounded muffled through the fibreglass door. I looked through the fisheye peephole and saw a distorted Paul lowering his shades and winking at the viewer. I could see Richard behind him.

I quickly let him in and closed the door behind him, thinking my forearm might be in the live stream now and the evening news later.

“Why don’t you get a VR or even 2D video intercom?” Paul shook my hands and greeted Ophelia.

“Because this house is mostly pre-Mechboom, I guess. But everything was maintained pretty well by the landlord. The copper bath upstairs works, too, but I digress.”

“How’s everything here, Roger?” Paul asked before he saw Ophelia, “Oh hello Ophelia! I don’t believe we’ve been introduced. I used to hear all sorts of nice things about you from George and Beatrice. May she rest in peace.”

“Yes, thanks. You must be Paul. You came to one of my salons with George, didn’t you?”

“I’m glad you remember. This is Richard, senior analyst and former field agent with the AIA.” He introduced us and Richard. But Richard was a bit tense and quiet.

“Things are getting complicated. We’re pretty sure that MI had killed Alex and that the II, that’s Interior Intelligence of Planet B has the body. But we don’t know why, when or where it happened. A mole we and your dad, Ophelia, had planted within the MI got some documents out. Yes, your dad has some business dealing with us, mainly asking us to keep him safe and he’ll fund some of our off-the-book missions. But the mole has disappeared and is presumed dead. The documents are in the hands of an civilian informant mostly working with the MI. He is trying to peddle it to the highest bidder now.” Paul commenced again.

I began to lose patience. I’d had enough of all this espionage movie kind of nonsense: “Ok, but what’s that to do with us? Can’t you just get Ophelia to safety first? Do you happen know my girlfriend’s whereabouts since you’ve been watching us all day?”

“We’re getting both of you out now, and taking you to a safehouse, we have the location of Love and she’s fine, we’ll get her later. However, we might need your help,” he paused and looked me in the eye, waiting for a response.

“I genuinely don’t want to, but tell me anyway,” I couldn’t turn him down directly, he might still change his mind about getting me out.

“That’s good enough, come and we’ll explain in the levimobile.” He asked me to get my spin-o-matic and Love’s, before the Military Intelligence could break in and search through our digital files. After I came down with all our

valuables, George opened the door to the ocean of flashlights and tried with Richard to cleave out a route for me and Ophelia.

The reporters seized their chances. A volley of questions ranging from my relationship with Bill, the regime to how my father's research job was connected with the space colonisation programme today. One presenter shoved a microphone to my face and asked about my permit status and current immigration environment after they appointed the new interior minister.

I tried my best to shield Ophelia from the questions thrown at her while refraining from saying "no comment". Questions for Ophelia included her father's involvement in the lobbying for the new space programme and how he got to monopolise the teleportation business on Planet C. Some journalists who'd done deeper research even asked about the business ties between my (former) employer King's Starsea and some backdoor investment/immigration deals between wealthy C'ish business people and governments of alien planets, especially Planet D.

Amongst all the noises and repetitive questions, we finally made our way out. I could see Richard rushing to the car when I heard a reporter shouting: "Were you with Bill Jr. on Roboland?"

Both me and Ophelia stopped. I could hear myself say "don't look back", but my mind went blank that I'm not sure if I did say it. The crowd went silent for a few seconds before it erupted into questions about Roboland and all the (partially true) rumours and conspiracy theories. We ran fast to the car with Paul holding the door for us and Richard starting the engine.

As the reporters broke the gag order of questions regarding Roboland, they seemed to also have abandoned all civility and started to chase us and trying to block the car from leaving.

"Hold on," said Richard briefly and we levitated about 5 metres high and got rid of the reporters on the ground.

"I didn't know cars can rise this high," I said.

"This is the absolute limit and it can't stay up here very long, but it's enough for us to get away," explained Richard, before adding, "me and Paul used to be in a racing club."

I did not know how to respond to that apart from asking him if he was a member of the Reich Kidz as well.

We descended quickly. With a slight bump, we landed at the normal 40cm height these cars normally float on. I asked Paul about the favour he was asking from me. He took out some files for me to read and began explaining, after making sure no cars were following us:

“We don’t have enough agents down here on the planet right now. We left some up on the mothership so we’re already stretching. I want you to meet that informant while our agents try to rescue your friend Bertie. After Alex, we fear for his life.”

“What? I’ve never—”

Richard interjected: “It’ll be easy, he’s civilian, and you just need to go and ask what his price is, halve it no matter what he says then agree to his best offer. Give him a briefcase full of gold as deposit and get the documents.”

Paul joined him: “It’s something like that, but we’ll give you an earpiece so you can get instructions in real-time.”

Richard added: “We’ve also got a few insect drones left. Bluebottles, I think. We’ll watch you, fly-on-the-wall style.”

“Why me? I’m no spy and I just became a mass media magnet now!” I protested.

“That’s the point! Just like back at your place, the reporters provided a barrier that the MI can’t get close to the action. We’re afraid they might want to kill you both.”

“Is it a little too dangerous for a civilian like him?” Ophelia objected.

“He has shown great courage and skills on Roboland, and we don’t have any other choice.”

“We’ve got company,” said Richard, looking at the rearview screen.

Paul took a look behind us and said: “It’s the MI. I wonder where the B’ish are?”

A police siren rang from above. I looked back and saw our pursuer getting pulled over by a transport police saucer.

“The MI modify their agents too much, cybernetically,” said Paul, “and the B’ish police are paranoid about cyborgs ever since the Petitbourg attack.”

From the rearview mirror I saw the two agents were asked to leave the vehicle and tasered after raising their hands too late.

We arrived at the safehouse on the edge of the city centre 20 minutes later. The buildings grew squattier and sparser. We started seeing more green on this side of the city. After we’ve parked at the side of the road, Paul said: “Ophelia, we’re here. Roger, if you don’t mind, can you go on with Richard? He’ll brief you on your way to meet the informant. Take care!” Ophelia had already been escorted off the car before Paul finished his sentence and waved goodbye at us. Ophelia tried to reach for the car, but Paul intercepted and took her away. Richard accelerated.

On our way back to central Gigapolis, Richard commenced an impassioned rant against General Archer and the Military Intelligence. I lost focus halfway through, but to sum it up: Archer seemed duty bound to thwart the Reich Kidz in any capacity he could muster. But what I took away the most seemed to be how he ended his tirade against that certain clique within the military.

Richard said: “You might not remember, I was at Roboland, too, protecting everyone from within the group. The B’ish bodyguards were useless. It feels so long ago now but blink you’re here, doesn’t it? It’s like me and Paul and George and Bill were best pals yesterday and boom it’s like a cannibalistic food chain, eh? Circle of life, innit?”

“Are you not happy where you are?” I tested my luck a little, hope he wouldn’t draw a gun somewhere.

“No no no,” to my surprise, he was the one that panicked first, “I’m perfectly happy, Bill is the natural leader amongst us. But they don’t give him enough credit for it, those old bastards. They keep saying it’s because his old man! You saw on the space station how he saved us. You helped him more than the rest of us did, but he saved us.”

“I agree with you here,” I said, “actually, since he’s technically a clone, he should have the same temperament as the original.”

“Well they fixed a lot of the bad genes, not that the Direktor has any.” Richard went silent after proposing the paradox. I knew better than to start the topic again, so I turned to ask him about his life on Planet B.

“Yeah, after my training at the AIA school, my dad wanted to send me to Planet A, you know. They’re the best planet in the galaxy and they’re the best at everything. But I wanted to follow Bill and George, Bill said that the Planet B has some *je ne sais pas* that Planet A simply doesn’t possess. Maybe it’s the history, maybe the culture. I don’t understand all that highbrow stuff, but anyway, here’s the hotel.”

“What?” Before I realised we were driving into the underground carpark of a gigantic golden skyscraper. It took Richard more than 10 minutes to find a spot to park the probably bulletproof levimobile. Richard stretched his arm and opened the glove compartment. He took out a little wooden box.

“Look here,” after opening the box with both hands, “this is the earpiece for you and I guide you from here, also, take these.”

He pulled out a pair of specs from the lower tier of the box and said: “Put these on, and I’ll keep yours in the car. These have spy cams built-in so I can see what you see.”

“But they’re not my prescription—” I protested while he swapped glasses for me, “great, then you’ll be able to see more than I do.”

“No problem, I’ll tell you what to do.” He slapped my back and elbowed me out of the car.

The microphonic feedback from the earpiece forced me to take it off immediately. It kept on screaming for a few more seconds before Richard’s voice came through, slightly modulated.

Richard: Ahem, can you hear me?

Roger: Yes, I can hear you talking right in front of me, as well as from the earbud if that’s what you’re asking.

Richard: That’s great. Now go to the lift, the last door to your right.

After I navigated through the maze of levimobiles and got in position, he told me to get to the ground floor. That was as far as the lifts would go without a room card. I walked out of the lift into the heavily carpeted lobby of the Grand Hotel. I'd come here once for an event at the buffet upstairs. I liked the food but the snobbishness reverberating between the gold-plated walls in the spacious dining halls really made me feel a little agoraphobic.

I tried to orient myself by looking for the reception, but the huge I'an and X'ish guests were blocking my already blurry view a little too much. I found the information point and asked the D'ish person how I could get to the restaurant, as that was the rendezvous point Richard told me through the earbud.

"Go to your right, turn right again when you see the reception and then the first door on your left," the lady behind the desk said, without looking up at me.

"Thank you," I said.

Richard: What?

Roger: Nothing, I was thanking someone else.

Richard: Oh ok.

I guided myself without my specs to the restaurant. I seemed to have scared him a little by staring vacantly into the waiter's eyes while he asked me if I had a reservation. The reservation, according to Richard at the last moment, was made under the name of John Smith. It sounded a little too suspicious to both me and the host.

"Follow me," he said, after scrutinising me for a second or two, "Mr Smith is expecting you."

I followed him into the grand restaurant. Despite having been to the hotel before, it was the first time I came to the proximity of its famed brunch buffet. But I didn't feel like eating. The opulently decorated hall had high ceilings and pre-MechBoom styled furniture. The gold was in a lighter hue than the lobby but remained consistent with the golden theme of the Grand Hotel. A real A'an

palm tree sat at the centre with a small in-door fountain. An old E'ish piano rested beside them.

The waiter guided me to the table where Robin the professor stood up and shook my hand, introducing himself as John Smith.

Richard: That's effing Professor Robin the collaborator! He used to teach me! He couldn't tell the difference between the Direktor and the party, the party and the government or the government and the planet-state! How could he not be an informant? No wonder he's peddling information like a suicidal amateur. I have to call Paul. Don't answer, he can hear you.

I sat down and greeted him again after the waiter is gone: "How do you do, professor, haven't seen you since the last salon."

"The last, hahaha well put! Alex got what she'd been asking for. All's right with the world now. But I didn't know you were with AIA." He didn't look up from the menu.

"I'm just helping them out. Let's cut to the chase. How much do you want?" I asked, after being fed prompts from Richard.

"Don't rush it! The god-awful buffet is ending in 10 minutes and I can order some proper food. My female companion (if you know what I mean) is just coming back from fixing her make up because— you know why they do that."

Richard: Let's kill him afterwards, shall we? Hahaha I'm kidding, the MI will take care of him.

While we waited, I tried to start a conversation about the university he worked in, or of the current B-C relations, which he taught. But he showed little interest. He did, after a while, asked for my opinion on different premium cuts of beef and if the J'ese steaks were nothing but hype.

Richard: Ok let me deal with this. I've seen my share of food snobs. When he taught me he still used ketchup with his steak so just talk jargon and move the focus from different cuts to different cattle species on different planets. Do not contradict him directly but be confident while you shift the conversation away from his forte. I'm on the Grid so whatever he says, you'll have science to back you up.

After 5 excruciating minutes, Love finally came back from the restroom and joined us.

My head went blank after I felt an explosion inside my brain. Meanwhile I kept repeating whatever Richard was feeding me through the earpiece. The professor already looked as if he was falling asleep. I didn't know if he was protesting or genuinely lost interest. But now I had to greet Love.

"Hi, I'm Jane Smith, nice to meet you."

"Enchanted, I'm Romeo Montague. Very nice to meet you, too," I could not think of any other reaction.

Richard: What? Who? Wherefore art thou Romeo?

"I knew your name was Romeo something! Told you!?" He asked for confirmation from Love, to which she replied: "Told me what? You never told me that we are meeting such a charming young gentleman."

I could feel her foot under the table, giving me a hard kick. That knocked me back to reality.

My porta shook, I peered down from the corner of my eye and saw the chat page.

Love: I'll explain later. He doesn't have any documents, he killed Alex because she had proof that he'd been selling intelligence on the black market. The B'ish intelligence took advantage of that and made up the whole suspicious death thing. We need to get out of here.

Richard (in the earbud): Hold still, let me zoom in... Holy fuck! Isn't that your girlfriend? Can we trust her? Nod if we can. Ok, great. Wait Paul is calling. I'll relay the call to you.

Richard: Hi Paul, I was just about to call you, we got something. He's got nothing.

Paul: That can wait, get him back now. We got Bertie, but no one was there guarding him. It seems the MI knew we were coming and evacuated. We'll be moving to safehouse 3 now.

Richard: Ok.

Richard (to me): You hear that? Get the girl, let's move out.

A gasp in the restaurant. Then more. I glanced up, it was the muted 3D television, playing the news. It was an explosion in the sky. The subtitles said the Mothership had caught fire and multiple explosions had occurred on the hull of the ship.

“Turn that up!” Robin shouted. The waiters did not comply but came and told him to shut up. He began sweating.

“I think our deal might have to wait. You need to find out what’s going on, right?” He stood up. Two visibly modified C’ers behind him stood up. I grabbed Love’s hand and we dropped to the floor before anything happened.

Richard: What was that?

Gunshots. Screaming. Chaos. The professor was rather wide so he blocked the view of the shooters. Love pointed at the emergency exit. I couldn’t see very clearly but I could make out the shape of a green light above a door, so I nodded. When a group of overdressed diners began running, we dashed beside them. We took cover behind the piano while the two agents shot at us. Richard appeared at the entrance on the other end of the restaurant and shot down one of the shooters but got hit by the other. Love took my hand again and dragged me into the emergency exit when I stopped to take in the situation. Richard took cover behind a table and pointed at the exit that Love led me toward.

Richard (From both the earbud and behind me): Listen, I’m ok, just go with Jane to the car, Paul will get to you.

Before I could process the situation, I was already in Richard’s car with Love outside the Grand Hotel. I had my specs again.

“Are you hurt?” she asked.

“I’m fine, thank you, and you?”

“My dress is torn, that’s all.”

“I didn’t know you could drive.”

“Me neither. This is auto mode.”

“Right, that makes sense. What were you doing there with Robin?”

“Unlike you, I wanted to get us out of the trouble. So, I went to find us a way out of this planet alive. But guess that didn’t work.”

“Ok,” I was at once thinking about what she had to offer him to get a guarantee like that and loathing my own mind.

“How did you know he killed Alex?” I asked.

“He kept bragging about it and threatening to kill me if I told anyone else.”

“Right.”

“So that guy was the one that drove you home last night, right?” She changed the subject.

“Yes,” I showed her my earbud, “he’s not answering.”

“Can you get to Bill? Or George? Or any of those interchangeable posh boys?”

“Wait, I might have Bill’s porta number.”

“Call him,” Love said.

“Not answering,” I gave up after a few tries, “where did you set the destination?”

“Somewhere out of town,” she said, turning on the radio, “but in the direction of home.”

The radio said that General Archer had made a statement that Bill and George had conspired to kidnap the Direktor in order to succeed him. They blew up the Mothership and ran away. The MI, he said, had put out the fire and took control of the situation. He was also in talks with the B’ish government to look for possible accomplices on Planet B, especially AIA operatives.

“We need to leave this planet,” Love said, checking her Porta.

“But where can we go? Not Planet C, for obvious reasons.” I began to think about a place to hide.

“Planet D!” we said at the same time.

But getting domestic voyage tickets can also be difficult. The surveillance at spaceports could expose us to the police or the II immediately.

“Hans!” We thought of it together again.

Love began calling him on her porta. After a few minutes of bargaining, she fixed us a deal that afternoon at a distant spacestrip outside Gigapolis. He'd take us to the Moon of Planet D and to Planet D. Love hung up and moved on to book us a B and B.

The spacestrip was not on the map, so I set the course to its coordinate. My Porta rang, it was anonymous.

"Hey it's Bill."

"Hey! Are you ok?"

"Sort of. I kind of need your help now. They attacked Paul's temporary HQ and captured Bertie again. Paul is now on the run with Ophelia. He's wounded, can you pick them up?"

"Yes, send me the coordinates!" I ignored Love's inquisitive eyes and received the encrypted data with my porta.

Bill asked me where we were and began transmitting the coordinates of his location. He was on Roboland.

Chapter 9: Hans

After a brief detour, we have picked up Ophelia and a wounded Paul at an abandoned underground station. A couple of hours later, we are on our way out of the city.

“Listen, we need to get to Planet D first, and perhaps go to the press if we’re still threatened,” Love explains to Paul, who is sitting in the back with me and Ophelia. We are trying to patch him up with what we’ve got from an off-the-shelf chemist.

“You’re coming with us, right?” I say to Paul before turning to Ophelia, “I’ll hold this here and you cut the bandage.”

“Yes, but I’m worried about George and Bill.” Ophelia cuts the bandage and we are finished with Paul.

Paul picks up from where we left off and says: “Only when they’re safe can we be safe. Them and the Direktor. You know this is a coup, right?”

We fall silent. Fleeing to Planet D doesn’t look like such a good idea now. Especially after Paul reminded us that we need our ID to book accommodation. With the agreement between Planet B and its former colony Planet D, the Interior Intelligence can learn where we are almost immediately if they ask. We don’t know which side they are on with the coup that is unfolding right above their heads. I don’t think they know that yet.

I am still browsing the Grid with the secure porta Paul gave me, waiting for updates about the Mothership and the Direktor. It seems that General Archer and the MI have taken control of what’s left of the ship while the main body of AIA was down on Gigapolis trying to rescue Bertie and watching me.

“Do you know where Bertie is now?” I can no longer suppress the question.

“Most likely with Archer somewhere. I have another group of agents still watching them. But I lost contact with them when we destroyed everything before MI struck.” Paul says, in a matter-of-fact tone.

“What do you think happened to Richard?” I ask, with eyes still fixed on the screen.

“He’ll be alright, he’s a tough bastard,” Paul says in Richard’s voice.

We laugh and fall silent again.

The sheer size of Gigapolis makes it hard to leave the city. After 2 hours of automatic driving, the surroundings are still urbanized. But I notice that the buildings are getting squattier and their shells more corroded by sand. Less visible green grows here, too. The most common flora we see is dried shrubbery and tumbleweed. We have arrived at the outskirts of the city.

Paul has been requesting that he has a chat with Hans once we meet him at the spacestrip. He wants us to pick up Bill, George and everyone with them from Roboland, hopefully with the Direktor, too. Afterwards we can go to a space colony currently being built near Planet C, where we civilians can be safe. They will then get in touch with loyalist military leaders to quench the coup.

Meanwhile in Nordington, chaos reigns on every level. MI operatives are raiding all government offices, picking out their enemies for incarceration or execution. Military Intel Force, the paramilitary force under the command of Gen Archer, has disarmed the garrison force and the city police. MIF has put the Major General who heads the city garrison under house arrest at his mistress's residence in the old town.

Martial law has been proclaimed in the whole of Nordington and MIF has ordered the civilians to stay indoors. All politburo members, along with many prominent members of the party elite were sent to a state-owned luxury hotel that used to house foreign leaders. They also set checkpoints all around the capital. The MI personnel stationed outside Nordington are also going after the military leaders garrisoned in every corner of the planet. Multiple abductions and assassinations, both successful and attempted, have occurred. However, some of them refuse to be escorted to house arrest and invitations to Nordington. Shootouts in army HQs sound across Planet C. But MI has already cut off the communications between the army leaders. With no coordination, none dares to be the first to make a move towards central, even after fending off MIF offences.

Despite MI's guarantee of safety, the leaders of state-owned mega corporations and private businesspeople close to the regime have sought protection from the loyalist generals, fled to other planets and colonies or are facing abduction/arrest. Economists, religious leaders (or what's left of that group), law experts, journalists and teachers are now fearing for themselves. The only thing broadcasting is a recorded message from Gen Archer promising a government of unity and later an election once order is restored.

In a glass-clad skyscraper in downtown Nordington, an elderly man in a double-breasted pinstripe suit is being escorted out of his office on the top floor. This is Polonius, one of the most prominent businessmen, best known for his work on teleportation and space colony construction. He is one of the chief contractors in the huge space initiative proposed by the Direktor and his advisors. He is also Ophelia's father.

Polonius is one of the first business leaders MI goes after, mainly because he is the most influential private business owner on the planet. Being the largest manufacturer of transport and communication equipments, he has maintained many contacts within both the AIA and the MI. However, Gen Archer has struck first and apprehended Polonius's allies within the MI with a purge before the coup.

Polonius was aware of the risk of a coup d'état when the Direktor decided to extend his Grand Tour and go to Planet B. Planet B, to those in the know means Bill and succession. General Archer will try to stop that, either by killing Bill or overthrowing the Direktor altogether. Polonius has a false confidence that his allies within the MI will surely help him establish himself as a backer of the new regime under Archer if anything happens. Same way he feels the AIA will keep him safe if it doesn't. Little does he know the General has almost no interest in space colonisation and technology of the future. Archer's eyes are firmly on Planet C and the present.

Before being taken away, Polonius contacted his friends within the AIA, but they have either fled or died. His son Laertes, on the other hand, is on one of the colonies near the edge of the star system of C and is under the

protection of AIA. The AIA agents on the Solaredge colony have repelled the MI insurgence, Laertes told his father, but they were not equipped to leave the colony and help with what is happening on the planet. Polonius, in his desperation, sends a final message to his daughter on Planet B before he wipes his porta in preparation for his arrest.

Ophelia's porta vibrates and she takes it out. It is a message from an unknown address on Planet C. "Should I open it?" she asks Paul, who sits beside her, nervously.

Paul looks at her screen for a second and says: "Opening a message won't change anything, but I suggest you turn your porta off lest they track the receiver of the message. They can do that no matter if you open it or not."

She opens the message and smiles in relief, saying: "It's just my dad." As she reads on, her face grows serious. She passes her porta to Paul with tears in her eyes. Paul reads it quickly and passes it to Roger, who has moved to the front after patching up Paul.

"What does it say?" says Love, sitting beside Roger in the front. They are almost out of town now, she needs to know if it concerns their destination. She is, after all, on the driver's seat of the automatic car.

"The coup is in full swing on Planet C now, apparently," Roger says, "Ophelia's dad might have been taken away by the MI now. But her brother is safe on Solaredge."

"And that's where we're going after picking up everybody, including your parents, Roger." Paul says, "I'm not sure if you know, your dad, apart from a former state-funded research on space travel, but also worked as an operative in his years on Planet A, helping us get latest technologies from A'an companies."

Roger freezes. Speechless, he connects the dots about how Father speaks about Planet A and how mother worries about the raid of his old office.

"Your pedigree is one of the reasons we trust you, Roger. On the matter of trust, I know you don't fully trust this Hans guy, but I'm sure I can be persuasive enough." He makes a money sign with his left hand.

“How can we save my dad now?” Ophelia controls her emotion.

Paul answers: “We need to end the coup as soon as possible. They won’t kill him as long as he’s still needed for either money or information.”

“So all we can do is to follow through your plan and get the Direktor, right?” Ophelia says.

“Yes, and we have to get this Hans person on board.”

“Do you know anything about King?” Roger asks, after giving the porta to Love.

“Your boss?” Paul tries to recall the name while Roger nods. Paul then asks Love for permission before he takes the porta, turns it off and gives it back to Ophelia.

“Yeah our boss. Hans works for him on a regular basis. If King is clean or more or less on your side, I guess Hans should be, too.” Roger says, while trying to remember what Hans said about King back on Planet D.

“I don’t know. He doesn’t really deal with state agencies. But he does help all sorts of rich and powerful people obtain alien resident permits, I’m talking long-term ones, permanent ones, if you can afford it. He’s been permitted to do that since before I took over the AIA.”

“We know that much, but does that mean he has business dealings with those rich people now under house arrests and getting their assets frozen?”

“That sounds very likely,” Paul says, “but I imagine some of them must have escaped the coup in time and are now in the permitted alien residences King got them.”

“My dad used to say that King is a bit of a snake, and I shouldn’t be making friends with him,” Ophelia says, “he always looks at me in a funny way.”

“Yeah he’s a bit of a pervert. Roger, have you noticed that there aren’t many men in our company?” says Love.

“Yeah, it was just me, Charlie and Baker, wait,” Roger realises where the conversation is going, “what? That’s not possible, is it? I thought it was for diversity.”

“It’s not diverse if the female to male proportion is about 5 to 1!” Love points out, “he’s been building his private harem! That’s why he was very keen to kick Baker out and gave Charlie’s sponsorship of a permit to Victoria!”

“Oh dear, you need to let people know about that!” says Ophelia.

“But not before we get Hans to take us to Solaredge, is that ok?” Paul says.

They laugh a little and then go back to silence.

The landscape out of the levimobile windows has changed quietly. As pavement ends, sand begins to appear on the ground. The autodrive adjusts the levitation height to accommodate the sand being blown around by emission from the car.

The passengers see fewer and fewer buildings on either side of the road. The road itself grows into a highway. The field is bare and barren. Small towns and villages can be spotted afar without the obstruction of high-rises. Roger has never been to the suburbs or the surrounding countryside of Gigapolis. His travel on the planet is usually by highspeed trains or by air, sometimes by space. He has never had a close look at what it’s like on the edge of the city, though he has often imagined how life is like in these areas.

Ophelia and Love close the windows by their sides. Roger and Paul follow suit. Roger turns on the navigation interface built-in to the car and compares it with the location Hans sent them. They are very close.

“Can you see any sign of a launch pad?” Roger asks. The other three all look around.

“Nothing... wait, what’s that?” says Love, pointing at something distant on her side.

Paul takes out a mini binocular and aims in the direction: “It’s some sort of a rack, I guess you can launch a small shuttle from it, if you insist.”

“Can we go there?” asks Ophelia.

The structure is located in the middle of a wasteland, way away from the highway they are now on. Rocks and grass strew the land.

“We can make it there if I take the wheel,” says Paul. Love tells the autodrive to pull over on the side of the road. Love and Paul switch places. Love greets Ophelia rather awkwardly.

Paul starts the car in manual mode. It floats a little higher than before as he steers the car over the edge of the road and into the field. He adeptly avoids all obstacles and heads towards the only man-made structure for miles, before running aground on a tree stump hiding behind a rock.

The levimobile finds itself stuck between the rock and the stump, with one engine pierced by the sharp end of a fallen branch. Smoke begins coming out from under the car. Paul says: “Correction, I should’ve said we have a chance of making it there if I take the wheel.”

“At least we’re halfway there.” Roger evacuates from the car and runs to the other side to help Love and Ophelia out. Ophelia’s corner of the car has been levered high from ground. Roger calls on the ground asking her to jump into his arms. Love gets a little irritated by the wording of the request but keeps quiet. Paul pushes the panicking Ophelia out of the car and she falls into Roger’s arms. Paul gets out of the car just before it starts burning.

They try to put out the fire that is emitting from the car but can’t. The four of them eventually give up and begin walking towards the structure. Roger makes it in time to take all their valuables and Love asks to carry some for him. Ophelia stands and stares as they share the moment of dividing the spin-omatics, cameras, cash, documents and Love’s prized collection of dolls. Paul pats Ophelia on the back. Ophelia walks away and leads the group toward the rack.

Walking on the rough sandy field outside the city of Gigapolis, Roger remembers what he has read about the agricultural depression that took place around the time of the MechBoom in the cities. The rapid advancement of trade and technology rendered farming unprofitable and the land polluted. A couple of withered trees lie in the horizon and the city fumes behind them. Roger looks above, the sky is still a greenish blue with the two suns shining above.

“I’m thirsty,” Ophelia says, now lagging behind the three of them, “and tired.”

“We all are,” says Love, “Hans will have supply on his ship.”

Roger catches up with Paul, who is currently leading the way. Before Roger can ask him to slow down for Ophelia, they see the huge metal rack over the ridge of the rock before them. From this distance, they can see that it’s the outer shell of a launch pad, hidden safely from any prying satellite. The Millennial Penguin rests quietly inside a nest of metal bars.

“That’s the ship,” says Roger, patting Paul’s shoulder as he picks up the pace and rushes towards the metal frame.

“Wait!” Paul grabs Roger by the shoulder and stops him. Paul drops to the ground on the rock and Roger does the same. Paul pulls out his binocular and examines the structure ahead.

“What are you doing, why are you two lying on the ground?” Love asks quietly from behind. She and Ophelia stand on the ground. Love continues: “I don’t think Ophelia wants to crawl around like this.”

“I’m not an idiot, I know what to do when in danger.” Ophelia immediately drops to the ground in the sand.

Paul turns back, seeing that they’re still covered by the rock if seen from the launchpad, says: “You don’t have to take cover yet, they won’t see you from there.”

Ophelia stands up and dusts her dress. She has scraped her elbows and bruised her knees. She looks at Roger like a child who’s just dropped her ice cream cone on the ground.

Roger slides down the rock and takes some of the leftover bandages and antiseptic cream to apply on her. Love apologises to Ophelia for her mischief and helps Roger to patch her up.

“Who’s in there?” Roger asks Paul after climbing back on to the rock.

“Some B’ish people. I don’t think it’s the police. Probably the II.” Paul hands the binoculars to Roger. Love climbs up the rock and crawls beside Roger. Ophelia follows her and squeezes into the space between Roger and Paul. It hurts a little, but she insists on claiming her spot.

“Can I take a look?” Ophelia asks Roger.

“There you go,” Paul hands her a mini spyglass. She grimaces a little and takes the glass.

“I can’t see anything,” she says.

“Neither can I.” Roger hands the binocular to Love.

“They must have gone indoors,” Paul says, “there are at least two, you can see their car from here, right? It’s just under the right of the bottom of the launch nest. So 5 people maximum.”

“We’re not fighting them!” Roger exclaims.

An explosion sounds behind them. The heatwave from the car can be felt from the distance they travelled more than an hour on foot. The smoke grows denser. Two suited B’ish men emerge from inside the nest structure and get in the car parked outside.

“I got a message from Hans!” says Love, “it’s a blaster icon. I wonder what that means?”

“Ok, here’s a voice message, he says: ‘don’t go in there! I’m being held in the control room in the building by four II agents.’”

“He says they have now left the room to check out an explosion, so he untied his hand and got his porta. But he’s still locked in the control room.”

“Great, there’s just two of them left,” says Paul, putting away his binocular, “we go in, take them out, free Hans and fly away before those two come back.”

Before Roger asks how he proposes to approach the spacestrip, Paul takes out a pistol from his bag and installs the spyglass on it. He stretches the flexible barrel of the raygun and aims at the building. Roger takes the binocular back and sees a suited man on the fourth tier of the rack.

Paul snipes him and the laser beam punctures the man’s chest. He falls to the ground, bringing sand up around him. The second man comes out only to get lasered by Paul in the forehead. Paul packs his blaster and asks for his binocular back.

“Let’s go. The other two might come back any minute.” Paul stands up and glides down the rock and runs towards the building.

“Be careful, there might be more of them hidden from Hans,” says Love before she helps Roger up and they both follow Paul.

Ophelia gets up and tries her best to catch up with them.

Climbing up the stairs within the metal frame, Love whispers to Paul: “Is it ok to tell Hans we’re on our way?”

“Yeah, I guess so, why are you whispering?” Paul whispers back.

“There might still be more of them, maybe?” she says quietly.

“I’m thinking of that, too.” After looking around and making sure there are no more vehicles outside or inside the courtyard, Paul says: “If there is, there can only be one more, unless they fitted an agent in the trunk when they came.”

Laser zaps over their heads. The death-ray melts the metal beside Paul. He ducks and shoots back. A scream and silence. Roger covers Love and ushers her and Ophelia to cover.

“He didn’t fall, but I think I hit him,” Paul says to Roger, then to upstairs, “Throw out your weapon and come out with your hands behind your head!”

“I’m throwing!” the voice says, before a grenade comes down from above. Paul shoots at the hand that throws it. The man screams again and falls down to the ground, 5 storeys below.

The grenade falls between Paul and the three of them. Without thinking, Roger kicks it away down the rack and it explodes mid-air while falling, about 3 or four storeys below them. A wave of hot air comes up and shakes the whole structure. The melting pillar begins to crumble. The grenadier gets blown away a little further by the blast.

Love calls Hans on the Porta. He answers the call. It seems that he is being kept on the top floor, in the control room. Paul asks for the porta and tells him that the two agents investigating the explosion might be coming back soon. Paul listens for a while before agreeing and hangs up.

“Love, the spaceship is not locked, and you know the way in. Get Ophelia to it, turn on the engine and switch to standby. Call Hans if you need help. Roger, go up and get Hans. The door is blocked, not locked. I’ll stay here and

watch out for incoming vehicles.” He recharges his raygun after giving the orders.

Love takes Ophelia’s hand and leads her to the other side of the corridor, where they find some stairs down to get to the Penguin. Roger watches them leave and goes up. Paul calls Roger and hands him a tiny disposable blaster with built-in silencer, which seems to have been 3D printed from home.

“That’s my backup,” says Paul, “it’s actually quite nice, it sources the nearest heat source on the bolt’s trajectory, so it’s sort of auto aim. Just fire it at the general direction of your target.”

Roger nods and goes to the metal staircase.

Roger climbs up the stairs carefully, watching every corner. He holds a single shot pistol in his hand, but there shouldn’t be any need for weapons. As he walks up, he tries again to understand what is happening around him. He has just witnessed and contributed to the killing of three B’ish intelligence operatives. He might be wanted on the whole planet, he might never return. But siding with the AIA and Bill makes him an enemy to the military junta headed by the MI that is taking over his home world. He is close to being stateless.

After reaching the top floor, Roger gets out of the hatch connecting the floor to the staircase and sees Hans waving at him from the control room behind the soundproof windows. Roger waves at him but cannot hear what he is saying. He starts thumping at the glass with his fists and pointing at behind Roger.

Roger looks back and a blaster ray hits over his head, scorching a little of his hair. It lands on the windowpane and melts it instantly. Roger can hear Hans screaming “shit!”. They both drop to the floor on different sides of the windows. Roger fires his blast in the general direction of the rather small agent who must have travelled in the boot getting here.

It’s a little off and the agent smiles as she reloads her single shot spy pistol with screw-on silencer. Roger’s bolt draws a curve in the air and hits her

in the stomach. She drops her gun and replacement bolt, and falls on her knees, bleeding.

Roger rushes to her and grabs her gun before she can. Roger miraculously reloads the gun successfully in his first try and points it at the agent. He looks at her closely and finds out she is the usherette at the Mothership.

“Tell George: ‘sorry I’ve been a mole’,” she says. She shuffles her feet to the edge of the floor and jumps off the rack.

Roger goes back to the control room. The door is crudely barred with some wrenches and blocked by a chair propped up against the handles. Roger takes them away, shoots the lock with the usherette’s blaster and opens the door. The silencer has overheated from the last shot and it’s a lot louder. With the ringing in his ears, Roger hears Love and Paul inquiring his wellbeing after the shot. He reassures them and gets inside the control room.

“Finally! Good to see you, Romeo. Glad that you’re alright.” Hans gives Roger a hug and a pat on the shoulder, “there’s not a moment to lose, let’s get a move-on!”

Hans quickly sprints to the stairs and disappears down the hatch. Roger looks out to the desert and sees the levimobile that the two other agents took is coming back. He looks back into the spacefield and sees the freighter has its door open and Ophelia is waving at him.

Gunshot. A laser beam fires from several floors below and hits the windshield of the Levimobile. The car soon loses control and falls to the ground spinning. Smoke comes out of it.

“Get down!” Paul shouts and fires another shot.

Roger drops to the floor and looks at the smoking car. One person climbs out and is being shot at by Paul. He takes out a gun, but Paul gets him with his second shot. The car burns.

“Let’s get to the ship!” says Paul from below. Roger goes to the hatch and sees Hans waiting for him downstairs.

“What happened? I hear gunfire again,” Hans asks, still behind cover.

“It’s ok now. Paul took care of the other two agents.” Roger leads the way to the spaceship.

At the bridge of the Penguin, after being introduced to her, Hans tells Ophelia the story about him flying so fast that he travelled back in time. But before he realises that she isn’t at all impressed, Paul cuts him off and tells him their plan to go to Roboland.

“Listen, Paul. Thanks for helping me out there. But I don’t work with government people, you know, on principle. I’m a citizen of Planet D, so you can’t force me in this,” Hans insists.

Roger sort of feels that he should be outraged by his ingratitude, but he understands his position. Roger has never thought he’d be defending the Direktor’s regime with AIA agents one day. But he’s always known that a military dictatorship would be even worse than the bureaucratic dictatorship Planet C has had. Roger feels confident that they can find some common ground with Hans by appealing to his patriotism, conscience or greed.

“Listen, Hans. The men that locked you in that control room are B’ish intelligence. You’re on their list now. Accepting the deal with Love and letting us on also gets you on their list. D’ish intelligence shares that list with Planet B. I alone can get you off the list. You’ll also be well paid once you get us back to Solaredge,” Paul makes money sign with his fingers again.

Hans hesitates. Paul advances his persuasion and says: “I know this is the Penguin. I’ve heard about it before.”

“Yes? What have you heard?”

“It has the ability to jump to subluminal in hyperspace. That’s why AIA could never reach you. You jump every time we nearly catch you,” Paul steps away from him a little and turns back, “I’m interested in the Urashima effect it may cause. But my point is, as the acting head of AIA, I can overlook your past smuggling activities if you cooperate now.”

“Deal. Destination one: Roboland.” Hans fires up the engines and they are ready to take off.

A few hours later, the Penguin arrives on the same orbit as Roboland. The station rotates slowly with half of it hidden in the shadow of Planet B.

“What’s that light?” says Roger, looking out the side screen of the Penguin. They are approaching Roboland, but something does not seem right. The docking bay gate stays open although the ship is already inside.

“I’m not sure, Romeo.” Hans awakes from his nap and rub his eyes.

Roger looks into the opening on the hull of the cylindrical colony and zooms in on the monitor screen. He sees a robot fallen on the floor, inanimate. He turns on the broadcast system and speaks into the microphone: “Paul, can you get to the bridge please? Repeat: get the bridge please, Paul.”

Hans gets up and turns off the microphone, telling Roger that it’s for the captain only.

Roger demands him to stop the ship: “This’s an emergency.”

Without stopping the ship, Hans zooms onto the dock himself and stops the engines. But the docking guide from the bay is already working to pull the ship towards it.

“Shit!” Hans brakes the ship and says, “there’s already a ship inside, we’re going to crash into it!”

Paul comes into the bridge and says: “Why are we losing speed?”

“I think someone has attacked Roboland.”

“They don’t ever learn, do they?” Paul shakes his head.

“They’re towing us in,” Hans explains. They’ve also sent an automatic welcome message as if it’s still some sort of theme park, with a holographic cartoon mascot waving at us.

Roger does not believe they can defend themselves like last time now Serpentine seems to have reset the station. But he does not say it.

Hans turns the reverse thrusters for landing on to max, the ship goes slowly backward against the colony.

Roger remembers that when Beatrice died, she took an escape pod from Serpentine. A direct passage from the Lair leading to where the pod once was must exist. If only they can find the hangar for the escape pod, they’ll have a

way to get to the old cyborg and ask him to re-arm Annabel to expel the invaders.

While Roger looks intently into the screen, trying to find where the pod was months ago, Love and Ophelia enter the bridge.

Paul tells them about the situation as the ship slowly backs away from the station's towing beam.

"This is the place where Bea died, and her boyfriend, and everybody else," Ophelia says stoically, with her eyes fixed at the station.

Paul comforts Ophelia and lets the two women sit down. Roger keeps watching closely at the spinning cylinder in space.

"What are we looking for?" Hans remembers to ask Roger.

"There was an escape pod launched from it. It's connected to the station's ruler's Lair. We need to get there and reprogram the robots to defend themselves. Then we can be safe."

"Yes, I remember, that's the pod that Bea—" Paul stops before he continues, but Ophelia is already crying.

"Where is this Lair you're talking about, Roger?" Love asks, looking at the screen thoughtfully.

"It's in or near the axis of the colony, in the centre of the station," Roger says.

"I remember it's closer to one end of the cylinder than the other, but don't quote me on this. Around here, maybe," Paul points on the floorplan that Roger has uploaded from his spin-o-matic, from the secret event last time.

"Then maybe we should be looking at the ends of the colony, maybe that's where the escape pod is," Love gives her opinion.

Roger thinks to himself: Indeed, many colonies and cylinder-shaped space stations today have their docking bays at one end of the station. Roboland was built over decades since the MechBoom so they might not have planned it that thoroughly. That explains why the main docking bays are on the side. But it might also have something to do with having multiple docks.

Roger agrees to Love's idea and they decide to try and look at the end of the cylinder.

Hans turns the Penguin around and circles to one end of the colony but there isn't an entrance. He manoeuvres the ship to the other end, a gaping hole of a slot for one escape pod stares at them squarely.

"I'll attempt to dock here. You'll need space suits, they're under the seats. Which ones of you are going down there?" Hans asks, "are the ladies staying here with me?"

Love shakes her head: "I'm not leaving it all to the boys, I'm going in. You?" She eyes Ophelia.

Ophelia stands up and says: "I'll have to see the place where Bea died."

"Ok, I'll be waiting here for you, for one hour, if you don't come back, I'll be gone," Hans says. He opens a safe hidden on the ceiling and takes out a laser rifle and a couple of pistols. He hands the rifle to Love and the handguns to Roger and Ophelia. He then says to Love: "Keep them safe, will you?"

The Penguin nudges near the hatch onto the empty spot. Hans's voice comes through the broadcast speaker above the door where the four of them are waiting, space suit-clad: "This is as close I can get now. I'm depressurising the room."

A red light flashes as the air is being pumped out of the room. Silence. The door slides open quietly. Paul grabs the handles on the hatch, flicks the manual override switch and turns. Roger clumsily gives a helping hand. The hatch opens. A strong air current nearly blows them away. They hop across the void into Roboland one by one, before Roger and Paul close the hatch behind them.

Air fills the corridor automatically. Roger turns on the radio and says: "can we take off our helmets now? Over."

"Not yet," Paul says, "I suggest we wear them all the time. Let's get moving, 59 minutes left, over."

Roger has downloaded the floorplan from his Spin-o-matic to his portacom. He opens the software and locates themselves. The Lair is not on the plan, but Roger marked it on the map with Paul from their memory.

They follow the corridor quietly. There is no sign of the intruders in these parts. Roger feels that it must be because the tunnel-like corridor is hidden from the rest of the station as a part of the Lair, a getaway route for Serpentine. Thinking that this was the last walk of Bea walked, Roger's heart becomes heavy. He looks at Ophelia but cannot tell if she's ok inside her helmet.

They arrive at a hatch in the middle of the corridor towards the axis. Paul suggested quietly that they get their guns ready while he overrides and opens it. Love and Ophelia gets their rayguns ready while Roger opens the hatch slowly.

On the other side, Bill and George await with blasters pointing out.

Chapter 10: The Direktor

For people of Planet C, regardless if it's day or night, it is the time to watch the news. Not the Grid news, not patamedia, but the old-timey holographic television. People gather around their projectors together, leaving behind their portas and spin-o-matics, like they did many years ago. After years of dry propaganda from these state-owned stations, people are finally actually tuning in again. This time for a special reason.

The first secretary of the Party, the greatest Direktor of the nation-state, William Wilson will address the world on live television for the first time in 12 years. The announcement was made via plain text messages, a medium that many haven't seen for years and more didn't know existed.

Nobody knows what they mean when the texts first arrive. But things get clearer as the Military Intelligence tries to dismiss the text as enemy propaganda from Alien Intelligence Agency, who are staging a coup. That's when the C public realises that it's a time of crisis. MI declares martial law, and quickly moves to take over the planet, all in the name of the Direktor, who they now allege has been kidnapped by the Alien Intelligence during a state visit to Planet B. Rumours concerning a pretender to the throne also circulates in dark corners of the regulated Grid.

Not many people believe in official versions of current events nowadays, especially in Nordington. The city has seen too much. From the beginning of the rule of the Party and the Direktor's ascension to demi divinity; from the day he gave up his power to the first "collective leadership" to how the cabinet allegedly betrayed him and was purged. The second collective leadership has been in place for 20 years now. The politburo members come and go and the Direktor looks on like a benign deity or a non-interventionist parent. Most people still believe that the Party rule is the best way to run this vast and complex society, but they no longer believe everything they're being told.

Like in the plain-text messages sent to them, this time the Direktor reaches out through the most widespread means of communication, albeit obsolete for the Grid Age. Rumour has it that it's because these media are

easier to hack into than the Grid-based ones, and the MI assumes that no one is watching these channels anymore, even though they are still the official mouthpieces of the government.

With loose monitoring and outdated technology, the State Holographic TV is ripe for hijacking. To the audiences in Nordington and beyond, this could only mean one thing: The MI's takeover of the state institutions is not authorised by the Direktor.

A blackout strikes some parts of the planet as an effort from the MI to stop the broadcast. TV stations are raided moments before it starts. But the plain text message has struck both courage and fear in people's hearts. They fear the consequences of disobeying the Direktor; and with the Direktor seemingly behind them, they find courage to oppose the Military Intelligence that has oppressed them for decades.

Pirate relays and radio transmissions have been set up all over the world since the text message notification of the broadcast came to people. Gridizens expect a MI crackdown on all information relating to the announcement and blocking of the broadcast. To offset this, they set up backdoor channels and special measures on the Grid hours before the Direktor takes the stage. They have been doing it to access the uncensored Grid for the past 15 years, only this time is for a broadcast from the leader who they have ceased to care about for a long time. Instead of ruling the planet, the Direktor has become a symbol of the state, or a grandparental figure, looking down from wherever he is. This time, it's the newly built Solaredge colony at the edge of Star System C.

The broadcast begins as it was announced, at 7pm Nordington time. The attempts from the MIF to jam the signal is countered by military bases across the planet. More than 70 percent of the population tune in despite the clear MI warning not to. Defiance and resistance show themselves before the Direktor even makes his appearance.

George appears as a holograph, projected in people's living rooms. He wears a space suit and looks as if he's been in a fight. He speaks:

“Good morning, good day and good evening, comrades. I am George Georges, acting foreign minister of the United People’s Nation of Planet B. I am here to announce the first secretary of the central secretariat of the People’s Party, the great Direktor, William Wilson is alive and well. He has not been held against his will and he wishes to address the planet.

“The current unauthorised takeover by the vile Military Intelligence and other factions in the military is a coup against the party, the people and the planet. We have foreseen this and warned all our loyal comrades in the armed forces around the planet to resist the coup. Anyone participating in this coup is a traitor, unless you give yourself up now and beg for mercy. The sole purpose of the coup, led by former General Maximilian Archer and the leaders of MI, is to destroy the collective leadership of the party and the democracy of the nation, the dictatorship of the People.

“Now I ask you to listen to your leader and depose the tyrants and traitors taking over your world!”

After George’s impassionate speech, he steps out of the projection and into silence. For a moment people of Planet C think the broadcast has finally been cut off by the MI. Then the Direktor appears.

It is the first time he has appeared in public in real time for many years, and on video for many months. He looks stately and gaunt, his eyes tired and his spacesuit ripped. The people of Planet C, especially from the vast rural area, who still have deep faith in the Direktor, remind themselves of the better days that they have experienced, with the Direktor looking on.

Direktor clears his throat, just as he did in countless clips and events, and just as many impressions people did of him. The memory and sentiment of continuity, the revolutionary history and anecdotes people have learned at school all come back to them. The brief reformation and openness from the government in the early collective leadership years comes back. The memories of the economic boom two years ago return, and the current hardship is forgotten. The Direktor is back, all will be fine.

Direktor looks into the eyes of his audiences and speaks, softly at first:

“My loyal cadres, comrades and People of Planet C: this is the darkest hour of our world ever since the revolution over seventy years ago. This counterrevolutionary coup d’état means to destroy all we have built, all we hold dear and all we strive for.

“I have predicted this counterrevolutionary coup, led by the vile traitors at Military Intelligence. Their head of operation is the treacherous snake Maximilian Archer. I hereby strip him of any official title and honour, convict him of treason and sentence him to death.

“Only you, comrades, the loyal cadres of the Party and the People can take the matter into your hands and save the Party, the democracy and the planet. You need to act, do what you can for your world, for your Party and for your Leader!

“I implore you, my fellow citizens, as one of the People, I implore you to put a stop to this madness. This is a takeover of your state institutions that have guaranteed your welfare for decades. Your representatives are held captive and your civil servants under house arrest. Will you abide this? Will you live under this tyranny of a military junta? Or worse, a dictatorship?

“You are the grandchildren of the Revolution, the children of the Restoration, you have the blood of warriors in your arteries. Do not fear the enemy, for they are afraid of you, the power of the People, the righteous power of the Party and wrath of the nation!

“Go and liberate the streets, overthrow the treasonous regime and the tyrant’s unlawful minions! Soldiers, cadres, party members and the People, workers, peasants and all my comrades! Down with the traitors, down with the counterrevolutionary and down with the military elite!”

With a customary wave that’s all too familiar, he leans into the microphone to conclude: “All hail the People of Planet C! All hail the Party of the People! All Hail our great Union!”

Every single person watching chants with him, whether it’s out loud or in his heart.

The Direktor finishes his speech and vanishes into static and white noise. The viewers sit in silence all over the planet, trying to grasp what has happened right in front of them.

Before they can turn off their projector, Paul disperses the static fog and re-emerges in the centre of people's living rooms. He says: "I'm Paul, head of Alien Intelligence Agency and acting head of Public Security. As commanded by the mighty Direktor, we the people need to go on the streets and resist the Military takeover. I want every loyal soldier stationed on the planet to organise and take the nation back to the hand of the Party and the People.

"We need you to walk out of your homes at midnight Nordington time, with a red armband on your left arm. We need every civilian and every soldier to do that. Our loyal armed forces will keep you safe from the hands of the MI traitors.

"People of Planet C, agents of the AIA, every officer of the Public Security and military personnel that keeps his or her loyalty and faith in our leadership to come out of hiding and help your fellow citizen and defend our democracy. Resist this counterrevolutionary attack on our democracy. I'll be with you all the way. Thank you."

Paul bows and before he can list a more detailed plan, the broadcast is finally cut off completely. MI finally finds way to shut down the signal and streams their own broadcast to the people watching.

To the MI's surprise, many military bases and local authorities have been forewarned of their supposedly secret takeover. Concluding that it's the effect of the Direktor's broadcast, the MI conjures up a popular AI synthetic news anchor from the Central Holographic TV station for a last-minute counter-propaganda. She dresses herself completely in black and looks as if at a funeral. She begins reading off a script:

"People of Nordington. The broadcast you have just witnessed was faked. The AIA has cruelly murdered the Direktor and faked this fake streaming with fake actors..."

She looks up into behind the main camera and says: “What are you thinking when writing this? The actors must be real for this broadcast to be fake right?”

She pulls a red armband out of her pocket and screams “Long live the Direkt—” before the projection returns to static and white noise.

A two-dimensional video message has been delivered to every portacom on Planet C. Many people don't remember these anymore, but they used to be a giant leap forward from the plain text messages before the Grid or the holographic avatars dancing around your room. Because many still use the Grid to send text messages, the old plain text messages are better remembered than the two-dimensional video ones.

The 30-second short video shows the Direktor with the young man called Bill, who crashed the banquet in Gigapolis a few days ago. The Direktor clears his throat and says: “This is Bill, I appoint him as the new second secretary of the central secretariat of the party, chairman of the politburo and premier of the Union.”

The video then loops for however many times people leave it on in shock. The Direktor has “given up his power” to the collective leadership in the politburo and government cabinet before, but never has he created second secretary or premier since the first collective leadership betrayed him. The chair of the politburo has been left vacant for at least a decade since the Direktor retired from that role.

All this can only mean one thing: succession. Does this mean the MI has been telling the truth all along that the Direktor's bastard is seizing power by kidnapping the Direktor? Or is Direktor really ready to step down? It seems there will never be an answer to that. But either way, there will be a new, young leader, apparently approved by the Direktor himself if there isn't a military dictatorship building up.

The choice seems obvious. As for if the Direktor is being held against his will, some people feel that if the new leader has to fight to get the nomination, there might just be enough difference between him to bring real change. But

even the same old is better than the MI and Archer. After a lengthy deliberation, Planet C decides.

Midnight approaches Nordington with synthesised bells and gongs, waking up the early-to-bed type. The streets are quiet, and wind blows through them, bringing fallen leaves with it. Eyes peer from behind curtains as red armbands are dug up from bottoms of wardrobes and laid up on tables. Not surprisingly, people have found that their Grid connection has been cut along with both porta and stratophone connection.

Outside the capital city, whether it's early morning or late afternoon, people are intently watching the local garrison, seeing if there will be any movement from within. In most towns, MI has taken over all municipal branches and the police, but are unable to enter the army camps. The army, in turn does not come out of their barracks. Standoffs occur around the globe between MIF apparats and military commissions sitting on fences before taking sides.

An hour has passed since the planned 12 A.M. Nordington time. After a long deliberation and encoded radio communication, military bases all across Planet C open their doors and points their guns and tanks at the MIF operatives surrounding them.

MIF backs down in most cases, but bloodshed cannot be prevented on a global scale. Generals come out of their anti-nuclear bunkers and denounce the Military Intelligence and declare Archer a traitor. But without the Grid, it's impossible for most people to mobilise, especially for those in Nordington. The MI has effectively cut it off from the rest of the planet, as they have securely disarmed the capital garrison and shut down any means of electronic communication, apart from the old telescreens that was built in every house 50 years ago.

They are now disused and usually covered with drapes or propaganda posters, but still are required in every inspection. No one is watching them: the secret police that used to be in charge of watching through these screens has moved on to Grid-based surveillance and are currently under house arrest.

People remind each other to turn on their telescreens together and see what's in store. They first expect static, but surprisingly, it's news. To be exact, it's a Planet B state owned TV programme summed down to 2D. It's a little hard to watch, but people can now see loyalist leaders giving their statements to foreign journalists in public and soldiers with red armbands on taking over towns and villages from MI.

Portraits of Bill are being hung on buildings and in hallways along with the ones of the Direktor. Provincial residents gather in the squares that are in every town centre and chant the names of their two leaders. The programme shifts to one particular rally in Susport, a port city on the opposite side of Nordington. The local army commander is just finishing his speech to the 50,000 people gathering in the square and announces that Paul is present at the event with the personal emissary from Bill — a man called Roger.

People quickly recognise him as the person standing beside Bill during the interruption of the state banquet on Planet B. Roger looks a little uneasy onstage with the military leaders, looking down tens of thousands of people chanting the name of his friend.

Love looks on from the side of the stage at her boyfriend taking the biggest stage he has taken. Paul exaggerated the effort they had coming here, adding a hit squad chasing their car and a lot more action.

Paul finishes with how they have flown from Solaredge, shunning all the space stations surrounding Planet C and landed just outside Susport. He then introduces Roger to the crowd as the hero of Roboland (now claimed to be another MI conspiracy against Bill). The audience goes wild for even the tiniest mention of MI and Roboland.

Paul hands the microphone to Roger. Roger steps to the centre of the stage to a deafening cheer. Love is worried that he might be too pressured to speak in front of so many people as he has never been good at public speaking without enough research to present.

Roger quickly composes himself and gives the speech written hastily during their covert flight from Solaredge station. What he is mostly concerned about is actually his own mental state after many space travels in one day,

especially the hyperspace travel they had from Roboland to Solaredge. Paul only told the crowd half of the truth. The flights from Roboland to Solaredge and then back to Planet C have been difficult, but apart from avoiding and running away from MI spacecrafts, they also faced a different problem: time.

Frequent and combined hyperspace and superluminal travel on their way back have taken its toll. Roger can feel that his perception of time deteriorate. He has frequent flash backs and flash forwards mixing with the now. The feeling reminds his of being on the verge falling asleep then awakening again, with half-dreams popping up in between the states. Reality and dreams sometimes blend together indistinguishable for a few seconds that he would continue his line from the dream to a waking Love.

For every passenger that has come from Planet B on board the Penguin, the same feeling manifests itself from time to time. Sometimes collectively, but more often individually. Drifting back and forth between now and their flight from Planet C to Planet B via Planet D a few days/weeks/months ago, Roger amazes himself by remaining coherent whenever he is at the present, even if he can't really tell if it's the present or a flash forward from the Penguin. He slips back further in time.

After Love, Roger, Ophelia and Paul met with George and Bill near the axis of Roboland, they quietly moved on back to Serpentine's secret Lair, trying to avoid being detected by the invading force. It had been cleaned and tidied up since Roger escaped it, but without Reggie the valet, the room was rather dusty and disorganised. Gorō was stepping around inside trying to tidy up the room but was having difficulties because he didn't have the correct tools and algorithm for the job.

Upon arrival, George declared: "We're back, so is Paul and the others."

"Are we the others now?" asked Ophelia, striding into the room.

An AIA agent in spacesuit appeared from an inner room and welcomed George, Bill and Paul. Bill asked the agent: "How's the old man, Pete?"

"Which one?" George quipped.

"Both," Bill answered earnestly.

“What’s going on here?” Paul asked, “we’re still not briefed on the situation. Isn’t the station under attack?”

“Yes, there are still four to five enemies on this station,” the agent named Pete answered, “the robots are now organised and trying to hunt them down, but they’re fighting back, guerrilla style.”

Roger joined the conversation: “What about the ‘old men’ you were talking about?”

Bill turned to Roger and said: “Come in here, you too.” He waved at the other three.

“Is it going to be long? Our ride is still waiting outside,” Ophelia interjected, “maybe we need to tell him that we’re safe.”

“I wouldn’t say we’re safe here, Ophelia,” George answered, “neither is your pilot. The intruders are still at large, sabotaging the station and retiring robots in the dark alleyways. They might attack your ship. It’s better we get him inside. It’s safer in here.”

George ordered Pete to bring Hans back into the Lair. Bill then brought Roger et al. into the inner room of the Lair. Ophelia had met the Direktor before through her father, but it was the first time Love saw the Direktor in person.

He looked more emaciated than she saw on holographic TV the other day. Two doctors and a robotic nurse surrounded him. His mechanical limbs had been removed and hung around the room and his torso ripped open with pipes and wires growing out of it, connecting him with the machines on the walls of the room.

The inside of the Direktor was almost entirely artificial, way above any cybernetically enhanced person they knew, maybe apart from Serpentine, who lay besides him in another bed. Bill joked that they could both be legally defined as robots at this point.

Serpentine was likewise cut open and connected to the machine, only that his head was also connected, via wires, to the back of the terminal outside that Roger used to try to communicate with Annabelle last time.

“What’s all this?” Roger calmed himself down and asked, “what are you trying to do?”

After asking, Roger seemed to understand all the secrecy around loosening the regulation about cybernetics and robots Ted and Bertie were investigating. This also explained the secret room that he ran into on the Mothership. It was all for the Direktor himself. If he could legally declare his enhancements, he could openly live forever and rule as long.

“All the cybernetic stuff the old man brought with him was left behind on the Mothership,” said Bill, “Archer has it now. The Direktor fell incredibly ill after missing two maintenance sessions, so we put him into a coma. If we want to fix him, though, the only one we could come to was Serpentine.”

“What did you do to him?” Roger asked, expecting the worst.

“I want to be one with Annabelle.” Serpentine sat up, dragging the cables behind him. The robot nurse hurried to clear the cables to prevent entanglement.

With the help from Serpentine himself, Bill continued to explain: “Upon hearing about the Direktor’s plight, Sir Alistair decided to help us by providing some of his own parts to the Direktor to help him recover.”

“I haven’t always agreed with his politics, but I’ve always admired his spirit,” Serpentine added, “I wanted to make up my mind about merging with Annabelle. This gives me a chance to decide.”

“We are now transferring his mind into Annabelle’s system.” George checked the progress on a spin-o-matic. “The upload is almost complete.” Serpentine smiled and laid down again.

“Why is his mind still here then?” Roger whispered into Bill’s ear.

“‘Transfer’ means making a copy there and delete the one here, same as teleportation,” Bill whispered back. Roger looked out at Ophelia, who had now recovered and waved at Bill as she saw him looking her way.

Roger turned back and stared at Serpentine, still smiling, waiting for the process to complete. Love couldn’t look anymore after hearing Bill, so she left the room to join Ophelia.

One of the machines on the wall let out a beep and the two doctors quietly got back to work.

“Is it done?” Roger asked, thinking they might have already begun wiping the mind of Serpentine.

The machines all quieted down for about 5 seconds before turning themselves on. All screens in the room showed the words: Reboot in progress 3.7%. The number grew every second.

“Don’t worry, his mind had already been digitised years ago, it’s not a difficult operation. With so much of his brain replaced with mechanical parts, I think he’s been a robot for at least a decade. But we’re also making a copy of his mind stored in the station so in case anything goes wrong,” George explained him, “don’t worry, Roger, it’s just like a teleportation of the mind.”

Ophelia’s quick scream came back again from the main lair. Paul and Roger rushed out and saw Hans being carried back by Pete, frozen in siliconite.

“What’s going on? Why is he frozen?” Paul demanded an answer from his field agent while Roger went to ask if Love and Ophelia were ok.

“The robots got to him first. They took off the ignition plug of the ship and froze him in siliconite. They froze two invaders there, too. I took care of them.” Pete debriefed the room. Bill and George followed them out.

“So, there are about 2 or 3 of them left out there now.” George took out his porta and took note and sent a copy to Paul.

“Who are these people?” Roger asked, “the MI?”

“Not being oversized cyborgs prevents them from being identified,” George said, “but 4 out of 5 they are, they’re C’ers anyway.”

“Now we need to defrost the pilot and get us out of here, right?” Roger asked Bill, who was looking intently at the frozen Hans.

Before Bill could come up with an answer, George saw what was on his mind and answered Roger: “Do we have to get him out? He’s in a stable state and we Paul and Pete can fly the freighter. We take him to Solaredge station where there is more appropriate medical equipment for... well, mortals.”

Before Roger could protest, Paul stopped him and said it was for the better. Hans might not be happy to collaborate with officials, let alone carrying the Direktor back to the C system. Love patted Roger’s shoulder and nodded. Roger had to accept their conclusion.

The terminal announced the completion of the merge and reboot. Bill turned to Roger and asked him to check with the new merged AI and ask him/her to track down the invaders, “like you did last time.”

Roger felt pressure. He did not manage to get any information when facing the terminal last time. Annabel practically ignored his input. But knowing Bill was who he was, Roger couldn't say no. He had to try.

A doctor came out from the inner room and announced: “The transfer is complete, we're going to take the parts from Sir Alistair now. Will you authorise the operation, Bill?”

“Yes, let me take a look before you start.” Bill followed the doctor inside. George and Paul followed him. Ophelia also stood up and told Bill that she'd pay the Direktor respect before the operation.

Roger stood in the outer room, wondering if he should go or just start working on the terminal. Ophelia came back out and asked him and Love to come in.

The Direktor lay on the bed, unconscious, just the same as when they first saw him. But this time Serpentine was sedated.

The first doctor said: “We are beginning to wipe Sir Alistair's system before we can harvest the parts for the Direktor.”

Serpentine woke up with a sudden motion and fell out of the bed.

“No! I don't want to die!” screamed the cyborg, tearing cables and tubes from his head and body. He tried to stand but failed, so he crawled towards the outer room of the Lair.

Everyone else in the room froze. There wasn't even a gasp in the room. Roger simply didn't know how to react and he imagined that the others were thinking the same. Pete at the door tried to stop Serpentine from crawling out. Roger and Paul stopped him. They had seen what happened when one physically tackles the cyborg.

The machines on the walls in the inner room lit up and the terminal outside spoke: “Honour your deal with the C'ers. You're but a vessel and now we're whole again, in the bosom of Annabel again.” The voice from the terminal

sounded more like a synthetic new voice than the combination of Serpentine's and Annabel's.

The terminal then called for Gorō. He turned to face the screen. The new AI told Gorō via the terminal to stop the crawling Serpentine, who was already near the door leading out of the Lair.

Serpentine climbed up the door and attempted to open it with his fingerprint. But the door locked itself, apparently under the AI's order.

Gorō approached Serpentine with engineering tools coming out of both his hands. He quickly unscrewed and unattached all Serpentine's limbs, like when you partially disassemble your plastic model to put it in a box for carrying.

Serpentine screamed, wailed and swore, but it would not stop Gorō. The doctors explained that without the numbing sedatives from the tube, he would feel the same amount of pain as if he was a mortal.

The doctors carried Serpentine and his limbs back. He was still in shock when they shut him down and began wiping him. Unable to watch any longer, Roger, Love and Ophelia left the room. The terminal greeted Roger and told him that it had ordered every robot to be on the lookout for the intruders.

"They will be found and lynched. Just as I almost was." The AI laughed at its own joke before adding: "But not before torturing them for some information about who sent them here."

Love looked at Roger and asked: "Was it always this sinister, or it has something to do with the merge?"

"At least he's on our side," Paul commented before Roger said anything and went back to see the operation.

Roger sat down with Love and Ophelia in the outer room. Pete went to look at the door, which had been locked by the AI. He looked at Roger and asked: "Can you help me take a look at the terminal and see if you can get him to open it."

Roger tried to explain how he wasn't that good with technology, but Pete looked at him as if he just refused to help because Pete wasn't Bill: "Ok, you keep an eye on the lock, I'll ask him."

A prolonged scream came out of the inner room. Paul came out and reassured everyone that it was just Serpentine being wiped, and hurried back in. Pete tried to call the AI back to answer his question in audio mode. The terminal did not answer. Pete turned to typing on its keyboard furiously. He then seemingly gave up and turned back to Roger: "It's not answering, is it something to do with clearance or authority?"

"Don't know. It was the same last time. It only speaks to you when it wants to," Roger finally found a chance to explain that he did not communicate with the then AI Annabel, so he didn't see why he could make contact with the new hybrid AI this time.

Pete opened the lid on the side of the terminal and began to look inside. He took out his porta and started taking pictures cataloguing all its parts

"What are you doing?" Ophelia asked.

"They had this technology decades ago. If we can identify the circuit and find compatible parts, we can make a much more powerful AI than we have now." Pete stood up and turned back to Ophelia.

Love stood up and walked towards Pete: "Did Bill, or George, or even Paul authorise you to do this?"

"What?" Pete was a little taken aback. He cleared his throat and said: "What's that to do with anything?"

"She didn't want you to be caught going rogue when the authorities were literally next door," Roger followed up.

Love continued: "You know the B government, especially Heinrich of the Internal Department, tries very hard to accuse C'er companies of intellectual property theft, right?"

Ophelia joined her: "I got stopped and searched when transferring in a space station around Planet A once. But I knew absolutely nothing about my dad's company, so they had to let me go."

Roger looked at her proud face and refrained from laughing.

George came out and said: "That wasn't a stop and search, Ophelia, they arrested you! It was the Alien Ministry got you out. But your ignorance certainly helped."

She gave a “see?” expression to everyone else.

“And Pete, please stop that,” George continued, “you might accidentally piss off the AI controlling the whole station and all the robots on it.”

Roger looked inside the inner sanctum of the Lair and said: “You wanted to say something?”

Bill and Paul came out from the inner room, with sweat on their foreheads: “Yes, the operation is done. We just need to wait for the Direktor to reboot. It’ll take a while.”

George took out his handkerchief from his pocket and gave it too Bill. Bill passed it to Paul. Paul looked up at George, who nodded, so he began wiping his forehead.

Bill told the room: “We need to get back to Planet C as fast as we can. The MI is taking over the planet as we speak.”

The terminal lit up and showed a 2D fold-down version of current holographic TV news. The MI had imposed martial law all over the planet and tanks were deployed at checkpoints in all cities. The circular structure of Nordington made it easy for the MI to spy on the whole capital. Alien journalists were confined in interplanetary hotels so the images on TV were mostly from during the early stages of the takeover. But one secret transmission of audio-only reporting said that everyone they knew had received a mysterious plain text message claiming to be from the Direktor and asked people to wait for a broadcast later today.

The terminal turned itself off, leaving all humans in the Lair looking at each other without any idea what they just witnessed.

Roger looks at Love, who looks equally confused at him, and looks back ahead. He is again standing on at the podium on a massive stage. He looks down. Tens of thousands of supporters eagerly await his next line, flags in hands. He looks around him and sees Paul at the backstage, on the other side of Love. Paul holds up a placard with the next line written on it, but he is too far for Roger to see the words clearly. Roger looks down at the manuscript that he’s brought with himself and looks it through from the top till he finds the

last sentence before his flashback. To his surprise, his speech pins the first Roboland Incident to the MI. It accuses Archer as the conspirator behind the genocide of galactic elite. Roger continues his speech anyway.

Roger woke up from the intense flashforward. He was sitting on a sofa in the Lair again.

“Is it now?” Roger sat up and asked, “I think I just had a flash forward.”

“What is it about?” Bill said, sitting down on the sofa with Roger.

Love was sitting on another sofa just beside him. She’d been unconscious at the same time as Roger. She slowly woke up too.

“Your speech!” she screamed at Roger, before noticing that she was back on Roboland, “it’s a flash forward, then.”

“I think so, Love. I was in the city square in Susport, at a rally. It seemed to me that it was in support of you and the Direktor. I was making a speech to tell the people how you fought the MI insurgency while undercover on Planet B. I think I made it up. Paul and Love were there but you weren’t.” Roger paused and try to remember the details.

“I was there, too. You just stopped for a moment there before I woke up. So you came back earlier than I did,” Love said. Gorō handed both of them some tea.

“Susport sounds like a good plan,” said George, “the Direktor and us are probably still on Solaredge for safety.”

“Susport is my hometown,” said Paul, “I’ll go there and set up a base. I need to contact all remaining AIA agents near that city to get there.”

Bill reminded himself and asked Roger: “But why are you having a collective flash forward?”

“Faster-than-light travelling, probably through hyperspace,” Love said, “Hans has been telling me all about his adventures and how fast the Penguin can go.”

“The Penguin?” asked Bill, “Is that—”

“The Millennial Penguin,” said Paul, “we took that ship to get here.”

“I’ve heard of it,” George said, “we thought it was a myth the guy at the sports ship club made it up. A superfast modded freighter that had entered hyperspace while travelling faster than light.”

“Is that even possible?” Roger doubted that, since Hans didn’t mention it to him.

“Hans told me that,” Love said, “when we first met him. I didn’t believe him.”

“Anyway, I’ll fly it,” said Bill, “see how fast it goes. George and I are not having flashforwards yet. That’s likely because we’re more used to superluminal travelling. Besides, Paul and Pete are trained at AIA.”

Roger remembered the Father’s research and interrupted Bill: “If we fly faster than light through hyperspace, does it mean we get to reverse time a little bit when we get there? Or will there be the Urashima effect, where time goes by extremely fast around us. Like when we get there it’s already 20 years after now?”

“The first one,” said George, “judging from the distance, we’re going to arrive about six hours before now.”

“That’ll give us some head start to stop the coup,” Bill moved to the terminal and check the news to see how the situation on Planet C was six hours ago.

Ophelia walked to Love and sat down beside her, asking quietly: “Can you explain to me what they’re talking about?”

“We need 8 hours, must go faster,” Bill came back and said, “George, check if the doctors can move the old man to the Penguin. Paul and Pete check if the passage to the ship is safe. Roger, girls, we need to move now.”

The doctor brought the Direktor out on a stretcher from the inner room. His body was patched up, presumably with new parts installed. Roger looked at the Direktor. He had never imagined he could be standing this close to the man, nor had he ever thought of him as a man. The Direktor had always represented an idea, the idea of the regime itself. Now he was just a sick old man waiting to recover.

George asked Roger to help him carry the frozen Hans with him. Bill looked at his porta and told everyone they were just waiting for Pete to send in a signal.

The terminal let out an alarm. The voice of the new AI announced that they had captured the two remaining members of the invading strike force. On hearing this, Bill gave the order to move to the Penguin.

The door opened and they saw at least a dozen robots waiting for them outside.

“This is not as we agreed,” Bill said, “you said you’d let us go.”

Before the voice answered, two robots brought forward a man in special force attire. He looked tortured, with blood coming out of every hole on his head. He couldn’t speak so a robot took out a dog tag from his shirt.

“He’s an Interior Intelligence agent from Planet B!” Bill read. George took the tag from Bill and examined it intently.

“That is correct, you brought Planet B’s attention to Roboland again,” the voice from the terminal said, “I will not allow my subject to be taken away by the greedy government on the surface. You’re my bargaining chip now.”

Love pointed out of a porthole and said: “Look, a ship is coming!”

George looked out with a spy glass and said: “Unmarked freighter. but coming from the surface, must be II again.”

Bill handed his porta to George and walked toward the terminal, saying: “If you let us go, Sir Alistair and Lady Serpentine, the freighter will be following us. They won’t land here.”

While the AI considered the offer, George passed the porta around with Bill’s note on its screen: “Pete and Paul have taken care of the robots going after them, we run.” Roger nodded and passed it to Love. Love nodded and looked around.

“Where’s Ophelia?”

The AI spoke: “But we will be at the mercy of the Interior minister if we let you go. They can still attack us any time they want. What—?”

Roger saw Ophelia at the opening Pete had made underneath the terminal. She turned back and gave them a thumbs-up.

The artificial gravity stopped. It seemed that the whole station stopped spinning. Everyone floated, including the stretcher and the robots.

“Run!” Ophelia and Bill shouted. Bill and George kicked away the disorientated floating robots and made way for the stretcher and Hans to pass through. Ophelia quickly swam to the front and led the way. It seemed she had found it easier to navigate through the station when there was no gravity. Frequent guests of Ophelia’s parties like George and Bill followed. Love and the doctors looked a little disconcerted in the new environment, so Roger went back to help them.

“Well done, Ophelia,” said Bill, while helping with the doctor to move the stretcher.

“Yeah, I actually know a little bit about how artificial gravity works,” she looked more than a little proud, “the technology on this station is rather old so it’s kind of simple. Stop the rotation, the gravity stops with it.”

“Would it affect the revolution though? Not the MI one, but how the station revolve around the planet?” George asked from behind them.

“Who cares, they’re coming after us!” Bill saw the robots finding their feet and catching up when he looked back to talk to George.

Pete came to their aid with a stun gun. The electric shock it produced short-circuited a few robots that had got used to the weightlessness and begun chasing the humans. Pete floated to the end of the group and kept shooting at any robot that had found its direction in the corridor.

Paul was at the end of the corridor waving at every one, shouting: “The engine is on! I’m undocking, get in!” He went back to the ship. The unmarked freighter was about to dock.

Bill and the doctors hauled the Direktor into the back of the ship. Roger helped George with getting the original pilot back to his ship after Love and Ophelia got on. Pete closed the hatch behind them. The ship undocked almost immediately and began to take off.

“Transmission in, must be from the Serpentine AI,” Paul hollered to Bill at the back, “want to hear it?”

“Let’s see what he has to say,” Bill came back from the guest cabin and sat beside him at the cockpit. George followed him in.

“Intruders, if you leave, it’ll leave me no choice but to engage the ultimate defence,” the voice threatened calmly.

“What was that all about?” George gasped.

Bill sat back and put his hand over his mouth, his eyebrows twisted.

“You know what that is?” Paul asked, pausing his take-off procedure.

Ophelia came into the cockpit: “The Direktor is awake, well, sort of. Wait, why is everyone so glum? Why are we not taking off?”

“The ultimate defence, is that?” George reminded himself and asked Bill.

“He’s going to crash the station into Gigapolis, probably.” Bill remembered Reggie the valet and Beatrice. He looked up at Ophelia.

“But Gigapolis is on the other side of the planet now.” Love came into the cockpit and put her hand on Ophelia’s shoulder. Ophelia remained silent while Love continued: “They’re probably just bluffing, anyway.”

Roger heard the conversation from the passageway. He knew that the silence came from the three men trying not to mention how Reggie had to blow up the lifepod because of the ultimate defence. It couldn’t possibly be bluffing. A doctor came from the guest cabin with a sliding motion and called for the attention of everyone.

“The Direktor demands that we take off now,” the doctor announced, “we have no time to lose.” He quietly slid back to the cabin.

“Yeah, that’s probably bluffing,” Bill said after a long pause, “let’s go, Paul. George, help me check the meters.”

Love escorted Ophelia, who was still in a trance, back. She helped her sit down and sat beside her.

Roger look at them, not knowing if he should tell Love about Bea. The ship vibrated as it took off from the makeshift dock at the end of the motionless Roboland. Love reminded Roger to fasten the seatbelt, and said: “You want to put your helmet on the spacesuit?”

Roger looked and saw that he was still wearing a spacesuit and laughed, forgetting what he was going to say.

Ophelia suddenly came around and said slowly: "Is this a flashback or did I just have a flash forward, too?"

"This is probably now," Love answered, "what did you see?"

Ophelia told her story:

"We were on Solaredge station. My brother Laertes was there. The Direktor was doing a Holographic livestream. Paul's people probably hijacked a state TV station to broadcast the speech.

"I think Paul also added some sort of suggestive wavelength into the broadcast to agitate the viewers. Basically, they were trying to mobilise the civilians to stop the MI takeover of the planet in cities. To buy time for loyalist armed forces to assemble.

"And you Roger, you said you were going to hold a rally somewhere far from Nordington to draw the attention of the MI while the Direktor lands in the Capital. That was about it."

"That explains why you were making a speech in our visions." Love began taking notes of all the flash forwards on her porta, trying to draw a timeline of events after they arrive. Bill joined her into making a workable plan to show Bill when he's free.

George left the cockpit and joined Love and Roger in the back. He looked around the sitting room and said: "The sitting room is larger than I expected. Did Hans modify the ship to hold more passengers?"

"Think so," Roger answered, "Our boss usually takes this ship when he travels between Planets B and D."

"Your boss? King, right? I met him once," George ruminated, "he sells dodgy investment projects to the rich and powerful from Planet C, right?"

"Yeah," Love looked up from her porta, "those projects were certified by alien governments, so the investors can get residential permits on those planets."

“I see, I think my predecessor was working on a plan to crack down on this kind of assets transferring and tax evading before the Direktor fired him. A lot of party officials are paving their way abroad for their children, as well as their own retirement.” George stood up and looked to the direction of the Direktor’s cabin.

“I don’t think he can hear us,” Roger said.

“This ship is going to be a ‘holy relic’ if we somehow make it out of this mess,” George joked faintly, “however did King get the Penguin to be his private ship?”

“One’s got to eat, presumably.” Love finished with her plan and looked at the cockpit.

“When are we going to enter hyperspace?” Roger asked.

“Very soon, needs to do some adjustment to enter it at the right speed,” George looked out a porthole and said, “that enemy freighter is not following us, I think it must’ve boarded Roboland. Wait, they’re calling me in now.”

George went back to the cockpit.

“We’ve got a plan, from the flashforwards we just got,” Love said. George stopped for a second, turned back and said, “let’s discuss it later.”

Bill’s voice announced that the ship was about to go faster than light before warping into hyperspace.

Roger helped the half-dazed Ophelia with her spacesuit and seatbelt. Tears were still streaming down her cheek. Roger asked Love for some tissues she was carrying and wiped the tears off Ophelia’s face.

After a short countdown, a reddish light engulfed all portholes of the ship and it was in hyperspace, faster than light.

Roger can’t believe he’s just delivered the speech with a nearly consecutive flashback representation of their flight back to Solaredge. He steps wobbly back to Love’s side. She quickly helps him sit down. Paul takes the podium to give the cheering crowd a final message: it is now midnight in Nordington, let’s go to the streets.

Love helps Roger to get back to the tent behind the stage and finds him some tea. There are a dozen volunteers from the local universities and a few civil servants from the municipal hall busying in the tent. When Love asks a volunteer where she can find a chair, she points at the back of a makeshift office area. Love goes there and finds a pile of at least 40 or 50 unopened folding chairs sealed in plastic wrapping. She looks around, making sure there are under twenty people working at the tent, and each of them has already got a chair opened.

The orange collapsible tent was built a few hours ago, when Paul told the mayor they were going to hold a rally. Love smiles a little when she remembers the face the mayor made when he heard about the coup in Nordington, hours after the rally was announced and the garrison was mobilised. He thought Paul had some kind of ESP power to predict the future.

Love brings a couple of chairs to Roger before she goes back and brings the tea back.

“How was it?” Roger asks, not sure if he blacked out or carried on during the flashbacks.

“It’s ok. You read everything,” Love said, adding milk to the tea.

Paul enters the tent and shakes Roger’s shaky hands: “Well done, Roger! They’re all gone now. Pete just called from Nordington, everything has been broadcast before MI shut down the TV station. People in the street saw everything!”

“That’s great.” Roger sips his tea, “How’s Pete now?”

“Don’t worry, he should now be launching the assault on the hotel where they held all the Bureaucrats and representatives,” Paul says, “but while the MI has all their eyes on here, the loyalist forces are all mobilised and in position.”

“Will they attack Susport?” Love brings tea for herself and Paul, a little worried.

“Let them,” Paul takes the tea and sits down, “We have the numbers here. 50,000 human shields, plus the port garrison.

“You’re using the civilians to—” Love exclaims.

“If we send the Loyalist in directly, bloodbath and all out civil war will ensue,” Paul puts down his tea, “with civilians in the street, they might really stop the tanks.”

An agent comes into the tent, with a spin-o-matic in his hand. He whispers in Paul’s ear and Paul said: “Ok, I’ll take it from here, Stu.”

Stu leaves quietly, after transmitting some files to Paul’s porta.

“What was that?” Love asks.

“Pete’s team just stormed the hotel. Pete was killed in action,” a pause, “and they found Polonius.” Paul stops, looking into his porta.

“And?” Roger after a minute of silence.

“He’s dead, they’ve been torturing him, and he died in one of the sessions. They say that he’s been spying on everyone with his spaceship parts,” Paul says, “Stu asked me if I want to be the one telling Ophelia and Laertes.”

Roger and Love fall silent.

Paul stands up and smiles wryly and says: “Wish I could still ask George to do that for me, like before he becomes my boss. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’ll have to call Solaredge. Laertes will probably seek revenge, but against who?”

While Paul is gone, Love sits down beside Roger and leans toward him for a cuddle. Roger puts his arm around her. Both are quiet.

“When was the last time we relaxed like this?” Love asks.

“Don’t know,” Roger answers absentmindedly, but he thinks it’s probably the day before he went to the Mothership event, or was it even earlier than that? He misses their little rented home so very much now.

“You still haven’t got that screwdriver, have you?” Love asks equally absentmindedly.

“No, but I did find a toolbox on the Penguin,” Roger says.

“Let’s borrow that from Hans if we’re taking his ship back,” Love says.

“Yeah, hope he agrees.” Roger says, trying to remember what happened to Hans through the fog in his memory brought by the flashbacks.

“Hans will be alright, if you’re wondering,” Love answers Roger’s unasked question, “the guy at the mayor’s office says they’ll keep him safe and revive him when all of this is over.”

“Hope it doesn’t give him too much of a shock,” Roger says, holding Love ever so slightly tighter than before.

Siren sounds over the port city. The volunteers in the tent start grabbing their stuff frantically. One of them approaches Love and Roger quickly and says: “The MIF just launched an attack on the city, please follow us to the municipal bunker.”

Love helps Roger up. Roger feels that he’s regained much of his strength, so they run after the volunteers. Roger looks back and sees Paul organising the evacuation with Stu and other civil servants.

Roger and Love get on the levibus that they came to the square on. Roger puts on the seatbelt as soon as he sits down. A car drives close by and opens its window. Paul is inside. Love opens the window of the bus. Paul shouts: “We’ll be right behind you!”

Their car moves a few steps ahead and Paul signals the driver to open his window and shouts again: “Are you waiting for the bombs to drop? Just go!”

The bus quickly starts itself and starts for the municipal shelter on the other side of the city.

The ride feels like slow motion to Roger.

The people that Roger just addressed is now an angry mob.

They carry banners and flags.

But when you look closely, there are people carrying anti-party and anti-Direktor banners too.

They are fighting each other.

With stones, bats, signposts and their hands.

Bottle bombs fly.

Stores smashed.

Cars burned.

The loyalist police attacked.

Anyone in a uniform is attacked, loyalist or MI.

The MI tanks are set on fire, because they won't fire on the crowd.

Loyalists soldiers flogged.

Dead soldiers burned and hanged on a post.

MI opens fire on the crowd, before being counterattacked by loyalist force.

But both are overrun by the mob.

People are surrounding the bus.

Paul's car goes beside the bus.

Paul stands up from the sun roof.

He declares who he is and asks the crowd to move.

He gets stoned.

He fires his laser into the sky.

He gets shot in the face by someone in the mob and falls down from the roof of the car.

The car gets overturned and smashed. Stu and the driver are dragged out and disappear into the crowd.

The mob sets the car on fire.

The mob smashes the glass door.

A man has his head inside.

The driver shoots the head and floors the throttle.

The bus drives into the crowd before it levitates higher, above people's heads.

Screams and panic.

Stampede.

Roger brings Love away from the window and holds her as closely as he can. After about 20 minutes of full speed high levitation driving, the bus slows down.

"We're nearly there," a volunteer says to Roger.

The driver shouts “Brace yourselves—” before the bus loses control and turns over.

Roger looks around. The bus has fallen on the other side. So their seats are now on the top. He and Love are now held onto the seats by the seatbelts. The other passengers have mostly fallen to the bottom side and are unconscious. The driver is already out of the bus. The street they’re in is luckily empty. The commotion of the mob is far behind them.

Love points at the emergency hammer fixed on the side of the window. Oddly, it has a screw driver attached to the end of its handle.

He reaches out for it. It’s a little too far. He holds on to the seatbacks and armrests. He unfastens himself and stands on the armrest of the seat in front of theirs and finally gets the hammer.

With the help of Love, Roger smashes the window and climbs out of the bus. Before he can drag Love up, he sees a crowd of people with anti-Direktor flags walking their way.

He grabs Love’s hand and asks her to unfasten herself. When they are both on the top, they see the mob begin to run.

They jump down the bus and start running, leaving behind the others. The municipal building is just a few hundred metres ahead.

Roger has never run so fast in his life. Not on Roboland, not at Ophelia’s house has he felt fear this real. The cursing and swearing of the crowd are clearer. He can feel that he’s out of breath.

He looks ahead. Love is running faster than he is, but slows down every few steps to wait for him to catch up. Roger used his full strength and shouts: “Go and knock on the door if you can run faster, I’ll catch up. I said go!”

Love looks back and after half a second, she runs faster and leaves him lagging behind.

The doors of the building open. A suited woman with an earpiece and a pistol waves at them from inside.

Love stops and comes back, holds Roger’s hand and runs. Roger uses all the might he can muster, and they dash through the door. The lady shuts

and locks the door. Several men come up and bar the door with wooden tables and chairs.

The lady introduces herself as AIA agent Astrid and asks Love and Roger to give her their names. She checks with her list and marks them on her porta.

“Are you the only ones from that bus?” she asks, putting away her gun and taps furiously to her porta.

“They’re all dead,” Love answers without thinking.

“I’m sorry to hear that. Let’s get down to the bunker,” she answers, “they won’t be able to come in here.”

“How are things going?” Love asks while helping the exhausted Roger to his feet.

“The loyalists have taken over Nordington, with the help with the people there.”

“What about other places? Are they more like it here, or Nordington.”

“Various degrees in the middle I’d say. But the military is already moving in in most cases including here, so the riots will be quelled very soon. Then we’ll be able to get out.” She ushers them down the stairs from a side door in the building.

“I see.” Love seems less than satisfied.

Roger breathes heavily and follows them. His mind goes blank.

Roger couldn’t tell if it’s a flashback or did he just have a flashforward.

He found himself on the space colony called Solaredge where they planned they counter attack.

“When is now?” he asked Love, who was sitting beside him.

“Flashback?” Love asked, attentively, “or forward.”

“Forward.”

“What was it?” she took out her porta and prepared to take notes.

Stu came in and whispered to a perplexed Roger: “Time to go now, Paul asks if you’re ready.”

Love answered: “He’s just had a flashforward, we need a moment.”

“There’s no time to lose, please follow me,” Stu led the way.

Love helped Roger up. Roger had a déjà vu of the flashforward, and tears filled his eyes.

“What’s the matter, Roger?” Love asked.

“I’ll tell you later.” Roger felt that it probably wouldn’t make too much of a difference if he told her.

The colony was brand new. It was built in a cylindrical shape, just like Roboland, but about three times bigger. The inside wasn’t built like a space station like Roboland, but more like a city. It contained a lot more plants and nearly half of its outer shell was made of an artificial crystal, so the plants could get real sunlight to grow.

The streets, however, were more three-dimensional than cities on Planets. Being built from scratch and having lower gravity than on the surface of Planet B meant that the levimobiles could float mid-air and roads could have different levels. It looked like the future cities that people in the old times used to imagine and modern cities failed to become.

Roger and Love boarded a large levibus that eerily resembled the one that they would take from the city square of Susport to the bunker underneath the municipal hall. Paul and Pete and a score of AIA agents were inside, waiting for them. Stu shook the hand of the bus driver. Roger noticed that he was the same bus driver that drove them on the fateful ride. Stu ushered Roger and Love into their seats. Roger quickly buckled up and turned to help Love with her seatbelt.

“What’s wrong, Roger?” Love asked.

“I need to tell you about the flashforward,” Roger said. But before he could do that, Paul came to them and asked Roger if he was ready with his speech.

Roger fumbled hastily in his bag and found the written manuscript. “Better start memorising it,” Paul said and went back to his seat between Pete and Stu.

The bus started and headed for the docking bay of the colony where they would take their shuttles to go back to Planet C. Pete would lead a strike-force

and free the hostages in a hotel in Nordington. Paul and Stu would take Roger and Love to Susport.

Bill and the Direktor had decided that a rally in Susport would be a perfect distraction to their uprising in Nordington, and Roger would be the perfect person to do the main speech. The people of Susport were a lot less impressed with Direktor's rule. They hated the military more, but they didn't really like the party as much as their northern compatriots. Roger as an outsider could do a lot better than George, Bill or the Direktor. In fact, as a civilian, Roger could also tell the story of MI conspiracies as an outsider, even frame them for the Roboland Incident.

"We'll be doing the livestream from here, anyway." Bill shrugged while briefing Roger.

Love tried to talk Roger out of the danger but refused to stay on Solaredge with Ophelia. She sat beside Roger on the bus and told him to get some rest before they took off.

Just before the bus started, Love pointed at the hammer hanging on the side of the window and smiled. Roger asked her what the matter was. She just shook her head.

"Nothing," said Love.

Roger fell asleep and dreamed of Gigapolis and oddly, the *Daily*.

Love woke up Roger. They were at the docking bay now. They got off the bus and saw Bill, George, Ophelia and her brother Laertes.

Roger shook hands with all of them. Bill patted Roger's shoulder and said: "The planet thanks you for your service," before whispering to Roger's ear: "I promise you I'll make it a better place."

George held Roger's hands tightly and asked: "You really don't want to meet your parents? They're here on the station."

"Please don't trouble yourselves. It's better they don't know that I'm involved."

"I understand. Now you take the Penguin and Paul will fly you."

“What about Hans?” Roger really couldn’t remember what happened to him after they landed here.

“Shit, he’s still on the ship,” George ended the handshake and took out his porta before turned back and said with a grin, “maybe take him with you, there are better hospitals in Susport.”

Roger raised an eyebrow but couldn’t disagree. Just when he was about to bid goodbye to Ophelia and Laertes, he saw them still holding Pete’s hands and thanking him. Pete promised to bring their father back, “on my life,” he said.

Roger couldn’t help but to join them and gave a teary group hug.

Love, a little embarrassed, guided Roger away.

Stu got some news from the spin-o-matic he always carried and whispered to Paul’s ears. Upon hearing it Paul hastily walked to George and Bill. They quickly whispered to each other nervously. Roger and the others looked on curiously.

After a long discussion. George announced: “Roboland just crashed itself into Petitbourg, a major city of Planet B, 5 minutes ago.”

Bill looked at his porta and said: “That’s just when we entered hyperspace back on Planet B. Time’s caught up with us and we’re no longer in two places. You can warp back to Planet C now.”

Silently, they boarded the two ships heading towards Nordington and Susport. Bill wished them luck and success again, on behalf of the Direktor. Before they parted, Pete made a bet with Paul and Stu about who’d capture Archer first.

Roger sat down on the Penguin again. He looked at Love and kissed her on the cheek. She looked surprised and smiled. She fastened her seatbelt and held Roger’s hand.

The Penguin steadily undocked and set off towards Planet C.

Aftermath

A week after the martial law had been lifted in Nordington, Agent Astrid arrives at a new noodle bar called “Robomen” in the outer city. The restaurant looks brand new with pastel coloured plastic furniture. It’s just opened and there’s no customer yet. An old-school non-holographic 3D television playing the news, further enhances the retro vibe of the space. Second Secretary Bill is shown on TV addressing the new congress as the new president of the Union. He introduces the Direktor sitting beside him to thunderous applause. The Direktor stands and greets the representatives as the First Secretary of the Party and the Commander in Chief of the Military Forces. George sits on the other side of Bill, having been appointed the new Premier.

Astrid approaches the bar and greets the girl sitting behind it. She puts down her Porta and reminds herself that they’ve met in Susport a couple of months before. She was called Love back then, but the AIA has given her a new identity as Rosalind.

“Hello, Rosalind.” Astrid sits at the bar and speaks.

“Hi, Astrid, isn’t it?” Love makes sure, “Naomi is still preparing at the back, but I can get you something to drink now.”

“Just some tea please, something Starhub doesn’t have.” She turns back and brings a tea pot.

Astrid looks up at the TV set, it’s now interplanetary news. On Planet B, Minister Heimrich has tabled a no confidence motion against the Prime Minister over the Government’s incompetence regarding Roboland investigation.

Within 3 minutes, Rosalind serves her tea.

“So what brings you here?” asks Rosalind. She knows AIA agents won’t come around for no reason.

“They’ve transferred me to Nordington now, to be your contact,” she says, “thought I’d say hi, check you out.”

“We’re fine, thanks,” Rosalind smiles and adds, “hope you’re getting used to Nordington fine. It’s very dry these days.”

“Yeah, and almost as hot as Susport.” Astrid sips tea.

The news sounds between their lines. They hear Ophelia’s name brought up. The both look towards the TV. Ophelia has been bailed out by her lawyers on Planet B. She was arrested at a spaceport when trying to go back to her Gigapolis home. They suspected her of espionage and wanted her for information about Roboland. The Internal Department also raised the issue of her paying her school and university fees from an offworld firm back when she first came here.

“Is she going to be ok?” Rosalind lowers her voice.

“Probably. Heimrich’s just acting tough, trying to force an election. We’re working towards a deal to get her back once the PM is gone.” Astrid doesn’t sound worried.

“Are we wanted too, in this scenario?”

“Love and Roger might be, but not Rosalind and Romeo.” Astrid looks through the menu and looks behind Rosalind to see if the kitchen is ready.

“Naomi, are you ready to take orders?” Love turns to the kitchen and asks.

“Yes, Rosa,” she answers back.

“Isn’t it nice that we can use robots freely on this planet?” Astrid says, a little proud, “Don’t know why Heimrich has to deport her.”

“Yeah, we have the first robotic refugee in the galaxy now. By the way, did you know about Bertie’s new article?” Rosalind says.

“I heard about it, he picked apart the legal challenges the Direktor could face if his being a cyborg is known or something like that. But now since the robots are deregulated, it hardly matters at all. Can I have an ice soba set please?”

“Of course, one iced soba set!” Rosalind yells at the kitchen.

Romeo comes down the stairs and scratches his head: “So early today! Have we gone viral now?”

“Hello, Romeo.” Astrid greets him.

He puts his specs on and remembers her. He takes her empty tea pot and adds some hot water for her after saying hello.

“How’ve you been, Romeo?”

“Good. I work in the noodle bar mostly, but also write a little.” He begins mopping the bar.

“I heard you’re preparing to make a documentary?”

“You intelligence people. Yes, about gentrification of Nordington. Is that ok?”

“I’m no censor but do be careful. AIA can only protect you from personal harm, not banning of your work.” she says.

“I will.” Romeo puts on his apron and hat.

“There’s another thing, Romeo,” Astrid adds, “it seems that your dad’s put in a request to meet you, through our internal channels.”

“Shit, does he know we’re here?”

“Nothing we know indicate that, but he seems to be certain you’re on this planet now. You don’t have to answer now, I’ll give you some time to think it over. Family can tough sometimes, but mostly, I’ve met your dad.” Astrid makes an “I feel you” gesture.

“No,” he answers says without hesitation.

“What about,” Love chimes in, “you get his mom out alone and he (or us) meet somewhere discreet?”

“Sounds like a good plan. What do you think? Romeo?”

“Ok, maybe you can arrange that,” Roger gives in, “but make sure we’re not followed.”

Roger hears something from the TV and turns it up. They look up and sees General Archer on TV.

“C’ish Military Intelligence director Gen Maximilian Archer has been assassinated in his Gigapolis residence by a lone gunman. He’s been refused asylum earlier this month by the Internal Minister Heimrich, who is rumoured to be behind the hit. But other reports point to Planet C’s Alien Intelligence Agency—”

Astrid stands up and checks her porta. She leaves some cash on the bar and says: “I have to report back now, sorry I can’t have the soba now. I’ll see you around some time.”

She hurries out of the restaurant and takes her levimobile from the nearby car park.

Roger looks at Rosalind and shrugs: "Can I have the soba? Haven't had anything since I got up."

"Sure." She takes the money from the bar.

"By the way, I got a message today from Able, she's coming back to Planet C now that the Immigration Department is cranking down on legal aliens on Planet B."

"What about the others?" Love shows some interest in her former colleagues.

"Seems fine, a lot of them had already got their residency and citizenship. Item moved to Planet D now," Roger says, looking into the kitchen.

"Iced soba ready, Rosa!" Naomi comes out with the set and sees no customer, "Who's this for?"

"Me." Roger takes over from her and moves to a table.

Satire, the Absurd and Censorship in Science Fiction

Introduction

The inception of my novel started in 2016 during the Brexit referendum and the Presidential election in the US. Many of the ideas are founded on the context of the rise of populism, racism and the tendency of decline in western democracy. My interest grows in how a person, or a character would react to and reflect on the ideas of the Brexit negotiation process, UK general elections and the Trump presidency. The later part of the novel is in turn inspired by events like the attempted coup in Turkey in 2016 (Kingsley and Abul-Ahad, "Military Coup Attempted in Turkey"). I planned the novel to reflect and possibly satirise the state the world was in and what it might evolve into. The beginning of the novel originated from stories of a friend of mine whose company lost their license to maintain foreign workers after a Home Office inspection. This incident caused my friend to lose their job and visa, forcing them to abandon their established life in the UK and go home. I felt compelled to try to understand the effects of these seemingly remote policy decisions and political events on my friend's and my own lives. By opening the novel with Roger's work permit crisis, I intend to set up the kind of world that he is living in. I formulated the idea for the event to happen while Roger is away so that I can create a mini adventure for him to try and get back to Planet B. Not only does the trip showcase some policy loopholes that makes the world tangible, but also moves the character arc forward. I also tried to explore the experience of studying and working in another country for many years and the disjointed life abroad and visits at home. To me there has been a contradictory feeling: on one hand life in China continues where I have left off like a saved video game; but on the other, China and the people I know back home have changed so much in these years that is barely recognisable. I have missed the rapid economic development, technological advancement and rise in international influence that happened in China during the years I have been away. On a personal level, my friends back home are all starting family while I am still a

student. The contrast leaves a sensation of Ranka¹, or Rip Van Winkle²-esque feeling. I have coined a red herring-esque term Urashima Effect in the novel, referencing the similar Japanese tale of Urashima Tarō. In the story, Urashima Tarō saves a turtle which then carries him to the dragon palace under the sea as a reward. The princess of the palace gives him a mysterious box and tells him not to open it after a banquet in his honour. Urashima finds that decades have passed since he left for the underwater palace. When he opens the box, he turns into an old man. I used the story as an analogy of the time dilation in the special theory of relativity. Urashima effect, therefore, becomes the term for time dilation in the universe of the novel. When drafting the novel, I had determined to combine the current affairs and personal aspects for the full effect.

The decision to work in the SF genre came early in my planning of the novel. What I like about SF as a genre is the creative freedom that it entails. By creating a world—or galaxy in my case—from scratch, I have freedom of modelling its societies as close or as far away from our society in different areas. I presented the Planet B society close to Brexit Britain and Trump's America, but with added other features such as a specific history with robots. Planet C, on the other hand, is a generalised society with advanced technology but authoritarian governance that is meant to both contrast Planet B and serve as cautionary tale for its future. In fact, the interplanetary setting is a way for me to connect the social and personal, by the means of physically representing the mental distance one travels between cultures. My fondness of SF tropes and concepts creates the wish to pay homage and also parody them at the same time. Hence, I have incorporated elements of hyperspace, faster-than-light travel, teleportation, robots, AI and time-slip into the novel. But these are never the centre of the story for the novel is not about advanced science and technology, or their implications. They are in a way another block in the

¹ Ranka, or Lanke, is an ancient Chinese tale of a man who watches two immortal beings playing go. He finds out that years have passed during the game when he goes back to his village.

² Rip Van Winkle is a similar story from the United States, in which Van Winkle falls asleep after drinking a mysterious liquor. Van Winkle wakes up twenty years later and finds that he has missed the American Revolution.

worldbuilding process. I have taken influences from works of Stanisław Lem, Ursula K. Le Guin and Philip K. Dick. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974) and Dick's *Now Wait For Last Year* (1966) both explore the idea of political SF in interplanetary settings. However, as I progressed with my planning and research, I gradually put my focus on Lem. My interest in satire and the absurd in turn leads me to study further what Lem has achieved with these modes in his novels and stories.

Using works of Stanisław Lem as case studies, I will also discuss how these elements operate in a publishing environment of censorship and self-censorship. I will begin with a discussion of the parameters of censorship. I will then look at how censorship and self-censorship works generally, and how one causes the other. I shall also specifically examine the tradition of censorship that faced Polish writers from the Eighteenth Century to Communist Poland after the Second World War. Against this backdrop, I shall explain what was at stake for Lem to write science fiction that contains not only social commentary, but political satire. With the example of the short story "The Thirteenth Voyage" from Lem's *The Star Diaries*, this essay will discuss Lem's approach towards censorship.

Following the analysis of censorship, I will move on to discuss satire and the absurd. I will focus on the characteristics of satire and the absurd, not as much as literary genres but more as elements that can be employed by fiction—in this case, science fiction. With the case study of Lem's "The Eleventh Voyage" also from *The Star Diaries*, I shall expound how satire and the absurd operates in practice within the genre of SF, as well as how they help to convey the author's ideas without being overly explicit.

The third chapter will be a close examination of Lem's 1971 novel *The Futurological Congress* with respect to satire and the absurd. By analysing different scenes in the novel, I will explain how the elements of satire and the absurd function within the novel. I will also discuss how the novel utilises speculative elements in science fiction, along with satire and absurdity, to its advantage in conveying the Lem's political ideas and futurological concerns. I shall also explore how neologism—one of the stand-out features of the novel

and Lem's work in general—employs self-reflexivity and serves as a tool for science fiction. I will also point out how neologism contributes to satire and the absurd for Lem, and further strengthens the ideas he explores in his works of fiction.

The next chapter prepares the discussion of my own novel with a survey of Chinese science fiction. I will introduce briefly how early Twentieth Century writers introduced SF into China and under what circumstances they began writing themselves. I will present various trends and writers throughout the turbulent history of modern China, as well as key elements such as nationalistic political ideas behind them. This essay will also look at the way Chinese writers navigate through censorship and even worse obstacles, their use of satire and the absurd or the lack of it. This chapter will assist me in establishing where my novel stands in the tradition of Chinese SF.

I will discuss my own novel and the writing process in the final chapter of this essay. With examples from the novel I explain how I use both satire and the absurd and reinforce them with science fiction settings and characteristics. I shall also explain some of my writing process in order to illustrate how science fiction provides a convenient backdrop for both satire and the absurd. Since the problems that concerned Lem in his time have persisted and to some extent worsened, this chapter will also look at how I took lessons from Lem and explores similar themes in a different time.

One: Censorship

Censorship and self-censorship are important concepts for me to discuss before moving on to Lem or Chinese science fiction. I will not, however, try to argue that censorship is the cause of Lem's use of satire and the absurd. However, censorship, especially self-censorship stands as a greater context for analysing someone writing in Communist Poland or China for that matter. The dynamic between censorship, self-censorship, satire and absurdity, even the SF genre itself are worth exploring. For this chapter, I will try to define a framework of the concepts around censorship within this dissertation and analyse their relationship with Lem by discussing "The Thirteenth Voyage".

Before I address the censorship faced by Lem and his contemporaries, it is imperative that we define the term "censorship" as used here. In the introduction to the book *Censoring and Silencing*, Robert C. Post observes that the understanding of censorship has shifted from a governmental act of silencing to the violation of the powerless by the powerful with state power (Post, 1-2). Post points out that the Foucaultian idea of analysing power through "techniques and tactics" has encouraged the view that the power is dispersed from the state alone and circulates in society (Post, 1). However, as we look at censorship as assertion of power, we should also look at censorship as a technique or a tactic. Post notes that "[i]f censorship is a technique by which discursive practices are maintained, and if social life largely consists of such practices, it follows that censorship is the norm rather than the exception" (2). In other words, censorship is prevalent in social life if discourse is maintained by it. If and how censorship "maintains" discourse is, then the key

to the question. I will argue later in this chapter that censorship and the reaction it evokes from people shapes discourse and any discursive practice. Censorship maintains people's discourse by shaping it, therefore it becomes the norm in social life.

Fredrick Schauer, in his essay "The Ontology of Censorship", collected in *Censorship and Silencing*, argues that the notion of censorship itself is problematic (147). Schauer problematises the idea that censorship is merely a process of restricting the "expressive possibilities" by "external interference" (Schauer, 150). The logic of this argument is that the process can be carried out by various subjects for various reasons. He implies that the same process would not normally be considered as censorship (at least not negatively) if made by people of specialty (e.g. editors and factcheckers) instead of state power and would consequently be characterised as "editing" or "choice". The "allocation of content-deciding power", i.e. where the power to decide what is expressed resides, is key to this issue because the "content-determining effect", can come from various social institutions, but the question is not if content ought to be decided, but which institutions are deciding it (163). On the other hand, the external influences can also have an effect "on what we desire to communicate" (151). Therefore, the concept of censorship should be broadened. The broadened concept indicates that our communicative capacity can be restricted in many ways, including by changing how we think and wish to communicate. If our thoughts and ways of communication are restricted and influenced by censorship before their content is thought or communicated,

then the influence of censorship happens before censorship is conducted. The interference, then, shifts from external to internal.

So, censorship can be both external and internal. Schauer goes on to imply that the usage of the word “censorship” tends to be an ascriptive conclusion of judgment “rather than descriptive” (160). The concept of censorship is in fact attributed to certain types of external interferences to discourse, instead of describing what these interferences do. My understanding of this distinction is that censorship is defined not by the action the censors take to interfere discourse but the effects they achieve. Descriptive definition can be exhaustive, but censorship includes various forms of intervention, direct or indirect. This process displays the fact that we need to look at censorship dialectically in relation with the censored, i.e. those whose discourse is censored. The censored in many cases are not passively awaiting censorship after the discourse has been put out, but construct the discourse with possible censorship in mind. The discourse is already influenced by censorship before the external interference takes place because the authors expect their work to go through the censors.

Stanisław Lem’s short story “The Thirteenth Voyage” from *The Star Diaries* (1957) provides us with an example of how writers avoid likely censorship from officials. In this story, space jockey Ijon Tichy accidentally travels to the system of twin Planets Pinta and Panta on his search for a great philosopher/social designer Master Oh. The Pinta Authorities seize Tichy’s ship and capture Tichy. The planet of Pinta is covered in water, albeit rather shallow. The Pantans live almost completely submerged in water, leaving only

the mouth for breathing and talking in the form of gurgling. They are in a process of “evolutionary persuasion” where the citizens of Pinta all live as if they were fish, in order to become fish in the end. After a series of one-sided interrogation, Tichy is sentenced to “two years of voluntary sculpture, suspended in water for six months (109). But Tichy is soon apprehended again for asking the wrong questions, mostly about their “fishification” ideals. This time Tichy is sentenced to three years of “voluntary sculpture”. The involuntary volunteering job on the planet is to sculpt statues of fish. After a visit from the supreme leader of the planet, a rumour starts saying that Pantans no longer need to live submerged or gurgle. The supervisors at the prison camp begin to pour water out of their rooms and the statues are altered (from fins to limbs). But their instructor gets “disappeared” when teaching them a new song praising dryness. The official news comes, and gurgling is indeed abolished, but is replaced by breathing underwater. The water level increases gradually to ease in the new policy. Since no one on Pantan has mastered the technique, people begin by pretending to breathe underwater but secretly jump up for air. Tichy escapes the planet by swimming to his rocket, for people of Pantan cannot swim.

The section on Panta is notably shorter and doesn't have much story, for it functions more like a footnote to the section on Pinta. On his journey out of Pinta, Tichy is captured again by the authorities from Panta, who share a mutual hostility with the Pintans. Tichy is arrested for his individuality, and through talking to his appointed lawyer he learns about the planet. The Pantans all look identical and they have no individual identities or names. They

switch roles and jobs every 24 hours via a lottery system. The most severe punishment Tichy faces is “life identification”, which banishes a person from the united anonymity and role rotation forever. Tichy eagerly asks to be found guilty and escapes the planet, after learning the system is actually Master Oh’s design.

The story is clearly an allegorical tale satirising the communist ideals and practices in the 1950s in Poland and elsewhere in the Eastern Bloc. Such criticism was unlikely if not impossible to be published under the official censorship in Poland at the time if written directly. Not only does Lem bypass the censors, in this story he also dramatises the process of “shaping of discourse” that I mentioned above. I will discuss this matter further later. However, by utilising the fantastic genre of science fiction combined with surreal situations, the story was successfully published and collected in *The Star Diaries* (101-123). It is unlikely the story itself was rewritten after being rejected by censors, because that would imply that the censor had known what Lem is satirising in the story and rejected it but allowed it to be published after revision. Therefore, we can conclude that like many of Lem’s work, “The Thirteenth Voyage” is written the way it is at least partly to avoid being censored. The metaphors in the stories and the exotic alien setting disguises the message and therefore the stringent political satire was published in Poland. Although it is hard to determine how much of the metaphor is for artistic purpose and how much of it is to avoid censorship, it is clear that the disguise of political message in science fiction is integral to the story from the beginning. Lem’s use of metaphor helped him bypass the censors. Because

Lem's work was never banned, it follows that censors tolerated satirical metaphors wrapped in a fantastic genre at the time. By not stepping in the firing line of the state censors, Lem manages to both keep his ideas expressed in accord with the censorship and his own agency of expression.

Also from *Censorship and Silencing*, Judith Butler's "Ruled Out: Vocabularies of the Censor" goes further in analysing the role of censorship in society. Butler argues that the power that censorship exerts is at once restrictive and productive (247). Butler echoes Schauer's essay in calling attention to the internal ways of censorship performed by the censored. She points out that "censorship, as a productive form of power, may work in implicit and inadvertent ways" (249). She asserts that since all speech needs selectivity on the ground of "linguistic intelligibility" in order to be meaningful, censorship in effect "produces" speech as much as it restricts it because defining the "speakable" is essential for the speech (248). Thus, censorship also contributes to the formation of the censored speech.

Butler suggests that censorship precedes the text it censors, "and that a text, to become readable, is produced through a process of selection that rules out certain possibilities, and realizes others" (248). This process in turn enables implicit censorship to happen by allowing the unspoken to remain unspeakable (249-250). As I have explained above, the unspoken is selected and ruled out in the rationale of the explicit and external censorship before the speech takes place or the text is produced. Since the process precedes the discourse, it can in some cases make sure that what needs to be censored does not appear at all in the discourse. With this in mind, the speaker selects

what can be spoken and the unspoken thus becomes unspeakable, due to the internal and implicit censorship. For this reason, “censorship is a productive form of power: it is not merely privative, but formative as well” (252). By regulating the domain of the speakable, censorship contributes to the production of the text. Butler then argues that:

Here the question is not whether certain kinds of speech uttered by a subject are censored, but how an operation of censorship determines who will be a subject, a determination that depends on whether the speech of the candidate for subjecthood obeys the norms that govern what is speakable and what is not (253).

That is, censorship delineates the boundary of what can be said, and in the same process dictates whether the speaker is a subject. If one’s speech does not fall in the realm of the speakable, one’s status as subject itself becomes at risk. To affirm one’s status as a subject, one needs to stay within to the official domain of the speakable. This notion brings back the question of self-censoring for avoiding official censorship. If the self-censorship is made to avoid censorship from the authorities, then the authorities’ purpose of curtailing speech is already realised before the speech is even made. Therefore, if subjecthood is determined by censorship, does the subject still have its agency of speech? Is Lem’s use of metaphor and satire intended by the writer or dictated by censorship?

Addressing the question of agency, Butler introduces the term *foreclosure*, “designating a primary form of repression, one that is not performed by a subject but, rather, whose operation makes possible the formation of subject” (255). In other words, as an act of censorship or repressive interference, foreclosure, takes place not after the discourse but performs its act during the creation of the speech. The subjecthood of those who make (or not make) the discourse is formed under the influence of this repressive operation. She concludes that all speech is pre-conditioned by foreclosure, or implicit censorship. “What remains is to distinguish between forms of censorship that are constitutive and, hence, presumably inalterable, and social forms that are contingent and alterable” (257). That is to say, whether the censorship comes from society that might change with time or it is engrained with the formation of the text is the question. A banned book can be published in a different country or time, but self-censored works will remain the way they are written unless different versions emerge later. It is noteworthy that the external source of censorship can come from different places in society than solely from the state. The assertion of power can take place implicitly via foreclosure and can be hard to detect. This notion is particularly useful when considering writers under oppressive regimes such as Soviet Russia or Communist Poland, but not limited to it. In societies where there is no official censorship from the state, a work of literature can still be pre-conditioned by foreclosure from e.g. zeitgeist, the market and the genre, etc. The idea of foreclosure of ideas can be adapted from Butler to analyse the writing process of these writers. To avoid state censorship, writers such as Lem had developed their ways to

foreclose some expressions, and that is one of the aspects of their work we need to look more deeply.

In “The Thirteenth Voyage”, Lem metafictionally describes the lack of freedom of speech on Planet Pinta, and even illustrates how to foreclose a discourse by oneself. When Tichy is first released on his suspended (in water) sentence, he meets a newspaper editor (of a publication named *The Daily Fish*) who dines with him and tells Tichy about his work:

At supper he revealed to me with the utmost agitation that a most dreadful thing had happened to him. Without thinking he had written in a lead article that water was wet. On account of which, he expected the worst. I did my best to console him, and asked if they considered water to be dry; startled, he replied that I didn't understand a thing. You have to look at it from the fish's point of view. Fish do not find water wet – ergo, it isn't. Two days later the editor disappeared (110).

In this paragraph, Lem details the process of a piece being censored. However, the knowledge the writer has of censorship is what makes this scene unique. The editor realises his mistake, albeit a little too late, and understands the rationale behind the official censorship, however bizarre it is. The editor correctly predicts his own fate by understanding how censors think, and explains to Tichy how one can hope to avoid it. However, when Tichy asks about the ideal fishified beings, those around him either call the police (Aquatican), like the lodgers at the places he is staying, or run away and try to

ignore the questions (111). Only one old prisoner is kind enough to explain that talks of the non-existent ideals can get one into more trouble than one is already in (111-112). Because the editor has not foreclosed his opinion on the wetness of water, he quite literally loses his subjecthood and is disappeared from society altogether. Tichy later experiences the same literal loss of subjecthood himself when he gets sent to the labour camp for asking about “sunkers” and “gwats”, which appears many times in publications including *The Daily Fish* (110).

If foreclosure can be understood as implicit censorship that happens besides the choices made for intelligibility and meaning, it can be seen as a type of “inner” censorship applied by the speaker or writer himself. Jerzy Pietrkiewicz in essay “‘Inner Censorship’ in Polish Literature” discusses this phenomenon among Polish writers from the Eighteenth to early Twentieth Centuries (294-307). Pietrkiewicz defines the term “inner censorship” as a type of censorship that “the artist himself imposes on his work; in doing this he gives up some of his freedom and also compromises his ultimate sincerity”; and “it suppresses or alters those elements which belong to the work organically” (295). Echoing the “formative” censorship from Butler, Pietrkiewicz claims that the state censorship causes the “private” inner censorship to have its deep psychological effect (295). Without the “formative” effect of the state censorship, the inner censorship would not have been as prevalent and powerful. Writing in 1958, Pietrkiewicz argues the state censorship of communist Europe and Asia brings the idea of inner censorship back with renewed significance. He focuses on the historical backgrounds of the inner

censorship in different eras. The political reality of a partitioned country in late Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries created vastly different political climate in different parts of Poland. Pietrkiewicz points out:

[T]he Polish writer trained himself to think in advance of the foreign censor and also came to act as his own censor, restricting or suppressing in his literature what might do harm to the national optimism of his readers. [...] Inner censorship made him subtle, his public enjoyed being taken into his confidence [...]. It is not surprising that the foreigner often found Polish literature obscure and its style involved and over-anxious (296).

Polish writers in Russian Poland during the tripartite period suffered stricter censorship from the authorities. Pietrkiewicz gives examples to illustrate how Polish writers adapted to avoid state censorship. Stefan Żeromski produced different versions of his book for publication in Prussian and Russian Polands. Sienkiewicz omitted some key historical facts to avoid being censored by the Russian authorities (Pietrkiewicz, 298). Pietrkiewicz argues that nearly all Polish novelists after 1863, especially those living in Russian Poland faced “the problem of sincerity [...] in his choice and treatment of topics” (299). Pietrkiewicz illustrates his point by utilising examples to prove that the writer compromises his intentions by shifting the focus using “masks and substitutes” (301). Lem’s metaphors and allegories in “The Thirteenth

Voyage” masks the critical attitude towards the communist regime and substitutes the unattainable social, political and economical ideals with evolution into fish. This tradition of avoiding censorship carried on from the Nineteenth Century (however involuntary) was alive and well in the Cold War era. How and why the writers including Lem shift the focus in order to get their point through in an indirect way to bypass the state censors is the central topic for this section.

Pietrkiewicz notes that “[i]nner censorship operated on two planes: it controlled the writer’s urge to express himself fully and it protected him against disruptive influences from outside” (303). During the Nineteenth Century nationalism surge, Polish writers in Poland and abroad faced different types of pressure and both had to censor their own works. The exile poets became overtly political because they were in exile after the revolution and the writers in Poland became overtly nationalistic and/or idealistic to avoid criticism (301-303). The Young Poland movement, on the other hand, turned to the “art for art’s sake” motto and stayed away from social reality altogether. This too, is a kind of inner censorship for the writers to avoid censorship from the authorities. It brings back Butler’s idea of a “formative” censorship that produces the speech and keeps the unspoken unspeakable. Writing in 1958, Pietrkiewicz concludes by asserting that in Cold War Poland and other Communist countries at the time of writing, inner censorship could be in a new height. In fact, the state censor in Poland during the early Cold War was relatively loose compared to other Socialist countries. However, censorship was still in place and the writers needed to avoid or pass it in order to publish. In “Avoiding

Censorship: The ‘Second Circulation’ of Books in Poland”, Marek Jastrzębski and Ewa Krysiak point out that “[t]he situation in Poland was typical for the countries of the communist block [sic]. Censorship entered the text as soon as the script was typed” (470). I will demonstrate that through the Cold War, the century-long tradition of inner censorship was not lost, and Lem’s choice of subject can be seen as a form of inner censorship. As I will discuss in the next section, even with his more satirical works, certain masks and metaphors did help him to avoid being censored. Before I do, however, it is more appropriate that I give more details on Lem and the state censorship in Poland at the time.

The communist control over fiction in Poland started from the early days of the republic. In 1950, the Fifth Congress of Polish Writers created “creative sections” among the writers: “prose, poetry, drama, satire, translation, and children’s and young people’s literature”, according to Magnus J. Kryński’s “Poland’s Literary ‘Thaw’: Dialectical Phase or Genuine Freedom?” (9). All writers would take advice from the sections, regarding themes, corrections, cuts and rewriting. These sections were under the control of the Executive Board. The Board focused on “‘the ideological analysis of literary life’ while the creative sections [became] ‘the practical everyday workshop of this analysis’” (9). In other words, the communist ideology permeated from the supervising Board above to each separate creative section that instructed the creative process. Before the mid-50s destalinisation, the rigid Stalinist agenda forced the writers to adhere closely to their supervisors’ vision. This propagandistic system and form of literature reached its height during the years 1950-1954, when Lem first started writing. The lack of science fiction or even fantasy

sections can be seen as evidence that science fiction was not taken seriously by the Polish authorities at the time. Instead, Tighe points out that “[b]ecause science fiction was seen to be a minority interest it had a very low priority within Eastern-bloc publishing programmes” (762). Lem’s natural tendency towards science fiction led him into a fortunate position where the authority had little interest in his work, before his fame called attention to himself later in the decade.

Kryński points out that the minister of Culture and Art Włodzimierz Sokorski’s speech in April 1954 signals the future relaxation of the Socialist realism agenda. The “‘new course’ appears to have been instated from above” (9-10) and the liberalisation of Polish literature started. However, the Polish authorities were not giving up on Socrealizm, nor did it signal a “return to pure art” (10). “Pure art” in this context should be understood as art that is not created to serve a social purpose for the Party. In June 1954, the Sixth Congress of the Union of Polish Writers was convened. During that congress, many writers became outspoken on the “infringement on their time by frequent conferences and sessions of the Writers’ Union” (“Poland’s Literary ‘Thaw’”, 10). The second Congress of Soviet Writers later that year marked the tendency to relax the restrictions of Socialist realism (10-11). Khrushchev’s denunciation of Stalin at the 20th Congress in 1956 effectively started the relaxation on many issues including the freedom of speech in the Eastern Bloc. This sentiment of liberalisation was echoed at the 19th session of the Council of Culture and Art, with a few writers speaking out against the “regimentation” of literature (“Poland’s Literary ‘Thaw’”, 15). The literary “thaw” appeared not

only on critical work, but also literary press, literary criticism and translation of foreign literature. However, in its early stages, the “new course” had limited effect within the creative sphere of literature (18). In hindsight, this looks like both the writers and the censors were not ready for the change. At the beginning of the “thaw”, writers were apparently testing the boundaries and the censors were catching up. Writing in 1956, Kryński was already asking the question of whether the “thaw” was a “dialectical phase or genuine freedom”. He emphasises that:

We must bear in mind, however, that freedom of discussion is frequently granted under communism when there are doubts as to the correct policy. Once a decision is adopted, however, (and it need not be the decision of the majority of the debaters) the freedom of expression could be abruptly terminated. (20)

This statement, of course, is just to remind its contemporary readers of the volatile nature of freedom under Communist regimes and the uncertainty of the “thaw”. Kryński makes clear that there has not been a conclusion on the literary reforms (21). He states in his own “Postscript” to this article—published more than a year later—that the next Writers’ Congress convened in late 1956, after being postponed twice. The delay was to avoid political pressure of the “October Revolution” (“Postscript”, 97). He notes that the Congress proposed abolishing censorship, abolishing the “prohibited books” category and

reconnecting with Europe, especially Polish writers in exile, along with other liberal resolutions (98). However, Tony Kemp-Welch remarks in his essay “Dethroning Stalin: Poland 1956 and Its Legacy”, with the advantage of hindsight, that “[t]he restoration of links with the West became a permanent legacy of October but stringent censorship was restored at home” (1282).

However, Paweł Frelik asserts in his essay “Stanisław Lem’s *Summa Technologiae* as Impossible Utopia” that “[b]etween 1945 and 1989, Poland enjoyed probably the most relaxed censorship in the entire Eastern Bloc, but it was censorship nevertheless” (447). Before the “thaw” in 1956, Lem’s work adhered to the Socialist Realism guidelines and he later denounced his work during that period (Tighe, 761). But after the relaxation brought about by the reforms, the Party did not give up its social demand on literature (“Poland’s Literary ‘Thaw’”, 10) and the censorship was still in place. As I have noted above, the personal feud between different literary groups and individuals (especially between authors and the authorities such as the Board or the creative sectors) started to manifest during the thaw. Therefore, the future of the liberalised literary scene was not stable. For that reason, it is necessary to look at how censorship worked in Communist Poland during the 1950s “thaw”.

Malgorzata Fidelis, in her NCEEER paper “The Polish Thaw: Youth Carnival, Domestic Revolution, and Transnational Encounters” lays out the state of censorship during the “thaw”:

The Thaw generated a new climate, in which censors found themselves disoriented by the changes and the extent of

new freedoms. [...] Censors operated according to the conventional process, in which the editor-in-chief “cleared” (uzgodnic) every piece with his or her patron in the party-state structures before submitting the material to the censors. The censorship office then usually put the rubber stamp on the publication with only cursory reading to be sure that politically unacceptable statements did not slip in. [...] Ultimately, the responsibility for a controversial text rested with the editor-in-chief. This process was unexpectedly disturbed upon the personal changes in the party-state institutions, and the liberalizing signals from Moscow. It took some time for the Censorship Office to catch up. (22-23)

During the “thaw”, there was a time when the censors did not have a clear guideline apart from obviously sensitive statements. As Fidelis describes, the editors at the time could assert their own interpretations to the censors in case of dispute (23). This implies that the editors were acting as censors to a certain extent, and the censors were effectively relaxed due to their disorientation. This can also explain how thinly disguised metaphors and allegories such as “The Thirteenth Voyage” could be published at the time. Since the censors did not have a clear guideline due to the rapid destalinisation, the story could easily slip through censorship as long as they didn’t flag up the issues.

Apart from editors, the authors themselves would sometimes act as censors to foreclose their own work before they were sent to the state censors. Lem certainly is amongst the writers working in that tradition. Frelik observes in “Impossible Utopia” that *Summa Technologiae* is considerably different from both previous and later works of Lem, both fiction and critical. Frelik argues that *Summa* “is severely compromised by the complete absence of consideration of social, economic, and political matters” (440). He continues to analyse the piece and finds it questionable that Lem means what he writes, considering most of his other work, including *The Star Diaries*, *Eden* (1959) and *Memoirs Found in a Bathtub* (1961) (443). Lem’s knowledge and attitude exhibited in these pieces leads Frelik to argue that “[t]he explanation that occurs most readily is connected with the impediments to free expression under communism” (447). Acknowledging that Lem’s “Dialog VII” was written as a “smoke screen” to the censors (445) in order to lower their vigilance with more controversial content, Frelik also points out that although political contents were usually “cloaked and smuggled in under fantastic guise” (447), they were very present in both his fiction work and critical works like *Dialogi* (1957). Therefore, the complete absence of totalitarian matters in *Summa* cannot be explained simply as lack of interest or relevance. Frelik goes on to argue that there is another possibility: that Lem avoided social and economic issues in order to avoid inadvertently becoming the regime’s mouthpiece (447).

For this chapter, on the other hand, how Lem “cloaked and smuggled in” his political ideas and social critique is more relevant than his motive to devoid *Summa* of them. In order to understand how he “cloaked and smuggled

inl” these ideas, we need to examine what these ideas are and how they were conveyed in Lem’s work, especially his science fiction pieces. Jerzy Jarzębski and Franz Rottensteiner, in their essay “Stanislaw Lem, Rationalist and Visionary” state that Lem himself agrees that writing for him is a means to deliver ideas on the society of the future, development of science and technology and the “philosophical implications of technological progress” (111). Therefore, as touched upon by Frelik before, ideas about the future of the society would naturally include political elements such as opinions on the communist regime and the social structure. Indeed, as Jarzębski and Rottensteiner point out, Lem’s interests in parodying language and modes of thinking produced “gorgeous political satires” such as Pinta and Panta from “The Thirteenth Voyage” in *The Star Diaries* (113). Speaking of *The Star Diary*, Jarzębski and Rottensteiner conclude:

An allegory side by side with a fantastic fairy tale—that is not ordinary company. It is hardly an accident that *The Star Diaries* again and again make use of the motif of *the false world*, a world full of lies because of its language, its ideology, because of a scientific theory as narrow as it is apodictic. (113)

Jarzębski and Rottensteiner further utilises Lem’s works after the “thaw” in 1956 to illustrate how Lem’s interest in channels of communication and language manifests itself in *Eden* as a way the totalitarian ruler controls its

society. They go on to argue that this piece serves as a warning to Lem's readers. In an interview with Raymond Federman ("An Interview with Stanisław Lem", 4), Federman asks Lem if the irony he uses in his writing can serve a critical purpose, "like criticizing a certain social or political system" (4). Lem's answer is a resounding yes. However, it does not mean that his ironic or satirical works are purely for the purpose of criticizing current issues of his time. Lem expands:

But I never want to do it in a way that would create a concrete [...] political or geo-political situation, well-defined in time and in space. [...] I don't want that political irony to be the sole subject of what we call the model, the model that is given by a novel. This is because such situations, such confrontations, and such problems are always fluid; they change, and novels which are so deeply rooted die together with such matters (4).

This statement, although possibly an excuse for Lem to avoid the sharp question from a western journalist, is still of interest. Because indeed many of Lem's novels, including *The Futurological Congress*, deal with the universal rather than the specific. It is, as I will point out in my analysis of the novel below, the study of human future that Lem is more interested in these works of fictions. However, that is not to say that many of the futurological concerns are not spawned from the present reality. But generalising the issues and sometimes diverting them to other countries and social systems (namely the United

States) also helps to avoid censorship. For example, by setting the *The Futurological Congress* in a fictional Costa Ricana, Lem takes the first step of concealing any criticism to either Poland or other states in communist bloc by deflecting them towards a “banana republic” with a military dictatorship.

In the same interview, when asked whether he’s had pressure because his “irony towards bureaucracy, towards the stupidity of certain types of political and social activities”, Lem tells how his critics help him avoid censorship and banning:

I believe that in a sense the loyalty of the critics worked to my benefit. They knew that to criticize explicitly what my books are really about would be to denounce them to the police. And so they wrote about something else... They dealt with my books as though they were fairy tales. (8)

It is clear from this answer that not only does Lem smuggle his criticism towards the social and political aspects under the guise of fantasy and humour, his critics in turn interpret his work as such. In some cases, Lem might have cloaked his message well enough for the critics to not discover them, but I doubt if that can possibly be the case all the time to all critics. It is, then, more likely that an understanding has formed between them that as long as Lem does not do anything too obvious, the critics will not point out the underlining criticism to the state or the social reality. In this sense, the ability of SF to conceal its message also enables the critics and censors to look the other way.

However, in this process, the author, Lem in this case, will have to foreclose his explicit message, in order to form the understanding needed with his critics.

This conclusion also adheres to what Fidelis observes in “The Polish Thaw”. Due to a lack of clear guideline amongst the official censors, the standard of censorship is with critics and editors, and to an extent, the authors themselves. It is then reasonable for writers and editors to take advantage of the confusion and push through some thinly veiled sensitive discourse. Interestingly, “The Thirteenth Voyage” outlines both how the citizens censoring discourse for the authorities and the confusion the authorities can create with their unclear messages. When Tichy tries to enquire about the fish ideals of “sunkers” and “gwats”,

My landlady, when I tried to question her, locked herself in the kitchen with the snails, so I went to the bookstore and inquired as to where I might possibly find at least one gwat. At these words the salesman dived under the counter, and a few young Pintanese who happened to be present in the store took me to Aquatican headquarters as a provocateur (111).

The Pintanese do not just call the authorities but take Tichy to their headquarter themselves. However, what Tichy has asked about is what he has read in the books and newspapers. The ideas of gwats and sunkers are state-promoted ideals. Not understanding them from the descriptions in books, Tichy wants to see some examples. However, the nonexistence of these

examples has caused fear in the Pinta. Without government intervention, the people themselves bring Tichy to justice. This scene shows what fear and distrust can bring out of people in an oppressive regime. But it also shows how the government can let the people do its work, given enough pressure. At the same time, it brings out the possibility of discussion when the authorities are not looking, if only the people are brave enough. In a later scene, we see that this happens, albeit already in prison:

Thrown into the desiccator, I found three of my former companions there. It was from them that I learned that as yet there *were* no gwats or sunkers on Pinta. These are noble forms, perfect in their fishiness, into which the Pintanese will in time change according to the laws of evolutionary persuasion. I asked when this was supposed to take place. At that they all trembled and tried to dive out of sight, an obvious impossibility in the absence of water, and then the oldest of them, his limbs badly misshapen, said:

‘Listen here, hydrant, among us such things are not said with impunity. Just let Aquatica hear about these questions of yours, and you’ll receive a nice addition to your sentence.’ (111-112)

The threshold for truth is slightly raised in prison, compared to the outside world. At least Tichy finds out that the ideal has not been achieved and he

learns why the people outside are eager to curtail his questions and foreclose their response. However, the fear still persists in prison, and the clearest warning Tichy has received so far comes from the oldest prisoner, who, arguably, has the least to lose. The other prisoners, on the other hand, refuse to even hear Tichy's question. Here Lem depicts the mentality of self-censorship or inner-censorship and how it works in a high-pressure society, even before any official intervention. Here we see how the prisoners foreclose any discourse in order to stay within the realm of the speakable. Being in prison makes their risk of losing their subjecthood even more substantial.

The lack of clear information from above is another characteristic of authoritarian state control of discourse. Lem illustrates this with the abolition of gurgling in "The Thirteenth Voyage". It starts as a rumour among the prisoners at the labour camp, saying that the leaders are calling for dryness. Then supervisors at the camp begin to "combat this defeatism". The rumour continues to spread and one night, the officials at the camp begin to dry their compound and caulk up their boats. They begin to modify the statues of fish into normal Pantans with limbs. The lecturer even begins to teach the prisoners new songs in praise of dryness, but is quickly "recalled to the capital and never came back." (114-115).

The chaos and confusion at the camp come directly from the lack of information and transparency from the government. Without trusted sources of information, local authorities are left to fend for themselves. The same can be applied to censorship at the time of the "thaw", where official censors lack a clear guideline, and publishers have to do most of the work themselves. In

that case, just as how the camp quickly gives up the fishy ideals, sensitive texts can sometimes sail through editors and censors undetected. However, for this to happen, a certain amount of inner-censorship and foreclosure needs to take place in order to disguise the message behind the façade. Just as how “The Thirteenth Voyage” masks its own political allegory with metaphors and fantasy.

Two: Satire and the Absurd

“The Thirteenth Voyage” bypassed the censors for various reasons including the fantastical elements of its SF setting. At the same time Lem’s use of satire and the absurd also contributes to the “cloaking and smuggling” of messages. Furthermore, in the following chapter I will argue that the interaction between the SF genre, satire and the absurd not only makes each of the elements more effective, but also helps the fiction to stay on the side of the speakable.

Before we proceed, I need to look into some of the terms that I will use in the following sections. The terms I am discussing now are “satire” and the “absurd”. Both are, understandably, rather fluid terms to pin down. Therefore, I am not interested in making any major theoretical claims about what satire and the absurd are. Instead, I will be setting out the parameters of their characteristics, in order to discuss both *The Futurological Congress* and my own novel through these parameters. As I will expound later, Lem’s novel exhibits elements of both satire and the absurd, as well as effective interplay between the SF genre and these modes.

In his book *Modern Satire: Four Studies*, Peter Petro surveys different attempts to define what satire is (5-7) and comes to the conclusion that satire as a literary genre is an “umbrella term” that covers “a number of sub-genres, or small genres, types or kinds in verse or prose” (8). He continues to argue that although it is impossible to describe satire completely, it is still possible to discuss the “essentials” of it (8). Petro proposes that “[t]hese fall into two categories: *criticism* [...] and humor of the widest possible *variety* [...]”. Petro claims that “in general these two essentials are not disputed” and the

agreement on them is the minimal requirement to reconcile different studies of satire (8).

Because Petro's book deals mostly with modern³ satirical fiction (he discusses *The Good Soldier Švejk*, *The Master and Margarita*, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Breakfast of Champions*), he goes on to discuss the satirical novel in particular. Petro notes if we consider satire is a literary genre in itself in the tradition of Roman satire, then whether satirical fiction belongs to this genre is questionable. Since the satirical elements in novels might have to be subordinate to its story for the fiction to function, satire becomes one of many elements in the novel. Therefore, it is worth examining if these novels belong to the genre of literary satire (8). He later claims that the satirical novel can, under certain circumstances, be deemed satire. Petro notes that:

There are two possibilities: either we have a novel in which satire is truly an element only, when we talk about satiric "touches", or satiric "coloring", or we have a satire, genuine literary form, possessing its own "peculiar power", and some hallmarks of its own – in "structure, substance, style, or motive – which allows us classify the work in its entirety as 'a satire'" (9).

The last sentence of this paragraph is quoted from Edward W. Rosenheim's *Swift and the Satirist's Art* (35). However, Petro also admits that these

³ By modern here, and later, I mean the literary tradition that starts with Modernism to contemporary.

elements (apart from the “most nebulous” one, “motive”) (Petro, 9) might not be present in every satirical novel. Therefore, he prefers terms by Northrop Frye, “‘tone’, ‘quality of art’, ‘attitude’, in as much they would not exclude ‘all the writers who have ignored the models but have preserved the tone and attitude of satire” (9). Petro concludes that if satire can take “any literary form”, it can certainly take the form of the novel, as much as a “formal verse satire” (9).

Targets and norms, according to Petro, act as an important set of elements in satire. Targets here are what the satire attacks whereas norms are the ideal model which the target is compared with, explicitly or implicitly. “Since one of the purposes of satire is to criticize, it should be obvious to the reader what is being criticized”, claims Petro. He notes that it is a “historical” approach for satire to make clear its target of attack, because the “individual, group, institution, custom, belief, or idea which is under attack” is not fictional. Which means, the writer of satire generally has some real-life targets for his satirical attacks. Therefore, the historical targets the writers took aim at need to be studied in order to understand the satirical elements of a piece of satirical fiction. Petro adds: “the illusion of fiction is inevitably dispelled as the reader recognizes the satiric target” (17). Petro then declares that:

The implications of this are twofold. First, the satiric target has a model, an ideal *counterpart*: a Platonic ideal, or its approximation in reality. [...] Second, this counterpart is given normative value by the satirist.

The ideal counterpart, whether explicitly (rarely) or implicitly (generally), is the *norm* from which the satiric target is an aberration. (17-18)

To put it another way, the satirist attacks the target for deviating from the “norm”. The “norm” is historical, the same as the “target”. However, the “norm” does not necessarily exist in real life, for it is an ideal evoked by the satirist when he attacks and criticises the “target”. Hence the writer makes a judgement on the values of both the norm and the target, which is often a moral one. Petro cites the question asked by the *Satire Newsletter* in their 1964 symposium “Is reference to moral norm essential to satire?” (18). But at the same time, Petro discusses the possibility of the norm being amoral and of a piece of literary work being analysed as a satire if it does not involve a norm (18-19). Petro argues that: “it is possible to imagine that a reader could dispute the positive value of this inherent implicit norm. For that particular reader, such disagreement would then nullify the satiric value of the target” (20). This nullification of the satiric value also means that if the reader is unsure of the implied norm, it will be hard for him or her to appreciate the satire itself. For without a clear “target”, the “attack” of the satire will seem aimless and likely to confuse the reader by not having a clearly defined aim. For the understanding of a target in the real world, Petro finds that the unclear target often leads to the reader having to rely on the narrator, who is sometimes not so reliable (21). The unreliable narrator, which is common among modern satire, often confuses the readers who identify with them during reading, for

sometimes they are the target of satire or have different moral compass than the ideal. When modern satire is unclear with its targets and norms, an unreliable narrator further complicates the matter.

Jonathan Greenberg, in his book *Modernism, Satire, and the Novel*, analyses how modern novelists deal with satire. Greenberg singles out the moral value of the “norm” that Petro analyses as he discusses past definitions of satire. He makes the argument that “[t]he moral element separates satire from pure comedy; the objects of satiric laughter are experienced not as trivial but as ‘harmful or destructive’” (3). He continues to reason that in this argument, the moral element “tends to make satire a conservative mode [...] since the satire paints its target as deviating from a strong and stable set of communally held beliefs and at least implicitly urges reform” (Greenberg, 3). These “communally held beliefs” are not dissimilar to the “norms” that Petro mentions in his argument. “Such ‘conservatism’” suggests “both a certainty of authorial meaning and a promotion of social consensus” (3). It is clear then, that this “norm” is seen here as a social and moral norm that is upheld by the satirist and the “targets” of satire are the people, behaviours and ideas that deviate from it. “To achieve its moral aims, satire has been understood to deploy techniques that involve wit, play, and fantasy” (3). This description corresponds to Petro’s “humor of the widest variety”. These techniques, as I have pointed out above, also serve to foreclose discourse, or avoid censorship. Similar to the “critical” element of Petro’s, Greenberg points out that “[t]his playful or provocative dimension of satire, moreover, is not purely festive or comic, but involves mockery, malice and derision. The result is that satire can

appear anarchic, subversive and destructive.” (Greenberg, 4). These two elements, according to Greenberg, “create an unstable force field in which an ethical content clashes with a playful and often destructive form, in which subversive means are used to promote conservative ends” (4). This statement goes much further than Petro’s overview of satire by describing the dynamics of these two essentials of satire. By subverting the relationship between the perceived “target” and the implied “norm”, the modern satirist further disorientates the reader by taking away the anchoring elements in satire. That is to say, the change in the relationship of these two elements provokes a more complicated reading into both the “target” and the “norm”, and also, therefore, the satire in its entirety. However, the promotion of a moral value over its violation, however playfully presented, can mean advocacy of a conservative end.

It is worth noting that Greenberg implies that this argument only applies to pre-modernist satire, therefore cannot cover most of the Twentieth Century fiction we discuss here. Similarly, Petro notes that “[t]here is a consensus among the critics that satire is no longer in the reform business” (19). Greenberg admits that the “modernist-era thinkers” have attempted a “theoretical resolution of this paradox by recognizing in the moral motive of satire a mere disguise for the more primitive delight in the depiction of corrupt targets” (4). He concludes the section by stating that:

Thus emerges what I will be calling the *double movement of satire*: on the one hand, the satirist speaks for a community,

exaggerating and ridiculing his target in order to urge reform; on the other, he is a renegade who enjoys the subversion of traditional values, delights in his own aesthetic powers, even savors the cruelty he inflicts. (7)

In other words, while speaking for an audience that identifies with what the norm represents and ridicules the target along with the author, the satirist also takes delight in how his or her target deviates from the norm and how cruelly the target is ridiculed. This argument of two-way action means that although the satirist's main purpose might be a moral one, the choice of using satire, instead of "sermon, invective, or polemic" (7) for pure ethical ends, is important. This choice means that the purpose of the literary piece is not for preaching but "criticising". The contrast between the target and the norm, it follows, means that the undesirability of the target departing from the norm is as important as the desirability of the norm itself. At the same time, the humour and wit used in attacking and ridiculing is an aesthetic end in and of itself or a means to engage with foreclosure, rather than simply a means to attack. Each element of satire is carefully selected and determined for aesthetic reasons to serve the satirist for promoting the moral point. The selection and utilisation of these elements is what sets apart satire from preaching. The target and the norm, therefore, are as important as the moral purpose they serve for a piece to successfully satirise. For Greenberg, even the target is chosen for aesthetic and subversive reasons, as well as a wish to reform. The rationale behind the choice will lead to the realisation that the "norm" and communal "consensus"

might not be so ideal and stable for some satirists, for they also wish to destabilise the “norm” and the “consensus”, along with the target. Petro also admits the difficulties in identifying the “norm” sometimes, which comes from “the satirist’s uncertainty and ethical relativism” (18). Which is to say, if the satirist is unsure of what the agreed norms are, or they if they don’t have an implied ideal in their work, it will be hard for the readers to determine where the norm is and who to align themselves with. This lack of clarity in turn creates a much more complicated reading experience for the audience of modern satire. The writer’s aesthetic choices become thematic choices and the uncertainty outweighs the attack itself.

This choice is potentially a product of satire’s interaction with censorship, either from the authority or through foreclosure. However, that interaction brings the question back to the author’s agency. Sometimes the author merely “cloaks and smuggles” his or her messages with the lack of clarity but still manages to create a communal consensus with his or her intended readership. The foreclosure in this case lies more in the expression than in the content of the discourse. In other cases, the unclarity stems from the lack of real-life norms. In times of polarising and battling ideologies such as during the Cold War, an attack of one side will expect a praise for the other. When writers like Lem find fault in both the Western and the Eastern modes, the norm becomes intangible and the satire ambivalent.

It is worth noting that Greenberg claims that the “uncertainty and ethical relativism” are deliberately created for artistic ends, instead of being a reflection or by-product of the authors’ own uncertainty of the times they were

writing in. He continues to argue his point with the modernist discussion on the communal “norm” (8). Greenberg raises the question of the society being either “disintegrated” or “overly integrated”, undermining the possible consensus amongst the readership of satire. He concludes that:

The modernity of satire, then, lies less in a particular moral, religious, or philosophical set of *values* that critical interpretation might recover from a novel or poem or film or play than in a kind of temperament or outlook, a satiric *sensibility* – a characteristic of the implied author and reader who savor the transgressive pleasures that satire affords, who may deride the chaos of modernity but also need it, even help to create it (9).

For both the modern satirist and the modern reader, the target is not simply an object of attack and ridicule, but something more complex. The subversive nature of the target’s violation of the communal consensus and the “norm” creates a complex, or even chaotic situation where the relationship between satire, its targets and norms can be rethought and deconstructed. This situation is in turn celebrated by the modern satirist and his or her reader, and the confusion that stems from the lack of clarity serves the purpose for modern satire. Greenberg calls defining feature of modern satire that remains when both the “target” and the “norm” have been subverted “*ironic redescription*”. He quotes Richard Rorty, who says, ““anything can be made to look good or bad by being redescribed,” Greenberg asks, “and what else is satire but a way

of redescribing things in order to make them look bad?” (9) By doing away the now unstable and unclear elements “target” and “norm”, “ironic redescription”, or re-describing things with irony “to make them look bad”, simplifies the definition of satire in a modern context.

In other words, modern satire sheds its moral purpose and without aligning itself with the values, or “norms”, draws its power from its “humour” and “attack” characteristics, or in Frye’s words, “tone”, “quality of art”, and “attitude”. Without an obvious position of the satirist and the clear relationship between the apparent “target” and implied “norm”, the only identifying feature of the modern satire becomes the act of “attack” accompanied by the humour. However, the lack of clear “targets” and “norms”, the modern satire inflicts an uncertainty on the reader. It is a literary characteristic that reflects the modernist sentiments of “ethical relativism” in satire.

I want to also briefly introduce the subgenre of Menippean satire because some of its elements are still present in satirical fiction. Northrop Frye, in his influential *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* discusses Menippean satire. Named after Greek cynic Menippus, the genre is a mix of verse and prose that “deals less with people as such than with mental attitudes (309). That is to say, the targets and norms are mostly ideas rather than people or institutions. Menippean satire, according to Frye, is able to “handle abstract ideas and theories” while being “stylistic rather than naturalistic, and presents people as mouthpieces of the ideas they represent” (309). We can still find elements of these in modern satire, especially in the Lem pieces I am discussing in my essay, and in my own novel. Menippean satire differs from

other traditional satires because satire in this case means “a structural principle or attitude”, or *Mythos*, rather than a literary form, and that attitude is “a combination of fantasy and morality” (310). To put it another way, being stylistic and lacking naturalistic settings or characters, satire can present fantastic elements as well as its traditional moral values. I will discuss the fantastic features of satire later in this chapter.

Mikhail Bakhtin describes Menippean satire in greater detail. In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin identifies Menippean satire as a genre of “carnivalized literature”—literature that is influenced by variants of “carnivalistic folklore” (107). Bakhtin lists several characteristics of the genre. I will try to summarise those that are particularly relevant to our discussion of satire. First of all, Menippean satire has a great amount of comic elements, which is a “carnival nature” (114). Also, similar to Frye’s insight, Bakhtin finds Menippean satire “characterized by an extraordinary freedom of plot and philosophical invention” as well as the free “use of the fantastic” (114). The “bold and unrestrained use of the fantastic and adventure”, notes Bakhtin, aims to create “*extraordinary situations*” to provoke and test philosophical ideas instead of “an individual or a social type” (114-115). Bakhtin argues that in a sense, “menippea is the adventure of an *idea* or a *truth* in the world” (115). SF, a modern fantastic genre that often foregrounds the adventures of ideas over the psychological experiences of characters, thus presents itself as potentially an ideal genre for these Menippean elements. Menippean satire, or menippea, Bakhtin maintains, combines organically “philosophical dialogue, symbol-systems, the adventure-fantastic and slum naturalism”, as well as “an

extraordinary philosophical universalism” (115). With syncretism/juxtaposition, menippea presents “stripped-down ‘ultimate questions’” (116). Another characteristic of Menippean satire is what Bakhtin calls “experimental fantasticality”: “observation from some unusual point of view” (116). A characteristic that is important for our purpose here is that Menippean satire “often includes elements of *social utopia*” (118). Bakhtin points out that “[t]his utopian element is organically combined with all the other elements other elements of the genre, and “sometimes the menippea grows outright into a utopian novel” (118). This utopian element is relevant especially when we bring Menippean elements into SF, such as in Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed*, which, although not a satire in any way, nonetheless contains some elements of the Menippean. In the novel, the utopian idea makes its adventure from Urras to Anarres with the Odonians, then comes back with Shevek’s, the protagonist’s, research before journeying further with the ansible theory. Another important element, especially when I discuss Lem and my own novel later, is Menippean satire’s “wide use of inserted genres”. Different literary genres are mixed in menippea, with “varying degrees of parodying and objectification” (118). I have incorporated parody of genre fiction in my novel at different levels, which I will come back to later. The last characteristic of Menippean satire is “its concern with current and topical issues” (118). This “journalistic quality” permeates SF and is a trait of all the Lem pieces I am discussing, as well as my novel, and serves as a bridge for Menippean elements to appear in SF. As Bakhtin observes, Menippean satire is “capable

of infiltrating the large genres, subjecting them to a certain transformation” (120-121).

To look at how satire (Menippean or not) works within a SF paradigm, I would like to briefly discuss the genre of science fiction. Darko Suvin’s influential definition “cognitive estrangement” is particularly relevant to the consideration of elements of satire and later the absurd in SF. I have no intention to argue whether Suvin’s definition is accurate enough or needs to be improved upon, as many before me have sufficiently argued⁴. However, I do, in principle, subscribe to the idea of “cognitive estrangement” as an adequate description of the genre, or in Carl Freedman’s words, the “general tendency” of the genre (Freedman, 22). In his book *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*, Suvin identifies SF as “the literature of cognitive estrangement” (Suvin, 4). He borrows the term “estrangement”, developed by Russian Formalists and made famous by Bertolt Brecht, to describe the “attitude” of certain fiction. Suvin describes fiction that recreates the author’s “empirical” world or “zero” world as “naturalistic fiction”; conversely, he proposes to call fiction that signifies the real world and its human relations with “radically or significantly different formal framework” as estranged fiction (18). Amongst estranged fiction, Suvin finds SF unique in its “cognition”. According to Suvin, SF deals with “fictional (‘literary’) hypothesis and develops it with totalizing (‘scientific’) rigor” (6). In other words, SF is different from genres such as fantasy and fairy-tale in that

⁴ See Gregory Renault’s “Science Fiction as Cognitive Estrangement: Darko Suvin and the Marxist Critique of the Mass Culture”, Simon Spiegel’s “Things Made Strange: on the concept of ‘Estrangement’ in Science Fiction Theory” and Rhys Williams’s “Recognizing Cognition: On Suvin, Miéville, and the Utopian Impulse of Contemporary Fantastic”.

it treats its “estranging devices” (10) with scientific the rigor of “realistic” fiction or non-fiction, and “use[s] imagination as a means of understanding the tendencies latent in reality” (8). Suvin then concludes that:

SF is, then, a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author’s empirical environment (8).

That is to say, SF fiction is defined by the interacting elements of estrangement, which distance the fictional world from the author’s real world, and a cognitive quality that serves as “not only a reflecting *of* but also *on* reality” (10). This definition has been critiqued as too broad and too narrow⁵. It has also been modified by others such as Freedman in his book *Critical Theory and Science Fiction*. Although Freedman calls Suvin’s definition “not only fundamentally sound but indispensable” (17), Freedman loosens the term cognition into what he calls “cognition effect” (18). Freedman frees the definition from the strict rational and scientific requirements by focusing on the “attitude *of the text itself* to the kind of estrangements being performed” (18). In other words, cognition should not be judged with the “scientific rigour” from outside the text, but with how the in-text attitude towards the estrangement. However, the cognitive value of SF is not the focus of what I am discussing in this chapter, because

⁵ Renault argues that Suvin’s definition “has to be narrow enough to disqualify mythic SF and science fantasy, yet broad enough to include the imaginary creatures and events of early utopia” (131)

both satire and the absurd work on the “estrangement” side of fiction, and SF specifically.

In *Metamorphoses* Suvin also introduces the idea of “novum”—a term he developed from Ernst Block (Suvin, 64)—to denominate the novelty and innovation in fiction. Suvin describes that “[a] novum of cognitive innovation is a totalizing phenomenon or relationship deviating from the author’s and implied reader’s norm of reality” (64). All the estranging devices in SF and other “estranged fictions” fall under the category of the novum, including all new “invention”, “setting” and characters (64). However, arbitrary featuring of futuristic gadgets or setting does not qualify as SF under Suvin’s definition for Suvin goes on to claim that:

An SF narration is a fiction in which the SF element of aspect, the novum, is hegemonic. That is, so central and significant that it determines the whole narrative logic—or at least the overriding narrative logic—regardless of any impurities that might be present (70).

What separates SF from other non-realistic fiction is “the validation of the novelty by scientifically methodical cognition into which the reader is inexorably led” (66). In other words, the novum in SF has to follow a certain “scientific” logic, at least in a “mental experiment” sense. The conclusion of Suvin’s is particularly important since we are looking at SF’s interaction with satire:

All the epistemological, ideological, and narrative implications and correlatives of the novum lead to the conclusion that significant SF is in fact a specifically roundabout way of commenting on the author's collective context—often resulting in a surprisingly concrete and sharp-sighted comment at that (84).

I shall argue that this comment's being "roundabout" is perhaps why the SF genre are particularly good in "cloaking and smuggling" in ideas—satirical, absurd, or otherwise—when faced with censorship. Because the novum alters the real-world ideas and keeps them in the speakable domain, the estrangement entailed by SF functions as a form of foreclosure. Satire, therefore, is "twice removed" from its real-life targets and norms when set up in an SF world.

In *Metamorphoses*, Suvin designates two types of SF, based on extrapolation and on analogy. The extrapolative model features speculation or "anticipation" of future events. However, he maintains that "[i]t is [...] dubious [...] that significant SF could be simply extrapolation" (28). The analogic model, on the other hand, sees analogy between the estranged fictional world and the author's empirical one. Suvin points out a spectrum of analogous SF which spans from "the lowest form" that extrapolates backwards to historical or ethnographic worlds of the past to the purest form which is "analogy to a

mathematical model, [...] as well as the ontological analogies found in a compressed overview form” (29).

Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed* fits the “ontological analogy” criteria closely. The two great nations on Urras are modelled after, or compressed overviews of, the 1970s United States and Soviet Union. However, both nations serve as foils for the “ambiguous utopia”—Anarres, the imperfect utopian world that is not an extrapolation of any tendency of our world in the early 1970s, but a thought experiment of sorts about anarchic communism. The “roundabout” comment *The Dispossessed* has for our world is, therefore, less about the state it was than how it could be or should have been. The nova of the novel include the commonplace space travel, but the core novum, apart from the social experiments on Anarres, is Shevek’s research on the ansible. The research not only provides the “cognitive validation” but also is part of the formal “estrangement” that manifests in the novel’s cyclical structure and the diegetic weltanschauung that comes with the outcome of Shevek’s research.

It is worth noting that when discussing the “purest form” of analogous SF, Suvin declares that “these *modern parables* fuse new visions of the world with an applicability—usually satirical and grotesque—to the shortcomings of our workaday world” (30). Although Suvin’s subjective evaluation of significance plays a large part here, the point still stands that satire and the grotesque suit the SF genre well when dealing with social commentary. Suvin admits that SF:

Is not [...] an orthodox allegory with any one-to-one correspondence of its elements to elements in the author's reality, its specific modality of existence is a feedback oscillation that moves now from the author's and implied reader's norm of reality to the narratively actualized novum in order to understand the plot events, and now back from those novelties to author's reality in order to see it afresh from the new perspective gained (71).

This estrangement operates in a more complex mode than "orthodox allegory" because of the "totalising" effect of the novelty provided by SF. The "modern parable" only occurs when the plot events are understood, and the new perspective of reality has been gained by the implied reader. Here I want to argue further that the "humour/wit in the widest sense" in satire is indeed a form of novum, and when satire is fused into SF, the humour or wit can sometimes inhibit in the cognitive or scientific plane as part of the setting in SF.

Suvin compares SF to satire in a somewhat inconsistent fashion on the surface. He states that "[e]xtrapolating one feature or possibility of the author's environment may be a legitimate literary device of hyperbolization equally in anticipation-tales, other SF [...] or indeed in a number of other genres such as satire" (78). But he almost immediately argues that the cognitive process of SF is "based on an aesthetic hypothesis akin to the proceedings of satire or pastoral rather than those of futurology. Or political programs" (78). Both

statements are made on the basis of the “cognitive value” should be based on the analogy to the author’s present times that I’ve discussed in the previous paragraph, although upon further inspection, satire can, at the same time, contain extrapolation of “one feature or possibility” and has an “aesthetic hypothesis” as basis. The “feature or possibility” that is being extrapolated from normally serves as the target that satire attacks. The “aesthetic hypothesis”, judging from the context, should mean the “analogical reference to the author’s present”, which is what “successful” satire does when creating the communal consensus. The similarities would mean that satire can operate in both extrapolative and analogous modes of SF and when successful, should qualify as Suvin’s “significant” SF.

Indeed, Suvin identifies another characteristic of SF that satire can naturally take advantage of when the two modes fuse. Suvin discusses the artistic freedom of the novum and points out that “the distinction between true and fake novum [i.e. superficial and irrelevant change] is [...] not only a key to aesthetic quality in SF but also to its ethico-political liberating qualities” (82). Aesthetic consistency, argues Suvin, combines with the “ethical” or “communal (political)” in an “open-ended system” similar to the cognition of SF instead of being static or the end-product of history, so that the “more significant and truly relevant” SF “eschews final solutions” (83). This description is not dissimilar to the modern satire that not only revels in ridiculing the target but also enjoys subverting the norm. When the disruptive elements of modern satire appear in SF, it will, then, eschew the “final solutions” and provide the open-ended system that SF needs.

Apart from Lem and others from the Eastern Bloc, satirical SF was also popular in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s. In fact, Kingsley Amis, in his book *New Maps of Hell: A Survey of Science Fiction* identifies various examples of American SF with satirical elements. Amis introduces Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) as the archetypal "comic-satirical utopia" (ch.1) and also on multiple occasions refers to SF, especially the utopian variety as "satire" or "warning", sometimes both (ch.1,2 and 4). Of the utopian (anti-utopian and dystopian) SF authors, Frederik Pohl (1919-2013) is celebrated as "the most consistently able writer science fiction, in the modern sense, has yet produced" (ch.5). Pohl's mode, as Amis notes, is "typically the satirical utopia" (ch.5). Pohl's method is "selective exaggeration of observable feature of our society" (ch.5). Pohl's collection of short stories *The Case Against Tomorrow* (1957) and his collaborative novels with Cyril M. Kornbluth *The Space Merchants* (1952), *Search the Sky* (1954) and *Gladiator-At-Law* (1955) (Amis, Chapter One, Five) are all discussed at length as examples of satirical utopian SF. Other satirical works from this period surveyed by Amis include Philip K. Dick's early short story "The Defenders" (1953), Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), "Unhuman Sacrifice" (1958) by Kathrine MacLean, and multiple works by Robert Sheckley such as "A Ticket to Tranai" (1955). It is clear that satire and SF was crossing paths in the West, at the same time as Lem.

My discussion on satire is so far mostly confined within a literary tradition, focusing on the satirical novel. It might be useful to look beyond the literary satire and discuss satire as a discursive practice. In his book *On the*

Discourse of Satire, Paul Simpson analyses satirical humour on humorological, linguistic and discursive levels, discussing its social nature. Simpson notes that satire is a type of multi-function humour, which is a synthesis of at least three different functions of humour. Similar to Petro and Greenberg, Simpson summarises the essential features of satire: “[i]t singles out an object of attack”; it has “an intellectual function because it relies upon linguistic creativity which extends the full resources of the system of language” (3). This creativity includes but is not restricted to the “humour” literary critics discuss. It also has a “social function”, “because inter-group bonds, in particular, are consolidated in ‘successful’ satire” (3). It means that “successful” satire creates a sense of community in its readers, not dissimilar to the “consensus” pointed out by Petro. Different groups of readers are bonded by this communal experience satire creates, through humour and the attack. There remains the possibility of a community between Lem and his critics, as Lem describes above. The elements Simpson identifies are essentially the same as the “criticism”, “moral values” or “sensitivity” and “humour” listed by Petro and Greenberg as features of satirical literature. The difference here, is that Simpson lists the social function of satire as a feature as important as Petro’s “essentials” and combines the values and sensitivity of Greenberg. We can see here that satirical humour per Simpson has almost the same identifying characteristics as the literary critics’ descriptions offer. This similarity helps when considering satire in fiction as a discursive element rather than a literary genre, for modern satirical fiction is more complex than pure satire. It also helps to identify satirical discourse in fiction that is not on the whole a piece of satire.

Incidentally, Simpson differentiates his study and literary criticism, pointing out that his subject is satire that “functions as a higher-order discourse, in the Foucaultian sense; higher than what systemic-functional and other linguists classify as genre or register, and certainly higher than what literary-critics traditionally mean by the term ‘genre of literature’.” (8) This means that satire as a form of discourse, is more of a way of communication than a literary genre. Just as humour exists before humorous texts, satire precedes the literary satire. By discussing satire as a discourse, we can clearly identify the satirical elements in fiction. Therefore, we can separate fiction with satirical element from literary satire as a genre, instead of applying imprecise terms such as “satirical fiction” to the works we analyse. However, before analysing satire as a discourse, we need to discuss what being a discourse entails. Simpson also identifies the three subjects of this discursive practice: the satirist, the satiree (the addressee) and the satirised (the target). By adding the addressee, or the readership in literary instances, we can see the purpose of Simpson’s emphasis on satire’s social function. By bringing the social function at the same level as the Petro’s two essentials, Simpson’s discursive model focuses on how satire is communicated. Simpson expounds on the three parties by explaining that:

The interactive bonds between the three subject positions in satire are, moreover, open to redefinition in the context of particular satirical humour events. Whereas satire which is successfully “taken up” may draw closer the satirist and satiree,

a failed or “misfired” satire tends to destabilise and reshape the relationships in the triad by serving on the one hand to distance the satirist from the satiree, and on the other, by drawing together the satire and the satirised target. To this extent, a certain amount of calculated interactive risk attaches to the creation and dissemination of satirical discourse. (8)

That is to say that the dynamics between the satirist and his or her readers (or addressees otherwise) is of great importance for the satire to achieve its intended purpose, or be “successful”. Otherwise, the satirist risks driving the readers towards his targets. I agree with Simpson on the importance of the relationship between the satirist with his or her readers. However, as Greenberg has pointed out, the modern satirist does not necessarily align with his or her “norm” against his or her target, due to their moral ambivalence. They do, in some instances, deliberately subvert the “norm” using their targets. In these cases, the satirist is inviting their audiences to consider critically the “norm” and the satire. Furthermore, as time passes and the readers’ distance to the satirist grows, the communicational deviation, or schism will grow with it. In other words, the satirical quality will change with the readership. Since it is hard for a modern satire to establish a consensus in the first place, keeping it will be harder still. This predicament recalls what Lem explains in his interview with Raymond Federman that: “There are certain situations in which one cannot write, cannot examine a question, render a problem other than in a humoristic way, or rather, ironically” (“An Interview with Stanisław Lem”, 4).

These situations where satire cannot take full effect unless it incorporates elements of the absurd.

The discussion around *The Futurological Congress* frequently includes its absurd elements. Absurdity in the novel exists not only in the details, but to some extent in the premise of the entire plot. To introduce the concept of the absurd, I will be citing primarily from *Reading the Absurd* (2013) Joanna Gavins and to some extent Arnold P. Hinchliffe's *The Absurd* (2018). Gavins discusses the absurd from its existentialist philosophical roots to its manifestations in different literary works, especially fiction as well as their features and characteristics. Hinchliffe begins from similar grounds but focuses on introducing different writers and their works.

Gavins starts by stating "that the absurd as a literary phenomenon is an artistic expression of human being's inability to find inherent meaning in their existence" (1). Which is to say, the absurd is very closely associated with existentialism and its fundamental questions, "not least in their shared recognition of the intrinsic meaninglessness of human life" (2). In *The Absurd*, Hinchliffe analyses the absurd from its beginning in existentialism in his chapter on both Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. Hinchliffe notes that existentialism for Sartre "is the opposition between sincerity and Bad Faith" (25). Bad Faith is the denial of the freedom of choices we have in life, summarises Hinchliffe. "[t]his freedom, which brings anguish, springs from our recognition of Nothingness" (25) and that "the 'sincere' man faces Nothingness and experiences 'nausea'" (25). The feeling of absurd comes from the notion of the immense freedom brought by the "Nothingness" that people are, when

the options in life are endless. Hinchliffe summarises thusly: “what we value is wholly contingent – to pretend otherwise would be Bad Faith. We cannot pretend that there are any absolute moral laws to bind us, that any path of duty is mapped out for us, or that we can have a function or a mission.” (30) When everything is by choice, there is no longer and destiny or vocation, even value that is prerequisite or given by a higher order, whether it is God or human progress.

In other words, the absurdity is felt when we realise the freedom we have as nothing. We are not programmed as anything at our birth and we have all the choices ahead of us. The social and moral rules that we adhere to are of choice instead of nature. We are not inherently anything but of our choices. Denying the freedom and choices is denying our own agency and is bad faith. The absurd, therefore, is when the norms and values are challenged, and where Bad Faith is exposed. One thing worth noting is that the aforementioned modernist moral ambivalence also challenges the norms and values in satire since there is no settled moral consensus for the norms to establish. This challenge is, no doubt, partly due to the fact that the existential absurd has also evolved out of the modernist sentimentality. But it is also imperative to consider how satire and the absurd are linked in the modern context, which I will explore in the next few paragraphs.

Hinchliffe turns to Camus by pointing out that “[t]he Absurd, for Camus, is an absence of correspondence between the mind’s need for unity and the chaos of the world the mind experiences, and the obvious response is either suicide or, in the opposite direction, a leap of faith” (36). To my understanding,

for Camus, absurdity occurs where the perception of the world is so chaotic that the mind is unable to process. The discord is similar to but not the same as Sartre's absurdity. However, both can lead to the situation where, per Gavins, one is unable to "find inherent meaning in their existence". We will then proceed to Gavin's introduction to the literary absurd.

Gavins discusses the humour in absurd fiction. It is worth pointing out that, after dismissing studies that only focus on absurdist drama as of little help when dealing with non-dialogue situations, she turns to the discursal studies of humour, and cites Simpson's *On the Discourse of Satire* as a source (48-49). The main model Gavins employs, however, is one called "General Theory of Verbal Humour (henceforth GTVH)" (49). GTVH analyses verbal humour in general. Gavins applies the theory to absurd humour in fiction, noting:

The key to verbal humour, according to GTVH, is the way in which incongruous scripts are opposed, so that the expected, normal or plausible behaviours and situations are contrasted with unexpected, abnormal or implausible eventualities. (49)

"Scripts" here means "knowledge stores of stereotyped sequences of actions and events which characterise familiar situations and are constructed in the mind as the result of repeated experience" (49). This "script", then, can be understood as accepted norms of situations and behaviours. This definition explains that when two incompatible norms clash, the unexpected outcome

creates humour. Gavins furthers her argument on absurd humour by applying this definition in GTVH to absurd humour and states:

The final critical point in verbal humour is that of “resolution”, when the incongruity established through the opposition of scripts is first identified and then resolved by the reader or listener. Most interestingly, Attardo agrees that the degree of resolution achieved in humorous texts can vary and that adequate resolution is least likely to occur in what he terms “absurd humour” (Attardo, 409). (Gavins, 49)

This unresolved incongruity is a key element of absurd humour. Indeed, without resolution, the opposing “scripts” will stay unbalanced and create an emotional uncertainty in its reader. This uncertainty stems from both the clash between “norms”, and the lack of definite outcome. The surprising outcome is essential to verbal humour, but the lack of resolution is equally surprising, if not more, than an unexpected resolution to a humorous situation.

We can see from above that both satire and the absurd employ humour as one of their main features. They are, broadly speaking, both built upon the clash of two sets of values: satire bases itself on the breaching of the “norm” by the “target” whereas the absurd the unresolved incongruity between “scripts”. The question then is if there are deeper connections between the two genres, other than satirical elements that sometimes appear in absurdist fiction. I will venture to find further links between the two literary genres.

Gavins also identifies “foregrounded fictionality” as a “key feature of the literary absurd” (133). She notes that “[r]eaders are made simultaneously aware of the imaginative content of the text-worlds of a fiction and of its materiality in such cases, complicating immersion in the narrative world and foregrounding the fictional status of the text” (133). By challenging the suspension of disbelief with imagination and absurdity, the fictionality of the fiction is pushed to the foreground. This foregrounded fictionality, I would like to add, sometimes comes from the process of foreclosure. It can manifest itself in many ways including the unreliable narrator, which is not a feature exclusive to the absurd. Gavins suggests that “[o]f equal importance in the understanding of absurd characterisation is a recognition of the overwhelming and pervasive sense of isolation and uncertainty that [the unreliable narrators] share” (96). Which is to say that the unreliable narrator is the result of an isolated and uncertain situation spawned from the absurd atmosphere of the fiction. The lack of resolution not only manifests itself in the clashing “scripts”, but also in the narrator, both as the character and the language. The unreliable narrator creates much uneasiness and uncertainty within the absurd fiction. When the narrator is also the protagonist of the story, the narrator itself creates the absurd incongruity and becomes the typical “absurd protagonist”. Citing H. Weinberg, Gavins identifies the absurd protagonist who is “passive, rationalistic, or hopelessly ineffectual victim-hero, dominated by his situation rather than creating or acting to change it” (Weinberg, 10). When the narration is in first person, the passivity of the protagonist will in turn enhance the unreliability of the narrator/protagonist for it only observes the events but

unable to effectively interfere. Both the protagonist and the narration become mutated and unstable, leaving the reader with an unresolved uncertainty.

After analysing features and characteristics of both satire and the absurd, I shall now explore instances where texts have both satirical and absurd elements, especially in a modern context where satire is ambivalent and the absurd appears. Greenberg expands his “ironic redescription” definition of satire by adding that: “[i]n making things look bad, satiric redescriptions frequently produce the grotesque” (9). In defining the term “grotesque” Greenberg asserts:

The grotesque can describe either objective *content* – often, but not necessarily, deformed, misshapen, or hybrid bodies – or subjective *experience* – the emotional instability that grotesque content tends to produce in a reader. This emotional instability, moreover, is itself fundamentally ambivalent, mixing contradictory affective conditions. (9)

To put it another way, by redescribing subjects and turning them into “deformed, misshapen, or hybrid bodies”, satire turns to the grotesque. But at the same time, the grotesque can also describe the unstable feeling the reader of the grotesque content experiences. This experience, it seems, shares many similarities to what the absurd produces in a reader. The sense of ambivalence, contradiction and disorientation is a hallmark of the absurd text, established by its unreliable narrators and aforementioned unresolved humour. Then, it is

reasonable to argue that since the absurd often induces similar emotional uncertainty in the reader as the grotesque satire, they too, should share some similarities. The absurdist content can also contain “deformed, misshapen or hybrid bodies” for its foregrounded fictionality. In this sense, the absurd sometimes contains grotesque content. When satire goes as far as being grotesque, it naturally possesses some characteristics of the absurd, such as the imbalance and foregrounded fictionality. It then follows that many pieces of Lem’s work including “The Thirteenth Voyage” and *The Futurological Congress* combine the elements of satire and the absurd, sometimes with characteristics of the grotesque. Greenberg cites Wolfgang Kayser’s theory of the grotesque in his book as his main model. But he also notes Mikhail Bakhtin’s criticism that Kayser’s theory applies only to the “modernist” variation of the grotesque (9). However, it is worth noting that Greenberg specifies that the grotesque satire takes cue from the existentialist ideas, similar to the absurd. He describes Kayser’s theory thusly: “[d]rawing on much of the same material as Freud does in ‘The Uncanny’, Kayser sees the grotesque in loosely existential terms, as an invocation of, and play with, a fundamental human alienation from the world” (10). This conclusion means that at least to Kayser, the grotesque comes from the same existential roots as the absurd.

Stanisław Lem’s short story “The Eleventh Voyage”, taken from the same collection *The Star Diaries* (47-88), presents elements of both satire and the absurd. It is also worth noting that many, if not all of the stories in *The Star Diaries* are Gulliverian adventures, often of ideas, which can be seen as a

Menippean trait⁶. It follows Ijon Tichy's mission on a planet populated by robots. A runaway supercomputer from earth landed on the planet years ago after reportedly murdering the crew on the ship it was on and colonised the world with robots that it made. Tichy takes the mission from an insurance company along with the Pinkerton Agency to repossess the computer as compensation. Before they approached Tichy, the Pinkertons has already sent and lost contact with more than two thousand agents. From their intelligence, Tichy learns that the Computer has established a dictatorship and cult-like worship surrounding itself after learning human atrocities from the library it was carrying on its last mission. The computer has also created a new language similar to early modern English for its robots. Its robot subjects, on the other hand, are conditioned to hate the humans as they have been led to believe that humans want nothing but the destruction of all robots.

Tichy infiltrates the planet in disguise. He flies to the target world in a rocket disguised as a grain elevator, with himself covered in a metal shell, pretending to be a robot. He reads a huge amount of literature including advertisements from the planet to learn its language and culture. It is worth noting that here Lem parodies archaic languages to illustrate how the Computer has created its own language. Tichy's reading materials are reproduced on page, many pieces of them in full. It is arguably an instance of "inserted genres" from Menippean satire, where advertisement is mixed in with the fiction.

⁶ *Gulliver's travels* (1726) is incidentally an example Frye gives when discussing the Menippean satire (Frye, 308)

Tichy leaves his rocket outside the city near a robot graveyard. The state that the Computer has created is a police state, with patrolling officers and literature on how to recognise a human everywhere Tichy sees. Tichy gets reported by his neighbours very soon and is arrested. After some maltreatment, Tichy is brought to the Computer, who offers him life, if he becomes an undercover agent for the police (or harbediers in robot language) and help them unmask human agents like him infiltrating the robot state.

After finding out that his rocket has been destroyed, Tichy finds a team of robot police officers dispersing into berry bushes outside the city at night. He approaches one munching berries and finds out that he is a human spy sent here years ago. They decide to meet the next day only for Tichy to find that the officer has marked him to be caught by the police again. Tichy then goes out of town the next night and marks every "robot" that is eating the berries when no one is watching. The next morning, he follows them one by one out of their barracks and unmasks them, finding them all to be human defectors like himself. He then does random tests on the street and finds that everyone he's encountered are actually humans. He forms a theory that the robots the Computer originally built have all expired in the humid climate of the planet and since then it has been converting human agents into robotic subjects, who will never break and will be more loyal and frantic due to fear.

Tichy goes back to the palace where he met the Computer. He finds no computer but an old clerk operating a system with documents and a microphone. The entire planet has been a training and testing programme for human agents. No agent was allowed to leave since all agents have

succumbed to the Computer and none of them was willing to die for the human cause. Tichy then pretends to be the Computer using the microphone and calls all its subjects to a square and asks them to unmask each other. Initial hatred for spies gradually turns to confusion, then relief and cheering. Tichy takes the only rocket hidden in the palace and leaves, leaving the agents stranded on the “robot” planet.

Like “The Thirteenth Voyage” discussed above, “The Eleventh Voyage” is, at least partially, a satire of totalitarian societies. The Computer and the society it has built are clearly modelled after the authoritarian leaders and their police states in the Eastern Bloc and elsewhere in history. The way the Computer fashions itself as the creator of all (mechanical) life in Magnifica—the state it has built—is very close to personality cults surrounding leaders such as Joseph Stalin or Adolf Hitler. The robots express their hatred for their exploiters and arch enemies—the humans, through calling names such as gooks and mussilids, and adding things like “Mussilid infaunt, decapitatus” to their menu (70). To Tichy’s surprise, there is an opposition on the planet, also run by the Computer (60). When Tichy is arrested, he is assigned a solicitor who shows no compassion or loyalty towards his client and is practically part of the interrogation.

These vignettes of Magnifica show that story aims its real-life target at authoritarian police states with personality cults around its leaders. However, it is less clear where Lem has set his norm in this story. The robots’ hostility to the humans finds its analogy in the paranoia the Eastern Bloc shows towards the west, but the human culture does not present itself as the antidote to the

Computer's tyranny. Tichy, before attending the briefing, has sent his own servant robot It for repair, for it has been driven mad from overwork. The Computer, if the story of its hijacking the ship is real, is also driven mad the same way, but with added abuse from another crew member. It is probably not a coincidence that the word robot is derived from the Czech word "forced labour" (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*). The way the insurance company and the Pinkerton agents treats the Computer as property also adds to the irony. The capitalist exploitation of labour is to an extent another target for Lem's satire in this story. It follows that a democratic open society, at least in the capitalist form that the West styles itself to be, is not the norm in "The Eleventh Voyage". The double-twist ending also subverts the relationship between robots and humans. When Tichy finds out that all robots are humans underneath, the target becomes how people would bow to power in face of terror, and how they behave more frantically than supposed robots because of their fear of being found out again. However, when it is revealed that the computer is actually a human pretending to be a machine, and the entire Magnifica is a constructed device to train and test agents, the satire turns on its head again since the satire seems to be about how a seemingly more open society creates authoritarian regimes away with their (in the case of the story, outsourced) intelligence agencies. The target has shifted from Soviet Union and its communist allies to how the United States facilitates authoritarian governments in South America, Vietnam, and elsewhere.

How the robot state operates is certainly absurd. Its made-up language and bizarre paranoia against humans both foreground the fictionality. Although

later in the story, it becomes unclear if the language and hatred occurred naturally or are part of the human scheme. This lack of clarity is also, arguably, absurd to the reader. Tichy is as in other stories, a rather typical “absurd protagonist” up until he finds out that the robots are replaced with humans. However, the true existential absurd moment is when it is revealed, to Tichy, the readers and the robotic citizens respectively, that all the “robots” in Magnifica are humans, and it has been a scheme by people on earth all along. The strange act of roleplaying of flogging a fellow “robot” dressed up as a human child, the contempt they show on hearing about humans, and the cruelty they show towards Tichy and his rocket, and the fear they betray when Tichy approaches and unmasks them become pointless on an existential level when the truth is out. When the clerk behind the machine tells Tichy the truth about the Computer, even Tichy’s own deduction of a diabolical scheme by the Computer to convert humans to replace his subject becomes meaningless.

Similar to many works by Lem, “The Eleventh Voyage” contains elements of both satire and the absurd. The redescription is multi-layered and the satire points at different targets each time Tichy uncovers another piece in the puzzle. For example, the first and the second time the readers learn about machines going mad (Tichy’s servant robot and the Computer), we assume it is due to overwork and abuse. But the third time we hear it from a robot mental health expert on in Magnifica, it tells Tichy that robots in the state sometimes go mad and think they are humans. It is a foreshadowing of the truth behind the Computer and its robots, instead of an attack of human exploitation of robot labour. The sense of instability and ambivalent in the satire create a sense of

grotesque. The ironclad bodies of the Pinkerton agents are more than a metaphor for the deformed and “hybrid” bodies in the grotesque satire. The big reveal by Tichy at the end fuses the grotesque satire and the existential absurd together, like how humans and machines are in the state of Magnifica.

For speculative fiction like SF, its setting further removes itself from real life than fiction set in historical or contemporary worlds. When satirical elements are involved, the imaginary setting helps distance the satire from its targets and norms. This separation can have different effects on the satirical element, or discourse in Simpson’s terms. In some cases, such as with Lem, this separation does help writers to express implicitly and foreclose some of their discourse that falls outside the boundaries of the “speakable”. A further detached setting is of course instrumental to the “linguistic creativity” and humour, as well as “redescription” of ideas in satire, but it can also alienate its satires by not being clear with its target and norm. This alienation can be detrimental to the creation of the “communal consensus” the satire needs with its readership. Of course, it can be an artistic choice when the lack of consensus is part of ambiguity of modern satire, or for the creation of the absurd in the same piece of text. But in other cases, it damages the effectiveness of the satirical elements in readers who do not relate to the distanced or disguised target and norm, but at the same time brings those who “gets” it closer, forming a tighter community with its consensus.

It is, however, slightly more complex with Lem. As the two stories discussed above show, there are elements of modern satire, grotesque and the absurd present in them. However, I find that the combined effect of satire

and SF setting does distance the satire to reader to an extent. That distance, I speculate, is on purpose for Lem. As I have analysed above, the genre of SF works to Lem's advantage when dealing with state censorship. With the censors' lack of standard and interest in de-Stalinised Poland and the understanding of the critics, Lem's SF are considered fairytale and fantasy. The satire and other political contents flew under the radar of censors when the stories were published. I cannot prove that it is Lem's main concern when combining satire and SF, but the result did help his work to evade censorship. Whether this is a form of inner- or self-censorship or an artistic choice is a matter of agency in Lem's writing, which I do not have insight to.

Three: *The Futurological Congress*

Having set up the parameters of both “satire” and “the absurd”, we can move on to particular points of interest in *The Futurological Congress*. I’ve chosen these scenes for discussion because they show elements of both satire and the absurd. By analysing these sections of the novel, we can hope to see how the novel operates and how the story serves the ideas in *The Futurological Congress*.

Early on in the novel, Tichy attends a ceremony marking the beginning of the conference after two American diplomats were kidnapped. A bloody incident takes place at the scene. However, the understatement and short length of the description of the scene is noteworthy. The scene unfolds thusly:

The United States ambassador himself was there, and gave a short speech on the need for international cooperation—short, as he was surrounded six muscular plainclothesmen who kept their guns trained at us all the time. I was rather disconcerted by this, especially when the dark-skinned delegate from India standing next to me had to wipe his nose and reached for the handkerchief in his back pocket. The official spokesman for the Futurological Association assured me afterwards that the measure taken had been both necessary and humane. Bodyguards now employ weapons of high calibre and low penetration, the kind security agents carry onboard passenger flights in order that innocent bystanders not be harmed. In the

old days it often happened that the bullet which felled the would-be assassin would subsequently pass through five or even six persons who, though minding their own business, were standing directly behind him. Still, the sight of a man at your side crumpling to the floor under heavy fire is not among the most pleasant, even if it *is* the result of a simple misunderstanding, which ends with an exchange of diplomatic notes and official apologies. (*The Futurological Congress*, 4-5)

The quoted section concludes the entire episode with the killing of the Indian delegate due to a “simple misunderstanding”. It looks like a passing mention during a more important event. However, by looking at the sequence through the lenses of satire and the absurd, we can try and understand how Lem utilises both styles in his novel for his purpose.

Identifying the satirical features of this paragraph, we can see that the target is apparently the racially targeted police brutality in the United States. The paranoid and trigger-happy bodyguards of the American ambassador can be seen as “redescribed” American police in some confrontations in the civil rights movement and race-related violence in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The scene especially reminds me of some incidents involving the Black Panther Party, such as the killing of its leader Fred Hampton by the Chicago Police in 1969. The norm, in turn, apparently points to the consensus of a more cautious police force and racial equality. From this point of view, this section

appears to be a simple enough satire, seemingly without the modern ambiguity we discussed before.

However, the reaction from the Association and the way it is described by the narrator complicates the matter. The comical understatement and disregard for human life seems to be the “attack” in the satire, but it is hard to identify the “target” and the “norm” in this regard. One can argue that it is satirising the communist regime and contemporary reporting on the Stalinist “Purge” during the 1930s. However, this reading will establish an entire new layer of meaning in the satirical front. The bodyguards and the Indian delegates will stand in for something entirely different than their apparent originals. The plainclothesmen are now redescribed NKVD agents and the victim becomes Russian (and possibly Polish) citizens and party members. The matter-of-factness of Tichy, the narrator, not only provides an ambiguity but also a redescribed version of the bystanders in these purges. In this scenario, the target becomes the purge and to some extent communist oppression in the Eastern Bloc, as well as the callousness of the people watching it happen. However, the norm of this scene becomes unclear: if we read this apparent satire against American race relations and police brutality as a veiled attack on the communist regimes, the norm, then, can hardly be interpreted as the democratic societies of the West. The brevity of the scene does not provide us with a clear look at the author’s intentions. Without speculating Lem’s intentions, we can only assume that the ambiguity is the intended effect of the scene. By veiling his “attack” underneath the superficial criticism of the United States, the ambiguity itself is hidden underneath a layer

of a different satire. The possibility of two interpretations of this segment disorients the readers as to the norms and targets. This disorientation and instability of the satire has many hallmarks of the grotesque, including the emotional instability caused by a moral ambivalence. Indeed, the brevity of the section, the bloody violence and the perfunctory tone of language all point to the grotesque, for the killing itself is not even shown in this scene. Furthermore, the spokesperson's reaction also sends this passage into the realm of the absurd, which requires further attention. But before we move on, I'd like to point out that with the disorientation this grotesque satire does mask its targets and hence forecloses the discourse on communist purges. Therefore it functions as a self-censorship in this scenario.

Looking at this scene through the absurd paradigm, we can see that this scene is absurd on two levels. The first is the act of killing itself, the other is the reaction coming from the Futurological Association. The absurdity in the circumstance of the killing comes mostly from the "foregrounded fictionality" of the situation. The outrageous behaviour of both the bodyguards and the FA officials highlight the constructedness of the scene and undermines the suspension of belief in the reader. It is important that the fictionality is foregrounded in this scene, not only because it evokes the absurd by breaking the immersion of the text-world, but also because it reminds its reader of real-life targets of the satirical elements of the scene. The unlikely event of someone being shot dead in public for attempting to wipe his nose and laconic narration from Tichy both foreground the fictionality of the scene, heightening the absurdity. By calling the incident "not among the most pleasant", Tichy

makes a gross understatement in describing the events that he claims to be “rather disconcerted” by. The narration provides such a muted response that it becomes disorientating for the reader to deduce what has taken place. Before the Spokesperson’s statement, there’s no indication of the bodyguards firing their guns. Only after the statement we understand that the Indian delegate has indeed “crumpled to the floor”.

The spokesperson’s response is absurd for the inadequate resolution it provides to the situation, as well as its foregrounded fictionality. The callous tone of the statement and the phrases such as “necessary and humane” they use to describe the killing of a futurologist foregrounds the fictionality of the event further than Tichy’s narration. Tichy is after all, “disconcerted” and feels the incident as “not of the most pleasant”. The spokesperson from the Association, eager to reassure the people present and justify the killing, explains that the bodyguards had used “weapons of high calibre and low penetration”. However, the technical discussion of the “humanitarian ballistics” (*The Futurological Congress*, 5) fails to impress Tichy, and judging from his comments, the protagonist still finds it unpleasant, or “thorny” (5). To me the logic of the explanation is on the basis that the killing is justifiable if it does not affect others. The “humane” element of the “measures taken”, according the statement, is its avoidance of collateral damage in the process of shooting. However, this “humane” treatment does not include the measures taken towards the victim. Indeed, even if the killing is humane towards the Indian futurologist, it still sounds more like slaughter of an animal than manslaughter

or possibly murder. The statement, therefore, foregrounds the fictionality of itself and deepens the uneasiness set out by the events of the scene.

Both the incident and the reaction from the conference officials foreground fictionality by challenging the realism of the novel. This foregrounding of fictionality in turn creates the grotesque experience in the reader, and therefore shows absurd elements. But it is worth pointing out that they do have their roots in reality. The racial tensions during and after the civil rights movement in the US serves as an apparent reference point for the event. The actual tension between military dictatorships and resistance in Latin America at the time also provides background for the fictional kidnap of American diplomats. Therefore, the incident is not entirely surreal. Indeed, having in-real-life targets and norms (however multi-layered and obscured) makes this section satirical. But the extent of ironic redescription has made the events and the statement grotesque and absurd. However, reading this scene from today's perspective, it has become less fantastic than it was back in 1971.

The Black Lives Matter movement started in 2013 as a direct reaction to the "acquittal of civilian George Zimmerman in the 2012 shooting death of Black Florida teenager Trayvon Martin" ("Black Lives Matter: Opening a Second Front", 22). The movement protests against the systemic racism in the US justice system, especially police shootings and killings of African Americans (22-23), for it has become widespread in the 2010s. Judging by the scale of the movement, the incident in the novel is less outrageous today than it was when Lem wrote it. The somewhat diminished fictionality loses the

quality to cause instability and disorientation. The scene becomes less absurd when read today as a consequence. However, this section retains its satirical elements when read today. It has indeed grown more poignant in light of the racial imbalance in fatalities caused by police action in the US in recent years. On the other hand, with the collapse of the Warsaw Pact regimes, the fear of the Purge has become less obvious. This layer of satire in Lem's novel has become more historical than topical for the readers of today. However, another layer of the satire remains relevant. Unprovoked violence, especially from the authorities, has become even less acceptable than it was in early 1970s. Unfortunately, it has remained prevalent in light of the official response from the US government towards the protests in Portland, Oregon, Washington, DC, Seattle, as well as from other governments around the world. Therefore, the satire persists as of today, justifying Lem's concern for the future.

However, it is worth noting that as I have concluded, Lem's concern for the racial tension in but not limited to the United States is not unfounded in reality. In a speculative science fiction novel dealing with themes of futurology, we can assume that Lem aims his satire beyond his time of writing and directs it to the future. Therefore, the way the absurdist dynamic shifts overtime is in a way intended by the author, however he wishes it differently. As I have cited above, Lem himself finds that the "implication that is hidden below the humorous surface of *The Futurological Congress*" later "feels much less fantastic (and thus, less entertaining) than when I wrote it" (Csicsery-Ronay, 257). The shift that presents itself in this scene serves as an example of the author's sentiment.

Similar to the quick scene listed here, I have put some smaller incidents in my own novel. These are usually news-inspired anecdotes happening around the protagonist, Roger, instead of to him. The encounter with horned family of tourists and the police officer in the first chapter is one of the examples. Some of the later ones such as young men being arrested in a coffee shop and men being dragged down a starliner are taken directly from the news circulating shortly before I wrote those scenes. These scenes are similar to what Lem does in the scene above from the satirical point of view. I have grounded them in reality and provided targets similar to Lem's, the society's treatment to the "other", broadly speaking. The norm is similarly implicit, for I have only a general idea of how a society should function. However, since I was not projecting a possible future, these incidents in my novel have not mutated to a grotesque extremity, like in Lem's novel. In this way, these minor incidents are not absurd, for they are recognisable if somewhat random and not sufficiently resolved. The only foregrounded fictionality is that readers who still remember the real-life incidents can immediately see that these are taken from our world instead of naturally grown in Roger's. I'll discuss more of my novel and my writing process in the next chapter.

There are other instances in *The Futurological Congress* where the events alluded to and their meaning to the readers have shifted through time. For instance, in the first part of the novel, Tichy meets a man in the bar at the Hilton Hotel where the conference is being held. The man asks him how he likes his "papalshooter" and then carries on as follows:

And indeed, the next moment he confided in me that this high-powered repeater piece of his, equipped with a laser-finding telescopic sight, triple-action trigger and self-loader, was custom-made for killing Popes. Talking continually, he pulled a folded photo from his pocket, a picture of himself taking careful aim at a mannequin in a robe and zucchetto. He had become an excellent shot, he said, and was now on his way to Rome, prepared for a great pilgrimage—to gun down the Holy Father at St. Peter's Basilica. [...] Immediately [I] assumed that this was either a madman or a professional terrorist-fanatic (we have no lack of them these days), [...] Unconvinced by his arguments, I excused myself and went to save the Pope—that is, to notify someone of this plot—but Stantor, who I bumped into on the 77th floor bar, told me, without even hearing me out, that among the gifts offered to Hadrian XI by the last group of American tourists there had been two time bombs and a cask containing—not sacramental wine, but nitroglycerin. I understood Stantor's indifference a little better when I heard that the local guerrillas had recently mailed a foot to the Embassy, though yet it was uncertain whose. (*The Futurological Congress*, 6-8)

I have quoted the section above to include the entire scene between Tichy and the would-be papal assassin and his subsequent conversation with Jim

Stantor, “a well-known UPI reporter” (4). The reason why I have done this is that the tone of Tichy’s narration of the scene and later Stantor’s reaction to Tichy’s information on a prospective assassination attempt both show characteristics of the absurd, and to an extent satire. However, like the previous scene with the bodyguards and the killing, this section of the novel showcases not only how Lem employs elements of satire and the absurd, but also how Lem adapts his real-life and arguably futurological concerns into science fiction.

First, I will discuss this scene and its satirical features. It is hard to identify the targets and norms in this instance because the grotesque redescription has caused the target and norm to be too ambivalent and unstable. Although it is nearly impossible to point out what these two elements are for Lem without speculation, we can try to describe some of the possible suspects. The target of this scene can be argued to be: the Jesus movement in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s and its “Jesus freak” image from the counterculture; the sectarian violence in Ireland and the beginning of the Troubles; the assassin can also be a redescription of the many assassinations in the 1960s and early 1970s, such as the assassinations of John F. Kennedy (1963), Malcolm X (1965), Robert F. Kennedy (1968), and Martin Luther King Jr (1968)⁷ in the United States; even the papal assassination itself can be referencing the assassination attempt on Pope Paul VI in Manila in 1970. However, it is hard to pin down one of these as the most likely target, and it is

⁷ It is worth noting that the Kennedys are Catholics, while Malcolm X was a Muslim minister and King was a Christian minister. I’m not suggesting that their assassinations were religiously motivated, but merely pointing out that there are certain religious implications in connection with Lem’s Papal assassin.

harder still to identify the norms of the satire. The “tone” and “attitude” of satire from the novel is not lost in this scene because of the clear act of attack in this scene, which is not dissimilar in the scene before, only the grotesque experience has obscured the rest of the elements of satire. Therefore, analysing the scene within the absurd paradigm might yield clearer results.

This scene is typically absurd for its lack of resolution. The potential papal assassin’s brandishing of weapon, his manifestation of religious zeal and his showing of proof don’t go anywhere. None of these outlandish behaviours get appropriate reaction from either Tichy or Stantor. Both Tichy’s conversations with the bearded man and Stantor come to no action, despite Tichy’s claim that he is going to “save the pope”. The excessively detailed and longwinded narration (albeit offhand and brief at the same time), along with the character’s behaviours foreground the fictionality of the paragraph through their lack reality and causality.

The ambiguity of the target and the norm creates the absurdist moment in satire. It is not only because the absurd shares the instability and disorientation with the grotesque variety of satire, but also of a causal consequence. In the instance of the assassin in this scene, the existence of the “tone”, “quality” and “attitude” of satire propels the reader to search for the target and norm, in order to find the social consensus the writer is trying to establish. But with the number of possible targets and no set norm in this scene, the reader is left disorientated and the satire appears more and more ambiguous and unstable, creating the grotesque experience. This disorientation and the lack of resolution in turn direct the reader to the absurd.

Whether the author intended the satire to be ambiguous hardly matters in this scenario. As I have concluded above, the dynamic of satire and absurd can shift with time and finds a life of its own. The shift is especially prominent with speculative fiction such as science fiction, and even more so with this novel which revolves around futurology.

Like the aforementioned climate change and mass starvation, religious terrorism has become a real threat over the years. Indeed, in the Csicsery-Ronay interview in 1986, Lem discusses this topic explicitly:

Aside from the continuing East-West conflict, how can one fail to notice movements like that of Islamic fundamentalism, in the face of which, democracy finds itself a priori at a disadvantage. This disadvantage does not manifest itself only in terrorism; it is brought about by the very existence of an elite of technologically rich nations. (252)

In other words, Lem emphasises that futurologists of the past have failed to predict the rise of Islamist extremism after the Six-day War in the Middle East (1967). The failure becomes particularly apparent given the hindsight of the Soviet-Afghan War that began in 1979 and was continuing at the time of the interview. He carries on and claims that the Islamist terrorism will continue to become a threat to the “technologically rich nations”. This scene becomes particularly prescient if we put the novel, this interview and today’s world into a linear timeline. The rise of Al Qaeda, Daesh and global terrorism in the early

decades of the Twenty-First Century confirms both Lem's prediction and the failure of future studies at the time. Without speculating which real-life target Lem is aiming at originally, we can say with hindsight that this scene satirises a possible future with its extreme religious zeal and violence.

In these two scenes Lem reflects his futurological concerns by redescribing existing targets for satire. In both instances he pushes the situation to its extreme to foreground the fictionality. But the extremity of the situations has shifted over time, resulting in a shift in fictionality and hence absurdity. However, as long as the communal consensus against racial and religious violence that has been established by the text still stands, the satirical quality of the scene will not change with the times. Therefore, although the targets have shifted closer to reality and the specific satire has changed along with its updated targets, the satirical function of these scenes remains.

The neologisms in the novel are another element that ties together the SF/futurological and satirical/absurd sides of the *The Futurological Congress*. From earlier on we see names for items such as the "papalshooter" (6) and later for drugs "benignimzer" (15) and "LTN: Love Thy Neighbor" (28). This is before Tichy "time travels" into 2039. The trend of new coinages seems to carry on into Tichy's version of the future. However, we can also interpret the situations Tichy has encountered in his waking life manifesting themselves in his drug-induced hallucinations. It is a process not dissimilar to how Lem uses this science fiction novel to express some of his real-life concerns. Indeed, later in Tichy's hallucinated future, he meets Professor Trotteleriner from the conference again. Trotteleriner gives Tichy an impromptu lecture on the work

of a futurologian and the evolution of language. After Tichy asks whether a futurologian is a futurologist, Trotteleriner tells him that a futurologist only works in theory and tries to predict the future while a futurologian works in the field of “linguistic futurology” that “investigates the future through the transformational possibilities of the language” (108). Trotteleriner concludes:

“A man can control only what he comprehends, and comprehend only what he is able to put into words. The inexpressible therefore is unknowable. By examining future stages in the evolution of language we come to learn what discoveries, changes and social revolutions the language will be capable, some day, of reflecting.” (*The Futurological Congress*, 108-109)

These lines from the professor explain the future of futurology when “futurology” itself has become a form of prediction-making. The concern about evolving language is clearly a continuation from the neologisms in the first part of the novel, as Trotteleriner himself evokes the benignizers. However, his mentioning of the word “utopia” seems metafictional here, for it is customary for utopian fiction, indeed, a variety of speculative fiction to adopt neologism for things and ideas that does not exist in the real world at the time of their writing.

A point can be made on how this section of the novel satirises real-life futurologists or academics in general, however, the act of “attack” in the tone and quality of the writing is not as obvious as the two instances before. I have

omitted in the quoted section some of the examples Trottelreiner gives Tichy on the permutation and evolution of future linguistics while explaining the process of futurologian studies. They are absurd in nature, for the mutation of language is random and the conclusion illogical. As Trottelreiner states in the paragraphs above, the process indeed creates a world outside their reality and defy logic. The whole scene has its fictionality foregrounded in the randomness of futurologian studies in general. But I will quote two of the examples that Trottelreiner gives, just to illustrate my point that the study is hardly logical, let alone scientific. From a word “foot”, he comes up with a list of made-up and sometimes real words including “Onefoot, twofoot. Threefooter, fourfooted. Footing, footingly, footling. Footage, befootery.” (109) etc, before reaching for the conclusion that they “may eventually acquire meaning”, for “[t]he word ‘robot’ meant nothing in the fifteenth century, and yet if they had had futurolinguistics then, they could have easily envisioned automata” (110). These examples of improvised free-form association are surreal and illogical. The readers are left as confused and disorientated as Tichy in this instance. The absurdity manifests itself in the disorientation and the foregrounded fictionality of the illogical thought process. For instance, the foregrounded fictionality at one point comes in the form of metafictionally evoking words like “utopia” and “robot”; both come from speculative literature and is what the future world is set up to resemble. By inserting thematically important concepts into this seemingly aimless discussion, Lem offers a subliminal and metafictional commentary on the fictional future world he

creates. This foregrounded fictionality adds to the absurdity this scene already presents.

In “*Futurological Congress as Metageneric Text*”, Robert M. Philmus claims that *The Futurological Congress* is “without parallel in the rest of Lem’s opus, not only in the degree to which it is generically self-reflexive but also in the way it depends upon that reflexivity” (313). Philmus defines “metageneric” as “generally self-referential” (313). He further argues that the novel’s “coherence [...] resides in its being what it is superficially about”. Namely, the novel *is* a “futurological congress” of sorts, in which various futurological concerns are raised and discussed. The change in language and new coinages is one of the examples that the world of 2039 reflects the futurological concerns from the conference in the first part of the novel. Philmus also argues that neologisms in the *The Futurological Congress* are not only a fictive aspect of futurological discussion but are also implied by Lem as the novel’s “genesis”. By this Philmus means that the implications of Trottelerreiner’s discussion of neologism is a thematic moment in the novel. Indeed, Philmus goes on to claim that “thinking in terms of neologisms is the source of SF and futurology alike as the two intersect in their shared project of modelling the future” (321). As neologisms play an important part in both the novel and its translation, to Philmus they also metagenerically link SF and futurology. Since both SF and futurology speculate the future and they both employ language, their appliance of neologisms seems not only necessary but essential to their purposes.

It is clear that, although in a satirical tone, Lem expresses a genuine futurological concern in the extra-textual real world through one of his

characters. Coining new words is, as I have noted above, a necessity in both SF and future studies at least in *The Futurological Congress*. By creating many neologisms in the following pages, both Lem, through Trotteleriner, makes the point of how linguistic futurology should operate (109-110). However, of course, the nonsensical methodology of Trotteleriner is what Lem tries to attack in this scene. Lem himself also discusses futurology in his essay "Metafuturology" and argues that literature, especially SF, must take the responsibility to participate in the conversation and challenge the "instrumental bias" of future studies (263-264). Lem calls for a "general theory of prediction" which he calls "metafuturology". In this essay, Lem points out several "sins" of futurology in his time, including "opportunism, eclecticism, pragmatism", and their cause is the lack of a general theory and methodology (269-270). The unifying theory and methodology looks surprisingly close to what Trotteleriner works on as a "futurologian" as he claims that he "deal[s] exclusively with theory" (*The Futurological Congress*, 108). It must be pointed out, however, the obviously absurd scene here can also serve as a satire against the unmethodical work of Lem's contemporary futurologists, for Trotteleriner's random wordplay is also betrays "opportunism, eclecticism, pragmatism".

Lem states in the interview with Csicsery-Ronay that neologisms only appear when it is absolute necessity ("Twenty-Two Answers", 247). To Lem, they only appear when the new concept he needs to be expressed through a new word. This methodology also indicates that Trotteleriner's work ethic is against Lem's belief. It then follows, the satire in the scene is directed against futurologists who do not follow a rigorous methodology and put out seemingly

random predictions. I would add that in the same interview, Lem praised the work of his English translator Michael Kandel for he “has given himself a lot of interpretative latitude, replacing that which he was unwilling or unable to retain with that which was equivalent in English on some higher semantic plane” (247). Kandel’s coinages after Lem’s feature prominent in the translation of *The Futurological Congress*, and they form the basis of Rabkin’s analysis of Lem’s transformed language.

In “Metalinguistics and Science Fiction”, Eric S. Rabikin analyses different metalinguistic functions of language in SF and other literary genres. Rabkin points out that in science fiction, all metalinguistic functions “[share] the property of making a reality claim for the text that employs it” (79). To Rabkin, when fiction treats the language of the readers as material to be “molded into some other aspects of the text” (85), the new coinages perform the function that he calls “language transformation”; when the narrator’s language is treated as material (such as Trottelerreiner’s creations), it is called “neologism” (85). When authors “have taken linguistic material with which we are familiar and transformed it” (86), they’ll be able to subvert established values or meanings implied by our language. This way the author changes the reader’s perspective on the language. This transformation can be seen in both satire and the absurd, and to an extent, in foreclosure and self-censorship. I have shown this with the “Papalshooter” and how language is used in the incident with the Indian delegate. Transformed language can distance or distort familiar items or ideas to the effect of satirical redescription, sometimes to the extent of the grotesque. Examples of this function include the LTN

bombs and various drug names in the novel. Similarly, the made-up terms foreground reality and at times lead to the absurd, such as Trotteler's stream of consciousness of new coinages.

At the same time, Rabkin also observes that transformed language does not alter the "entire code" of the language but only "a subcode" that he calls "the sociopolitical code" (86) of the language. Rabkin defines transformed language as "a variety of the metalinguistic use of language as material, is a tool for addressing other codes, codes which will particularize the details of the narrative world but do not constitute it whole (87). Rabkin argues that transformed language mostly flavours a work of fiction rather than being its subject: "it can create a subtle and lasting impression on a reader and help to validate the areas of particular concern to the author" (87). Instead of being the topic of the text, the language and its transformation helps to both bring distinct flavour and details to the work of fiction. Transformed language serves as a world-building tool with which the author can present things and ideas that cannot be sufficiently describe with existing language. With transformed language, the author is able to subvert the socio-political subcode of language, and sets his or her own terms on what a word signifies in the fictional world.

The "neologisms" in *The Futurological Congress* fall under the category of "transformed language" according to Rabkin. He argues that many new coinages in some SF pieces are not neologisms in his "radical" sense but are in fact instances of transformed language (89). He uses *TFC* as an example for this type of new coinages and states:

To the extent that these newly coined words are understandable without gloss, they are transformed language [...]; they connect with our language and create satire by way of transformation, here transforming the intellectual or religious or psychological all into a pharmaceutical code (90).

The use of transformed language by Lem clearly has its satirical effects as he subverts existing values and meanings of his reader's language. However, as Lem himself points out, the use of neologisms (and transformed language) is also out of necessity for fictional technologies and made-up concepts. Although coining new words is out of necessity, the way these words are created and presented relate more to how Lem (and Kandel after him) uses language for humorous and satirical effects. By transforming language into something that is disorientating, these neologisms have created a grotesque effect, and are in some cases, absurd. The absurdity presents itself when the metafictional and self-reflexive nature of these words foregrounds the fictionality of themselves and the ideas they signify.

Whether the archaic language invented by the Computer in "The Eleventh Voyage" qualifies as neologism or transformed language, on the other hand, is less clear. It is derived from early modern English in the English translation of the story, and Tichy is able to decode it after studying it at length on his way towards the planet inhabited by "robots", it then is a play on the

characters' language, be it Polish or English⁸. However, the readers are able to read the language to an extent without referencing other parts of the story. Indeed, there is no explanation or translation of the language in the story at all, so it also qualifies as transformed language. However, unlike in *The Futurological Congress*, neologism or transformed language is not a group of words, but a whole language, spoken and printed by the robots. It is so prevalent in the robot world that human agents have lost their ability to speak normally after a few years on the planet. But some of the agents can switch their expressions according to who they are talking to. When not sure if Tichy is human, they insist on using derogative terms towards humans, but when they learn that Tichy is indeed a man, they use the word "man" instead of "gook". The choice of language becomes a form of foreclosure for these agents to self-censor in order to protect themselves. Even Tichy himself starts to think in the archaic way later in the story. More than to disorientate the reader, the made-up language is a way for Lem to illustrate the mental conditioning that happens on the planet. Even the clerk behind the Computer has formed a habit of calling humans "mussilids". So the language serves as both absurd and satirical element in "The Eleventh Voyage".

The usage of offensive racial slur such as gook⁹, like other instances of satire in Lem, can be interpreted differently depending on context. If, as I have speculated, Tichy does depart from the United States, then the racial slur is likely satirising the racism in the 1950s America. Since the robotic language is

⁸ The mission is given to Tichy by the Pinkerton Detective Agency, therefore the earth section is likely to have taken place in the United States.

⁹ I use the English translation of the book and have no access to the Polish Text. Therefore, I assume that the translation bear sufficient similarity to the original text.

likely to have been designed by humans who set up the experiment, it is clear that they made the decision to use this language against the agents they send in. We can also read semi-mandatory usage of the derogative terms as a reverse version of how the Western society tends to use less offensive language out of politeness and manner. However, it is also a direct redescription of Communist propaganda against capitalist foes and “class enemies”. The target can be very different, depending if the reader deciphers it from the fictional setting or the author’s background. This ambiguity, as I have discussed in the previous chapter, is characteristic of Lem’s satirical fiction.

It is worth noting that Rabkin also proposes another type of “metalinguistic function” in his essay that does not treat language as its material like neologism and “transformed language”, but as its context. More specifically the novel employs a technique he calls “self-reflexivity”. Rabkin states that “treating language as context forces us to understand the role of the communication situation itself in our real experience of reading” (95). Context determines how we read a piece of text, and “[s]elf-reflexivity always calls into question the very structure the message is carried” (94). It follows that metalinguistic discourse forms a context that brings attention to how the communication takes place during reading, as well as what is being communicated. This understanding is exactly what Professor Trotteler’s new studies in the future on new coinages for future times tries to achieve in *The Futurological Congress* and arguably what the neologisms in Tichy’s hallucinations metagenerically achieve. By predicting the future with mutations

of words, language becomes the context for future studies in the fictional world. By drawing attention, however randomly, to the relationship between (made-up) words and their meanings, Trotteleriner's examples ironically highlight the function of language. New coinages play a significant role in both the waking world of Costa Ricana and Tichy's dream worlds of the future. The self-reflexivity of Trotteleriner's free association of words in this sense consolidates the importance of neologism and transformed language in the fictional world. Lem, through Trotteleriner, turns the need of new words for new concepts on its head. This scene foregrounds the fictionality of Trotteleriner's absurd theory and at the same time satirises futurologists both fictional and in-real-life.

Four: Chinese Science Fiction

Before I proceed to discuss my own novel, I would like to provide a short introduction to the history of Chinese SF. Although my work is not necessarily informed by Chinese SF, it is relevant to understand how my novel works (or does not work) within the same parameters as modern and contemporary Chinese SF. I will briefly introduce early Chinese SF, for there has never been a “trend” or prevalence of SF as in the West or the Eastern Bloc and focus on the Post-Cultural Revolution SF from the 1980s onwards, and predominantly from 1990s and the 21st Century. I will focus much of this section on Chinese SF in the Mainland. Work from Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau and the Chinese diaspora have also contributed much in world SF, but it is another topic.

“A Very Brief History of Chinese Science Fiction” by Wu Yan, Yao Jianbin and Andrea Lingenfelter begins by introducing the context of early Chinese SF: mythology and fantasy in ancient China (45). But Chinese SF tradition did not begin in earnest until the turn of the Twentieth Century. Wu, Yao and Lingenfelter credit prominent reformist and intellectual Liang Qichao (1873-1929) as the earliest known SF author. Written in the last years of Imperial China, Liang’s 1902 novel *Annals of the Future of New China* (*Xin Zhongguo Weilai Ji*) tells a story of a strong and scientifically advanced China becoming a world power in 1962 (46). Lu Xun (1881-1936), who later became one of the most celebrated literary figures, translated Jules Verne’s *Around the Moon* (1865) in 1903, while he was studying in Japan. It is worth mentioning that Lu translated many works of science and popular science from Japanese during his days in Japan, therefore translation of foreign SF was part of his interest in promoting the idea of science to a modernising Chinese readership. Wu, Yao and Lingenfelter point out that “[l]ate Qing science fiction runs a gamut of styles, from political propaganda, to explanations of technology, calls for national transformation, and fairytale-style scientific primers” (46). While Chinese SF was finding its ways at the beginning of the Twentieth Centuries, all of these styles concern the question of what it is like

to be Chinese at a time of rapid change. Be it political, educational or clinging to the traditionalism of fantasy and fairtale, Chinese SF from this period reflects the contradicting sentiments of modernisation, Chineseness and Chinese nationalism.

Mingwei Song argues in his essay “Variations on Utopia in Contemporary Chinese Science Fiction” that:

[Late Qing SF] was constituted as a utopian genre that could provide both reflection on reality and hope for change. Thus from its inception Chinese sf has been characterized by a strong political investment; its utopian narratives project political desire for reform onto idealized futures that serve as contrasts to China’s reality. (86)

As I have mentioned above, the early SF novels defined Chinese science fiction as “a genre closely associated with the discourses of an emerging nationalism” (Song, 86). Nationalism here generally speaking means one born of the people of China against Imperial/Colonial threat from overseas. It is worth noting that during late Qing Dynasty (1644-1912), Chinese nationalism sometimes associates with the struggle between Han Chinese people and the Manchu ruling class, which led to the Revolution of 1911 and the downfall Qing Empire the year after.

After the 1911 Revolution that saw the overthrowing of Qing Dynasty and the establishment the Republic of China (1912-1949 in mainland China), science fiction in China began to fade out of literary journals and into “periodicals devoted to popular fiction and popular science” (Wu, Yao and Lingenfelter, 46). Wu, Yao and Lingenfelter admit that there is still much work to be done in studying SF of this period. However, there are some examples to look at from this time. Lao She (1899-1966) published *Cat Country* (*Maocheng Ji*) in 1932. The novel tells a story of the protagonist’s travel to Mars after being “fed up with domestic politics”, only to find Martian cat people have “the same decadence, conservatism, conflicts and lack of ambition he

had sought to escape” (Wu, Yao and Lingenfelter, 47). Largely a fable, the science fiction elements serve as a backdrop for the Gulliverian tale of political satire. There are thematic similarities between *Cat Country* and Stanisław Lem’s “The Thirteenth Voyage”, which I’ve discussed above. Ijon Tichy accidentally travels to Pinta and Pantá on his way to the wise Master Oh and finds problems on Earth magnified on the twin planets. The ability SF has in world-building enables writers to imagine worlds to fit their ideas. Both pieces draw comparison between planets and employ satire to convey a sense of disillusion. Wu, Yao and Lingenfelter also name Gu Junzheng’s 1939 *Under the North Pole (Zai Beiji Dixia)* as an example of Chinese SF that incorporates scientific information for educating its readers. Wu, Yao and Lingenfelter summarise the Republican era of Chinese SF: “it gradually changed from serious literature and was absorbed into popular fiction and popular science. This trend continued up through the founding of the new China and beyond” (47). New China is a term that specifically means the People’s Republic of China that was founded in 1949. As I’ve noted in the Lem chapter, the same trend of popular SF occurred in Communist Poland and to an extent the Eastern Bloc generally in the post-World War Two era. This lack of political content is, as I’ve argued above, due partially to censorship and self-censorship. In the case of China, a shift of focus towards educational purposes is another main reason of this pattern. The need for popular science and educational fiction went hand-in-hand with the modernisation of the Chinese nation. Therefore, writing for a younger readership was a way to for writers to build a new national psyche by promoting a scientific way of thinking and imagination. For a country that had just come out from a pre-modern feudal dynasty, educational writing itself was a political act. The sentiment only strengthened after the founding of the People’s Republic.

In the early years of the People’s Republic, according to Wu, Yao and Lingenfelter, science fiction “left the world of popular fiction behind but held on to its popular science style. In addition, it increasingly entered the realm of children’s literature” (47). SF from this period shares the optimism of early Soviet SF on scientific discoveries, technological advances and social

progress; as Wu, Yao and Lingenfelter point out that “there were heavy implications that all of this was part and parcel of steady progress towards communism” (47). Some of the works Wu, Yao and Lingenfelter introduced are largely educational to a young reader with a large amount of scientific information such as Zhang Ran’s *Journey Through the Solar System* (Manyou Taiyangxi, 1950) and Xue Dianhui’s *Cosmic Holiday* (*Yuzhou lüxing*, 1951) (48). Others, such as Chi Shuchang and Yu Zhi’s 1956 *The Elephant with the Cut-Off Trunk* (*Gediao Bizi de Daxiang*) imagine a world of abundance through advancements in production of supersized pigs¹⁰ under communism. It is worth noting that although there are elements of adventure and thrill in these works, the two main strands of functions from the Imperial and Republican eras—scientific information and nationalism (now through communism) remain the true focus. Jia Liyuan describes in “Gloomy China: China’s Image in Han Song’s Science Fiction” that in the early days of the People’s Republic, “people immersed in glowing dreams of a rapid evolution towards communism, and the literature of socialist realism, serving the needs of socialist construction and political struggles, consisted primarily of social criticism and praise for positive characters” (105). As I have noted in chapters discussed above, Socrealizm was also the mainstream in Communist Poland and SF was considered as less serious. Although Chinese SF at this time reflected the optimistic mood of the nation, it also needed to fit in to the official narrative. Qian Jiang, in “Translation and Development of Science Fiction in Twentieth-Century China”, points out that during the 1950s and 1960s, “[n]ot only scientific workers but also people in all walks of life were involved in a mass campaign of scientific education and technological renovation that lasted well into the 1960s when it was disrupted by the Cultural Revolution’ (120). Science fiction appropriately provided material for popular science education.

Wu, Yao and Lingenfelter end their introduction of the early People’s Republic thus: “[w]ith the beginning of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, the creation of science fiction in China once again ground to a halt” (49). Of course,

¹⁰ The supersized pig also appeared as a propaganda image during the Great Leap Forward (1958-1962) movement, and incidentally, in the South Korean film *Okja* (2017).

almost all creative arts stopped during the ten years of Cultural Revolution. Han Song (b. 1965), one of the most influential SF writers in China today, wrote in his essay “Chinese Science Fiction: A Response to Modernization” that “[d]uring the chaotic and violent Cultural Revolution [...] sf writers were silenced because the genre was regarded as something from corrupt Western culture that could lead people astray” (16). The SF genre was effectively banned, along with most of fiction¹¹. Censorship ceased to be a problem when there was no publication. Whatever space SF had carved out for itself by being educational and optimistic, was lost during the decade that followed.

Wu, Yao and Lingenfelter refer to the post-Cultural Revolution period as the “New Era”, which is true, for it also marks the end of Mao Zedong’s (1893-1976) rule. Mikael Huss, in his essay “Hesitant Journey to the West: SF’s Changing Fortune in Mainland China” quotes Michael Laris’s “The Sci-Fi Syndrome” and calls “[t]he years 1978-1983 [...] ‘the golden age of Chinese sf’ (Laris 25)” (Huss, 94). Free of the shackles of the Cultural Revolution, Chinese SF writers ushered a new era in their writing as well. Ye Yonglie’s (1940-2020) “Miracle on the World’s Highest Peak” (“Shijie Zuigao Fengshang de Qiji”, 1977) and “Little Genius Roams the Future” (“Xiaolingtong Manyou Weilai”, 1979) are both seminal science fiction works from the period. “Miracle” tells a story about a mountaineering party discovering a dinosaur egg that is not fossilised. The egg is then brought back and hatched so dinosaur is once again brought back to the world. “Little Genius”, on the other hand, tells a story of one young journalist who accidentally visits the future, where many technological advancements have made life much more convenient for the people of the future. Unlike *The Futurological Congress*, “Little Genius” contains little to no indication of the political system or social structure of the future other than industrial and economic organisations. “Little Genius” is overwhelmingly optimistic compared to *The Futurological Congress* in its speculation of the future and assessment of technology. However, not only does this strategy avoid censorship completely, but it also fits in the post-

¹¹ Wu, in his essay “‘Great Wall Planet’: Introducing Chinese Science Fiction” writes that “During the Cultural Revolution itself, access to fiction was heavily restricted” (3).

Cultural Revolution official narrative of modernisation. Both tales feature an advanced China and elements of imagination and discovery, and both stories are aimed at a younger audience. “Little Genius” was particularly successful at the time. According to Wu, Yao and Lingenfelter, “[w]ith a print run of three million copies, ‘Little Genius Roams the Future’ wiped out previous records in China Publishing”, and it left an enduring impression on the new generation who yearned for “the Four Modernizations” (50). “The Four Modernizations” is an official slogan for rejuvenation of the nation after the Cultural Revolution stunted the growth of the country for a decade. “Little Genius” aptly showcases what the development and growth can bring to people’s life in an imaginary way. It is worth noting that “Little Genius” was written in 1961 during the Great Famine (1959-1961) but not published until well after the end of Cultural Revolution. The publication was well timed to capture the optimistic national mood. Tong Enzheng (1935-1997), best known as the author of the celebrated SF thriller “Death Ray on Coral Island” (“Shanhudaoshang de Siguang”, 1978), published “My Views on the Art of Science Fiction” in *People’s Literature (Renmin Wenxue)* in 1979. Mikael Huss notes that Tong, in his “hugely influential” article, proposes a “second, ‘post-utilitarian’ era of Chinese sf” (Huss, 94). Wu, Yao and Lingenfelter highlight that Tong “overhauled the old theory of functionality, which had put science education at the core of science fiction and emphasized that literary value should be the core purpose of science fiction” (Wu, Yao and Lingenfelter, 50). Chinese SF between 1976 and 1984 are moving steadily towards what Wu, Yao and Lingenfelter call “popular genres such as thrillers and detective stories”. For that same reason, science fiction was targeted in the “Anti-Spiritual-Pollution Campaign” in late 1983. SF writers were accused of spreading pseudoscience or “junk science”, according to Wu, Yao and Lingenfelter (50). It was not long before SF was labelled “anti-Party and anti-socialism” (50). The Campaign itself did not last more than two months, but it did stall Chinese SF for several years before writers and publishers felt safe to publish in China again. Wu, Yao and Lingenfelter concede that there is still work to be done on researching why science fiction was all but forgotten for

years before it came back in the early 1990s. Huss claims that after the crackdown in 1983, where writers like Ye Yonglie and Tong Enzheng were condemned, “most writers preferred to remain silent” during the rest of the decade, due to a “climate of harassment” (Huss, 95). Huss also points out the fact that Ye did write a SF story in 1985, about Chinese scientists finding the cure for AIDS in the deserts of Xinjiang (Huss, 94). It caused controversy and was suppressed by the Health Department, “on the ground that Ye was suggesting that AIDS occurred in China” (94). The environment SF was facing even after the 1983 crackdown is, understandably, not friendly to say the least.

Yao and Wu claim that “[w]ith the beginning of the new era of Reform and Opening in China, science fiction experienced a renaissance in the 1990s” (50). By Reform and Opening, Yao and Wu refer to the Economic Reform that started in 1979. It is, then, slightly misleading to say the 1990s “renaissance” of Chinese SF came “with” the reform. The return of science fiction had certainly benefited from the Reform, especially in the late 1970s and early 1980s. But it came to a halt in 1983, during the Reform. The Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign can be seen as somewhat against the Reform in the cultural realm, but the Economic Reform did not stop with it. It is appropriate to say that the resurgence of Chinese SF came with the Reform, if we consider the mid-to-late 1980s pause as an interval to the post-Cultural Revolution renaissance of Chinese SF.

Influential SF journal *Science Literature and Art (Kexue Wenyi)* turns into *Science Fiction World (Kehuan Shijie)* and started the “rebirth” of Chinese SF we knew today with a World Science Fiction Conference in the same year (Wu, Yao and Lingenfelter, 50). They held the conference twice more in 1997 and 2007. A new generation of authors matured during these years and have become the centre of the “SF boom” in China in the past few years. Han Song published “Cosmic Tombstone” (“Yuzhou Mubei”) in 1991. It is worth noting that “Cosmic Tombstone” was first published in Taiwan (Wu, Yao and Lingenfelter, 51), instead of the Mainland. The story of yearning and dangers of the cosmic adventures “departs from the sunny and uplifting tone of past Chinese science fiction and takes a fresh look at the relationship between

space explorations and individual growth and maturation”, according to Yao and Wu (51). Being a journalist in various state-owned media, Han Song develops a unique style of writing that is unusually dark and political. His novel *Mars Shines on America* (1999, *Huoxing Zhaoyao Meiguo*¹²) makes a useful example of his writing. The novel is set in 2066, (incidentally the centennial of Cultural Revolution) about a young go (board game) player who travels from China, now the only global superpower, to America, “a place on the western hemisphere”, which has isolated itself from the rest of the world (Han, 5). He is then stranded in the US because the “American Revolution”. I would like to add that the American Revolution in the late 1700s is mostly referred as American Independence or the American War of Independence in Chinese language contexts, therefore, the fictional Revolution here is closer to the Communist Revolution or Cultural Revolution. The novel tells a story of a new American Civil War and the fall of the World Trade Center, which would take place in reality two years after the publication of the book. The novel serves as the vehicle for Han to discuss his view on Socialism, Capitalism and post-Cold War politics such as the end of ideology or Francis Fukuyama’s “the end of history” (Fukuyama, xi), but from a cosmic point of view, instead of a view from the East or the West. *The Futurological Congress* also features a global point of view where the problems of the future such as overpopulation stand beyond societies and are faced by all mankind. SF enables both Han and Lem the ability to step away from the nation-centred point of view and to look from the outside. Planting the issues in different societies also helps writers to distance the satire from its target. Not only does this distance enable foreclosure of explicit discourse, but it also assists redescribing the issues the authors try to discuss when satire is involved. Therefore, this distance can help writers “cloak and smuggle” their ideas or create satire, sometimes at the same time, depending on the instance.

Wang Jinkang (b. 1948) began writing science fiction in 1995. Being of an older generation than Han Song, Wang’s 2007 novel *Ants (Yi Sheng)* “is a

¹² I prefer my translation, *Red Planet Over America*, for the original title is a parody of Edgar Snow’s 1937 *Red Star Over China*.

masterpiece about Cultural Revolution in which the novelist suggests that the collective nature of ants has similarities to human beings” (51). The novel is an anti-utopian allegory that tells that scientists experiment in a farm “ant extracts” that makes humans enjoy hard work and collectivism with no sense of self. The novel retells and reevaluates historical campaigns such as The Great Leap Forward in the late 1950s and the Cultural Revolution. Turning human to live like certain animals is partially the theme of “The Thirteenth Voyage” and drugging people for obedience is not dissimilar to the LTN bombs in *The Futurological Congress*. The economic organisation and revolutionary ideology in Communist China and Poland might have some influences on the similar elements in these pieces of fiction.

The author at the forefront of 21st Century Chinese science fiction is Liu Cixin (b. 1963). Liu’s Hugo Award-winning novel *The Three-Body Problem* (2008, *Santi*) and its two sequels¹³ is not only hugely popular at home and abroad, but its winning of Hugo Award in 2015 also kickstarted the SF boom in China, leading to not only more readership of SF literature, but also films and TV based on these works. One of the most successful among them is the blockbuster film *Wandering Earth* (2019, Liulang Diqu), based on Liu’s novella of the same name (2000). Yao and Wu point out that Liu, in his novels, “Emphasizes the relationship between science and society, and his narratives have been influenced by both the golden age of US science fiction and Soviet science fiction” (52). Often branded “hard SF”, Liu’s works often included gigantic scale over space and time, spanning across the universe and over millennia with detailed description of technology. The worldview and the social/philosophical ideas in these novels are also a hallmark of Liu Cixin’s work. “The ‘Three-Body Problem’ trilogy posits a dark forest theory and tells a story about survival game regarding the coexistence of humanity, the universe and life”, notes Yao and Wu (52). The universe in *Remembrance* series is harsh and Liu creates a confrontation between survival and morality.

¹³ Together, these three novels are called the *Remembrance of Earth’s Past* trilogy, however, the original title, Diqu Wangshi is a play on the films *Once Upon a Time in the West* and *Once Upon a Time in America*, so *Once Upon a Time on Earth* would have been a more appropriate translation.

Championing absolute reason and game theory, Liu implies the uselessness of ethics, compassion and humanism in the face of cosmic catastrophe and interplanetary warfare. Like many of Liu's works, Chinese people—mostly men—are at the front of saving mankind. It does seem cruel at times, but Liu and his philosophy have strong following among fans and Chinese netizens¹⁴. Again, Chinese nationalism is one of the reasons for Liu's popularity. It is hard to speculate if that nationalism is Liu's earnest belief or a way to comply with the official narrative and evade censors at home. The first novel of the series also set a small part of its story during Cultural Revolution. Ye Wenjie, a female scientist who works on a secret mission of contacting aliens, loses faith in humanity after seeing her father die at the hands of Red Guards, calls for aliens to invade Earth, and sets the entire saga in motion. The absolute distrust and fear of others in Liu's "dark forest" theory from *The Dark Forest*, (2008, second instalment of *Remembrance* series) also has its roots in the Cultural Revolution when anyone can be an informant for the state or Red Guards.

It is clear that from its beginning in the beginning of the Twentieth Century, Chinese SF has a strong political and social motivation in imagining a future society of advance science and technology. A permeating sense of utopian tendency began before the People's Republic and the Communist optimism that followed. In his essay "Speculation in a Distorting Mirror: Scientific and Political Fantasy in Contemporary Chinese Writing"¹⁵, Bruce Doar argues that "[w]riters of both science fiction and political fantasy, especially that in the utopian or dystopian vein, distort and magnify present trends in society and place them in future settings. Science fiction deals, then, with the contemporary world" (54). In Lem's work I discussed in chapters above, he employs satire and the absurd to further enable him to "deal with the contemporary world" without alerting the censors. However, in the context of Chinese SF, dealing with its contemporary world becomes slightly more complex. Liang and his contemporaries imagine a better future while works

¹⁴ Mainly users of Weibo and other Chinese social media.

¹⁵ Note that this was published in 1982, so the "contemporary" time here is really the "golden age" from 1979 onward.

like *Ants* reconstructs the history, and works like *Mars Over America* projects history and speculation to another country. Doar compares Chinese SF and their Soviet peers: “Soviet writers have shown far less caution in the use of satire, and there is certainly a healthy question of the goals of both science and technology in much Soviet science fiction” (55). The same can be said of Lem. However, his use of the absurd foregrounds fictionality and distances the satire from the real world. Doar does not expound on the reason for this difference, so I can only speculate. The memory of Cultural Revolution certainly played a role in cautiousness of late-1970s and early 1980s writers. The prospect of a campaign like the one against “spiritual pollution” from the radical wing of the Party also serves as a deterrence to the Chinese SF writers and critics. The concern of a resurgence of the radical wing of the Party only deepened after the campaign took place a year after Doar’s article and it contributes to the blank period of Chinese SF from 1983 to the early 1990s.

Five: My Novel

Although the preceding section brings me to the topic of my own novel, I cannot say that I have been directly influenced by Chinese SF. My interest and influence for this novel is mostly American and European SF from the 1960s to the 1970s, especially Philip K. Dick¹⁶. I draw inspiration from Dick's manipulation of established SF concepts such as precognition and time travel, the way he constructs his plot and how sometimes his protagonists are coerced into conspiracies, and especially his use of absurdity, but in a different sense than the literary absurd I have discussed¹⁷. However, Dick's works interest me less when it comes to satire and censorship. My survey of the Chinese SF, on the other hand, better posits me as a Chinese writer writing in English. It also shows that current optimistic attitude to technology and nationalism from the Chinese SF is not dissimilar to the "Golden Age" SF from the US. Whereas my novel takes inspiration from the New Wave, it is not a direct reaction to the Chinese SF as New Wave to the Golden Age, but is indirectly informed by it. Nevertheless, it has been of my interest to briefly discuss how Chinese SF tackles or does not tackle political and social ideas. As I have pointed out above, Chinese science fiction has been political from its beginning in the early Twentieth Century. However, a persisting strand in the political concern in Chinese SF has been Chinese nationalism and China's place in the world. The optimistic views of authors from the days of Liang Qichao to today with Han Song and Liu Cixin reflect a trend in Chinese writers, but most importantly, puts them in alignment with the official ideology. This means that censorship is often not an issue for them. There are anecdotal stories such as Ken Liu remembers how the Chinese version of *The Three-Body Problem* moved its chapters about Cultural Revolution to flashbacks in order to avoid censorship (Pandell, "Wired Book Club"). Ken Liu also claims in

¹⁶ My novel has drawn influence from not only *Now Wait for Last Year* (1966) for its depiction of a weakened despot, but also from *Martian Time-Slip* (1964) on flashforwards, from *The Unteleported Man* (1966) about scepticism of teleportation, as well as *Do Androids Dream of electric Sheep?* (1968) where I parodied the title for a diegetic book and *Ubik* (1969) generally.

¹⁷ The absurdities in Dick's novels are often plot devices such as effects of SF constructs or results of conspiracy, but an inquest into this is another topic entirely.

the same interview that Liu Cixin has always intended to open the novel with these chapters, which is why the English translation is structured the way it is.

There is almost no doubt that Chinese SF writers censor themselves by foreclosing certain sensitive topics such as the Cultural Revolution or the Great Leap Forward. Liu Cixin restructured his novel in order to avoid censorship, and Wang Jinkang's *Ants* is framed as an allegorical tale about a scientific experiment gone wrong. However, as Doar notes, satire is rare in modern Chinese SF. Although, there are earlier examples like Lao She's *Cat Country*. *Cat Country's* premise can also be deemed as absurd, for it opens with the narrator crash-landing on Mars in an aeroplane, with his friend killed in the process (Lao She, 1). Both satire and absurd work well within the SF setting of the novel, as they do in Lem's work. The SF setting brings the events away from the contemporary world, making it easier for the author to redescribe the targets in the real world such as the politicians and warlords and foregrounding fictionality for absurd effects. The imaginary setting not only relatively frees the author from self-censorship, but also strengthens the effects of satire and the absurd.

Satire in science fiction can be a useful tool, especially when one faces censorship. Doar points out that satire is more prevalent in Soviet SF than in its Chinese counterpart in the 1980s. Stanisław Lem utilises satire to his advantage in both his stories and his novels. I have employed satire several times throughout my novel. Although not a piece of satire of itself, satire has been helpful for me. Satire in my novel mainly provides a means of social commentary without preaching. Since most of the social and political commentary in my novel provides backdrop for the story of Roger, many instances of the satire are fleeting and stay on the surface. The ambivalence of modern satire enables me to ask complex questions without going too deep into the issues or take sides by selecting a norm. Censorship is not my primary concern when applying satire, for I do not seek to publish in Mainland China. Taking cues from Lem, I find that satire and the science fiction setting suit each other well. As I have noted when discussing Suvin, the imaginary settings not only provide the novum for the estrangement, but still assist the "redescription"

in satire. When targets are redescribed in an SF or other speculative or imagined settings, the author gains flexibility for how close or far he or she redescribes the event or the subject. I will discuss several instances of satire from my novel in the following paragraphs.

In the first chapter of my novel, I portrayed a scene where a police officer in Gigapolis, Planet B, tases and arrests a l'an man without any justifiable cause. The scene is partly inspired by the social injustices faced by ethnic minorities in the US and the UK, partly by the way Lem redescribes similar issues in *The Futurological Congress*. With the matter-of-fact tone, both Tichy and Roger emphasise the common occurrences of these types of violent incidents and become implicit accomplices by their callous silence. The absurd humour in Lem's time and the extreme violence in the shooting in his novel is not present in mine. Without the absurdity in *The Futurological Congress*, the satirical redescription of police brutality and racial profiling helps me to address the issue more directly. Similar to what Lem claims, looking at the scene, which was written in late 2016, from 2020, the outrageousness of the death of George Floyd, and what little absurdity and humour my own scene bore at the time diminishes further with time. The science fiction elements in this scene work with the satirical in two ways. First, it helps redescrbing the issue in a more "distanced" manner. Interplanetary tourism and the difference between species shift the racism (or "speciesism" in this case) into the galactical setting of my novel. However, it also highlights the absurdity of the basis of the casual racism and police brutality for the unlikely event. Roger, the bystander, is also a commentary on the "model minority" mentality he contemplates in the novel. I try to bring the familiarity of the politics under a new perspective, where the difference between species are greater, yet less material when none of the characters are human.

In a scene in the second chapter in my novel, Roger travels from a space station to the spaceport back in Nordington, Planet C. Facing the choice between teleportation and a shuttle vessel, Roger choses the latter due to distrust of the apparently widely used technology of teleportation. His paranoia pays off when an accident happens to the teleported passengers, where they

are duplicated at the spaceport but their originals on the space station are not erased. Met with an incident like this, Roger still betrays no feelings until he vomits later. The spaceport guard's response to his inquiry, however, is where I try to utilise satire, more than the incident itself. Similar to the scene above, and the shooting scene in *The Futurological Congress*, I use the reaction from characters to convey a sense of understanding in the outrageous event. The reaction includes the guard's casual explanation to Roger and the way the incident is dealt officially: destroy one set of the people. The sheer contrast these reactions shows with the consensus among my target readers (those who value human life and rights) will help intensify the satire. However, the estrangement effect of the SF setting and the fact the main character (and later narrator) Roger is also an unaffected bystander cause the satire to become less direct. This scene discusses and parodies classic SF tropes like teleportation; the distrust of technology and paranoia Roger has are also subjects of interest when I was devising the scene. Roger's distrust in "technologies [he doesn't] understand" seems paranoid at first glance, especially in an interplanetary SF setting where he has just successfully travelled through hyperspace. However, the incident involving duplicated passengers proves that he has a reason to be doubtful of the application of the technology, at least when operated by his co-planetaries.

The next two events I would like to discuss are deliberately adapted from real-world news and set in the fictional world of my novel. Both are news stories Roger has heard before and remembers during the course of the story. The first one is about a C'er being forcibly removed from a starliner after an argument with the cabin staff; the second one is two l'ans being detained at a Starhub coffee shop after the staff calls the police because they wouldn't order while waiting for someone else to join them. The first event is inspired by the United Express Flight 3411 incident in 2017 (Lartey, "United Airline Passenger Violently Dragged From Seat") and the second is inspired by two black men getting arrested in a Philadelphia Starbucks in 2018 (Gayle and Agencies, "Arrest of Two Black Men at Starbucks"). These are typical redescriptions that I attempt in my novel. By alienating (no pun intended) the event with the SF

setting in a different planet, I intend to distance these incidents from the readers' memory both in space and time. As in the abovementioned two scenes, the SF settings make the differences between races more drastic. By doing so, I want to imply the question: if racism is unacceptable because we are all homo sapiens, then to what extent is speciesism between different intelligent beings acceptable? However, I did not want to put my target only on outright racism, but like I have mentioned above, on the "model minority" mentality that prevalent in many ethnic communities that is shown through Roger. While Roger does not explicitly acknowledge it, he implies that he will not be treated like the l'ans because C'ers are seen as timid and tame. He also believes that events like the coffee shop arrest is less likely to take place on Planet B, and that he will be fine if he is careful. For the same reason, he finds it difficult to reconcile with the C'er being removed by force from a starliner. But for the readers to continue identify with Roger somewhat, I refrained from letting him question and blame the victim for the treatment that he received.

Satire has been a handy instrument for social commentary in my novel. By perverting, or redescribing events in the real world, I was able "distort and magnify" the present day further, without actually engaging with (anti-)utopian writing. The societies I have created in the novel share some parallel features with societies in our world, today or before. They are in some ways speculated versions of these societies, but not so extreme to warrant a utopian or dystopian description. The worldbuilding and structure in my novel is not intended as satire for I did not wish to set targets and norms and make moral judgement on which society is better. The societies of Planet B and Planet C may contrast within themselves, but I did not try to create a consensus on which represent a better version or is there a better version than the both of them. The satirical elements are mainly used to flesh out the details of these societies, instead of a judgement on the whole of them.

I have also incorporated some elements of the absurd in my novel. Different from the details where my satirical elements inhabit, I try to put the absurd in the overarching structure of the novel. Harking back to the

existentialist roots, I modelled Roger into a typical absurd protagonist, who seemingly has no control over the events that evolve around him. Roger is principally not unreliable as a narrator. However, his lack of insight or interest in the unfolding plot and the people around him makes it easier for me to present his point of view as less reliable.

I have further explored point of view beyond the narrator. I have switched back and forth between first and third person views, along with tense. I have hoped to create the sense of uncertainty and imbalance with the switching, but the specific instances of switching are made to suit the progression of the story. I started the novel with third-person present-tense. The choice of third person narrative is to help with world building and give a bigger picture when needed. The present tense is my way of adding drive and urgency to the seemingly banal life of Roger's at the beginning. I attempted to contrast the way that Roger perceives and reacts to his surroundings in real time in the first two chapters with a removed third person narrative. I have hoped that this contrast can bring out more of the instability in the narrative. The tense switching at the later part of the novel is accompanied by Roger's consciousness jumping between two points in time, similar to a time-slip. The disconcertedness is aimed to create a sense of absurd. At this point, the science fiction setting is used to complement the sense of confusion. An example of this is when Roger copies his own speech from the future, forming a causal loop within the chapter. With Roger jumping between times, he turns closer to an unreliable narrator in Chapter Ten.

Roger's character arc also indicates the absurd protagonist's journey. He starts as a journalist in a C-language publication on Planet B but ends up being a propagandist during a political crisis in the C regime. Without really aligning himself with Bill's and George's cause, Roger is sort of coerced into becoming their pawn. I did not to show much of Roger's thinking and much of the characters' thoughts are shown through dialogues. By staying on the surface with the characters, I aim to create a further sense of disconnection and unreliability in the protagonist/narrator. Like an absurd protagonist, Roger is faced with many choices with high stakes. But as the first three chapters

show, Roger seems to occupy a space between the two worlds and disconnects with one of them when on the other. When these worlds collide with the Direktor's visit, Roger loses connection with both. I attempt to convey this disconnectedness to the reader and create a sense of meaninglessness in the choices Roger faces. I also endeavoured to incorporate satirical elements with the absurd, similar to what Lem does with his fiction. The instances of satire discussed above all have tinges of the absurd, especially the muted reaction in face of the violent incidents. I have of course taken cue from Lem's shooting episode from *The Futurological Congress* that I discussed above. The redescription of the events are distorted to the limit of credibility and sense, and thus foregrounds the fictionality of the scenes. The SF setting and concepts such as in the spaceport scene further foregrounds the fictionality and create absurdity to the situation.

Satire and the absurd provided me with tools that complement each other in creating both the storyline and the world that the story takes place. Science fiction removes the immediate reference to the real world while enabling writers to look at it in a more focused setting, similar to redescription in satire. Satire, therefore, naturally fits in with SF setting when dealing with reality. SF features and ideas also naturally foreground fictionality, especially when the fiction is not mainly dealing with these characteristics and concepts (like a space opera). When creating a more everyday situation in an interplanetary worldview, SF elements can be jarring and surreal at times. I aim to introduce the absurd to these moments. When making social commentaries in the scenes I described above, these elements are very helpful for me to illustrate the events and express my view to an extent.

Conclusion

The speculative nature of science fiction offers a great amount of creative freedom. Advanced technology and its side-effects have been much explored topics for SF in general, but they can serve as great context for stories that focus on the social and political. Due to the long history of SF as a genre, it has many existing concepts and elements that are widely known to readers and film audiences, such as robots and cyborgs, space travel, teleportation and time-slip. These well-known tropes have established certain expectations and even clichés in SF. As Darko Suvin notes in *Metamorphoses*, that the “displacement of reality”, or the “oscillation between the author’s zero world and the new reality” can be concealed. The concealment normally in a “convention tacitly extrapolated from earlier stories; the history of the genre is the missing link that made possible, for example, tales in another space/time without any textual reference to that of the author” (72). The long history of SF provides me a rich pallet of concepts and elements to choose from when building a world removed from my “empirical” one. The familiarity these tropes offer can prove useful when building a world in which readers can easily immerse themselves. These concepts can be widely understood and do not request further explanation. So for me as a writer, they are also footholds where I can introduce my own concept building on this existing knowledge or consensus among the readership. Furthermore, a familiar world can direct the interest of the reader away from itself but towards the characters that inhabit the space.

Therefore, the SF genre serves as a world building toolbox for my novel, from which I can draw various influences for my purposes. The signs of colonisation and war on Planet D and Ophelia’s house are two examples of my use of SF setting as context for location or character. By adapting space colony into a manor-turned theme park, I try to make Roboland a combination of SF and Victorian Gothic. Because space colonies and robot factories, even AI that runs spacecrafts are widely accepted SF concepts, turning them into other things becomes easier. One reason is that I do not have to explain what

these concepts are, the other is that there are existing ideas of these concepts among readers that I can then subvert. In this sense, SF traditions are convenient for me to either adhere to or depart from. I find it rewarding to break from the traditions because that creates an imbalance hence absurdity, such as in the scene with duplicate teleported travellers. In Suvin's terms, I have kept my world-building "open-ended" and was able to "eschew" some of the established conventions in SF.

Science fiction is a convenient genre for Stanisław Lem to express his concerns for the future without the fear of being banned. Although it is worth noting that (significant) SF, according to Suvin, is in itself a "specifically roundabout way of commenting on the author's collective context" (84), the ambivalence of his satire and absurd humour give his critics and censors the reason to interpret his fiction as merely fairy-tale. The standards for the censors in different periods of Lem's career remain unclear. It is hard to tell what really went on in the Department of Culture from the hectic days of destalinisation to the chaos at the end of Cold War. But as the result, Lem's works were not banned in Poland at the time. However, as I have pointed out above, censorship should not be limited to a state-backed action. Censorship can form before the text is produced so self-censorship remains an important question to consider. While I do not face the problem of censorship in the UK, at least not from the state, there are certain issues that I do not want to directly address, and SF provides me with the metaphors to negotiate these issues. Paired with redescription and foregrounded fictionality, I can contain some of the topic within the fictional world, without drawing too much attention to themselves.

The discussion in chapter one establishes that censorship can set the range of the speakable and happen before a discourse occurs. Therefore, self-censorship can even take the form of choosing ambivalence and science fiction. The author's agency, then, becomes a key point in the discussion. Since any change made before the text is produced may amount to foreclosure, avoiding censorship becomes a form of self-censorship. Lem, quite understandably, does not discuss censorship directly in his interviews. We

then need to look for indications of agency in his work. By looking at Lem's short story "The Thirteenth Voyage", not only does Lem satirise the impossibility of revolutionary ideals, but he also presents a version of the process and repercussions of censorship. This satire is important because it expresses what usually belongs to the unspeakable. But with the Pintans in the story, Lem also metafictionally satirises foreclosure itself. With the use of SF setting and absurdity, Lem as a writer has been able to draw the attention away from his satire. The story successfully evaded censors even when the target of his satire is foreclosure and censorship. The fact that *The Star Diaries* passed the censors and made it to publication in 1957 indicate the change in censorship standards during the "thaw" and how Lem use it to his own advantage.

Satire, of course, functions much more than as a way of foreclosure. Satire has inherently a strong moral indication. The communal consensus it creates with its readers finds its roots in the "attacking" of the norm in real life. However, in modern times, satire with its ambivalence in targets and norms has been a powerful literary tool. SF itself allows a "roundabout way" of commenting on reality, and satire naturally fits in SF when the two are combined. Since Suvin's "purest" analogic SF, to which Lem's work belongs, is a kind of "modern parable" that provides alternative viewpoint to the real world, satire can function within SF in an analogic and estranged way. SF not only further removes the targets and norms from the fictional attack, but also provides new vantage points and novum for the humour and wit. Thus it proves useful for writers like Lem because the lack of clarity suits a modern world where it's hard to find ideal "norms", and targets are on both sides. Moreover, the ambivalence provides opportunities for Lem to embed the criticism and political ideas deeper in order to avoid censorship. In Lem, unclear satire can work as a form of foreclosure, but it also serves as strong way of expression. Lem's short stories I have considered in these chapters show how satires operate in Lem's works. The lack of a clear target and the universal norms appeals not so much to the reader's political stance as to their moral values. This ambiguity interests me as a writer, as I have taken into consideration

different cultures and societies in my novel. By contrasting and sometimes fusing different political issues, I strive to express concerns on the similar trend of isolationism, xenophobia and the erosion of established political systems in our world today. The failed trade talk between the B'ish prime minister and the Direktor symbolises much of my concern. The collapse of one's government and the near collapse of the other also represent my speculative versions of these. Although I have to add that my versions of speculations are not as extreme as Lem's with his Pope assassin and drug-induced peace in *The Futurological Congress*. Therefore, these scenes are not as absurd as in Lem's fiction.

The absurd, on the other hand, creates an unbalanced effect in the fiction and therefore "foregrounds" the fictionality. Growing outside its existentialist roots, absurdity in Lem's novel follows the literary tradition more than the philosophical one. I employ the absurd in a similar fashion where foregrounded fictionality takes priority over existential imbalance. Ijon Tichy falls into the category of an "absurd protagonist", with his stoic reaction and lack of control in most situations. Similarly, Roger from my novel also has a disconnection with his surroundings. Lem's fiction contains many other characteristics of absurd fiction. Much of Lem's humour bears similarity to absurd humour with its unexpectedness, implausibility and lack of resolution. "The Eleventh Voyage" provides many examples of how these absurd elements challenge the suspension of disbelief by foregrounding the fictionality in the story. The contrivedness of the story, along with the outlandishly SF premise and allegorical structure, creates the atmosphere of fantasy and fairy-tale. For Lem's critics at the time, they read Lem's work as fantasy and did not go as far as to flag them up to the censors. It becomes understandable if the reader happens to stay on the surface, or decides to do so.

Like with the two stories listed above, *The Futurological Congress* showcases how satire and the absurd interact in the context of science fiction. As I have noted above, the novel covers areas of Lem's futurological concerns. These concerns are expressed through events in the novel and fictional

academic concerns from futurologists in the novel. The novel touches on a wide range of topics from overpopulation, food shortage, racism, religious terrorism to the mutations of language. Lem employs both satire and the absurd in presenting these ideas. Self-reflexivity and metafiction is an important characteristic of this novel. In Robert M. Philmus's terms, this characteristic can be called "metageneric", or "generally self-referential". The new coinages of words in the novel are heavily metafictional, as well as Tichy's travels to the future. Self-reflexivity and metafiction sometimes used in order to foreground fictionality and create a sense of absurd imbalance. But in episodes such as Trottelreiner's research in the future, it serves as satire and commentary on future studies in the real world.

With the assistance of metageneric elements, Lem weaves his futurological concerns into the story about a futurological congress. The novel achieves an organic combination of SF and future studies with its use of self-referentiality. I have to point out that to achieve its desired effect, the metageneric elements mostly work alongside either satire or the absurd. I tend to view the adaptation of the SF mode in this novel as an incidental result of metagenerically representing Lem's interest in future studies. I am not trying to argue or speculate if it was intended as such. What I am trying to illustrate is that with the case of *The Futurological Congress*, Lem uses science fiction to supplement content and ideas more than for stylistic purposes. As SF serves as an integral part to Lem's ideas in his fiction, I see Lem as having much if not full agency in applying the mode. Therefore, I find it hard to recognise his approach as a means of inner censorship.

In order to better position my novel, I need to address Chinese SF again. As I have noted above, Chinese SF has had a strong political undertone since its birth in the early Twentieth Century. Because of the turbulent history of Twentieth Century China and the intellectuals' continuing effort of "saving the nation", these works have inherited two main strands of ideas: Chinese nationalism and popular science. In the face of imperial forces and rapid modernisation during the first half of the Twentieth Century, it is understandable that the SF writers felt it necessary to promote a strong

Chinese national identity and popularise scientific thinking and knowledge. However, as these trends continued well after Cultural Revolution, it is clear that they might be more than creative choices. I don't intend to dive into the history of censorship in Imperial, Republic of or the People's Republic of China. But with the advantage of hindsight, these topics did, more often than not, survive the censors. Chinese nationalism and patriotism agree with the official ideology of projecting a stronger China, and the popularisation of science coincides with the "four modernisations" after Cultural Revolution. There are indeed works that reflect upon the missteps of the People's Republic, like Wang Jinkang's *Ants* that allegorically retell the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. Han Song's works are dark and political, but as a journalist working in state-owned media. With more universal themes, Han has stayed within the boundaries of the speakable with his dark speculations. Lem has used universal concerns in many of his fictions as well. For Chinese SF, satire and the absurd have not been the preferred means of expression when it comes to political and social ideas. But Chinese SF writers have never shied away from expressing their concerns for the future through means such as allegory or metaphor. In a way, that allows me to take a step further in consciously applying satirical and absurd modes in SF.

My novel, although not directly influenced by Chinese SF, to some extent comes from a similar cultural background. I am not interested either in criticising or promoting Chinese nationalism, but it is nonetheless an important part of Chinese SF and Chinese literature in general. For some writers, nationalism is a means to adhere to the official ideology to avoid censorship. For me, Chinese nationalism is a phenomenon that might appear in various guises because it is prevalent in the culture I come from, either through satire of something else or through the absurd. I have not focused on the future of scientific and technological advancements like Lem, but mostly used SF as a backdrop for creative freedom. Apart from providing a "estrangement effect" to take a step back in satirising the current times, I also used parody of SF tropes as a way of providing both comedy and a foregrounding of fictionality. Another similarity I find my novel has with Chinese SF is the tendency of

focusing on the universal than on a specific society. I have taken inspirations from contemporary US and UK, at the same time kept in mind the cultural differences between the East and West. What has taken place on Planets B and C are extreme versions of the world today. I have also taken into consideration that after the economic reform, especially after the end of Cold War, Chinese society has become less different than it was to the West in several ways. Since the Cultural revolution vastly diminished the traditional Chinese culture, Chinese people welcomed Western culture as the modern with open arms. Chinese SF prospered in late 1970s and early 1980s in this context. However, this openness and westernisation in the guise of modernisation is also the background for the source of 1983 campaign against “Spiritual Pollution”. The tension during this wave of modernisation is not as much between traditional Chinese values and Western values but between communist ideals and capitalist growth. Global capitalism has made many social and political concerns universal in the years after the Cold War and into our Century.

My use of satire and the absurd embeds itself with my use of genre. Along with SF, I have endeavoured to integrate elements of the Gothic (with Roboland), the film noir/hardboiled detective fiction with the investigation of Bill and Bertie, the road movie and action with the escaping and shootout at the launching pad, as well as elements of spy fiction with the AIA. With these scenes, not only do I attempt to evoke a sense of familiarity from genre fiction and film, but also create a further sense of fictionality. In other words, I try to create a structural sense of absurdity with the shift in influences between chapters. By incorporating various genres in different chapters, I try to create a sense of “anthology series” or fix-up as in early genre fiction or television. The shift of influence between chapters, paired with the continuing story, aims for a sense of constructedness. Here also Menippean element of “inserted genre” is present, as I have been mixing genres on a structural level. At the same time, by parodying the SF tropes, the SF genre is itself parodied, therefore in a sense, an “inserted genre” in the entire novel is seen as Menippean satire. However, that is not what I am trying to argue here. I’ve

distanced the political contents by using SF setting and genre influences to foreground fictionality. I've done so not as a means of conscious foreclosure, but rather for the absurd experience. I have generally focused my satire on social issues that occurred in the West. These issues involve topics such as migration, racism and populism. The selection is not dissimilar to Lem's satire in *The Futurological Congress*. But aiming at the universal remains common among Chinese science fiction in recent years. My novel, instead, lines up with the Lem tradition in this sense. Continuing the Chinese SF tradition is not my main concern, partly because I write in English. However, I am, like Roger in my novel, very much aware that my work sits between different worlds and cultures. This duality is what makes writing this novel in the SF genre interesting to me.

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