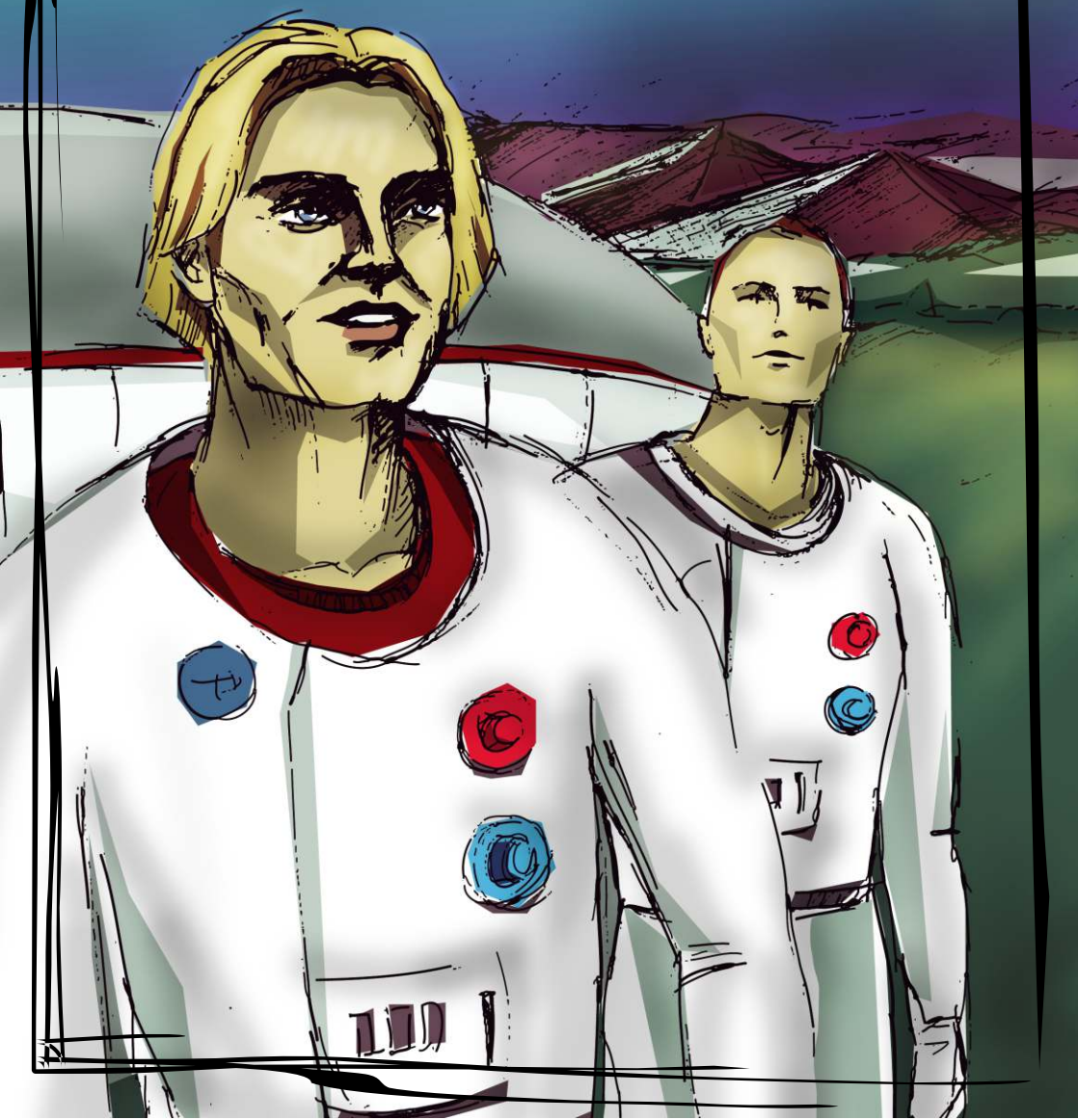


Teodor Pravicky

First Contact Finders

The Carnivorous Plant



First Contact Finders - The Carnivorous Plant

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INTRODUCTION

It's the 23rd century and for several decades the Global Earth Federation has conducted intensive research and expansion across the galaxy. During that time, a number of planets with alien animals and civilizations have been discovered.

The key participants of similar expeditions are specially trained agents. At that time robots have no autonomy under the law, so all decisions must be decided by humans.

However, the best of agents like Sammy Scoopers and Jerry Walker aren't very cool all the time.



CHAPTER 1

We are located at a ceremony to celebrate the successful completion of the final examinations of all students.

At the entrance of the school building, there are large numbers of people scrambling in. It looks like the whole city arrived tonight. Although, people at the Academy are used to that. Hardly any family members miss the opportunity to participate in such occasions.

Inside the hall and showcases there are many tools on display that agents need whilst travelling to distant planets. The usual typically boring items such as tubes, but also medieval clothing, swords and prehistoric maces. Androids looking like giant frogs present a newly discovered type of civilization, not too distant from the Earth.

The graduates and their families are standing around and watching examples shown on the screen of what their future work might be like. Of course, not everyone gets that far. Frightened mothers, observing giant insects on corridor monitors, will eventually find happiness in the fact that their child started to panic after the first expedition and accepted an office job instead. Mothers typically react like this.

Rone and Mimzy are two serious guys and also the newest members of the analysis group to oversee the discovered planets (ODP). Their faces are familiar to everyone, because every year a maximum of one or two students finish this particular field.

"See Mimzy, now it starts to get interesting. Look at those naive faces on the other students, their eyes are full of dreams of the future..." Rone smiles with satisfaction, and without waiting for an answer, he continues: "They want to be astronauts, explorers, have a little fun in new places and fool-around with pretty girls at home."

Both of them evaluate the situation and shake their heads disapprovingly.

"Yeah, I'll fool-around with them instead!" Added Mimzy.

Rone is much brighter than his colleague and also holds a slightly higher position, although he is just a graduate like everyone else. Personal interest brings accountability and Rone is fully committed to every task he undertakes.

Mimzy's note seemed pretty ridiculous to him.

"You think we're here because of that, moron?"

"What's wrong, Rone?" Mimzy asks surprisingly, and grins like a little puppy caught in the act.

When Rone sees him like that, he always softens up to some degree.

"Think a little. What will the staff do if all their careers flourish?"

"Will they go into retirement?"

Incredible even for Mimzy!

"No. They will be influential and work in lucrative places or take-up responsible positions. OUR work, don't you get it?"

Both are silent for a moment and watch visitors passing-by.

Two kinds of giant insects, looking like cockroaches, fight on the close-by virtual display. The image is quite hazy, because they're almost transparent, as if they're made of glass. Now and then the shot turns towards the agent with excited expression.

A young graduate together with his family, are watching the scene. He tells them how important it is to be able to assess the situation and keep their distance, when similar creatures fight, they are pretty fast.

Rone watches the young agent and nods his head disapprovingly. That's the perfect place for these people he thinks to himself, and says to his colleague:

"That's why it is always bad when it eventually goes wrong. Do you remember our teacher, Mr. Morray?"

"Yeah, it used to be such fun with him." Mimzy sighed emotionally.

"But it's not fun anymore, because one of those agents is his boss now."

An important topic for consideration. The expressions of both analysts hardened. Without anything further needing to be said, they enter the conference room.

The faces of the graduates who pass by are very happy and positive at first. But every time they look at Rone or Mimzy, their expressions show a little fright and apprehension.

"So what's the plan?" He asks confidently.

Rone thinks for a moment and considers the best way to say it.

"We have to learn how to hold back the ones who look too capable."

In the large conference room, everything is a different than usual. The whole building is normally used for teaching nauseating things such as mathematics or biology.

However, this evening is about a mixture of loud music, half-naked dancing girls, food, alcohol and generally joking around.

Around one such table where a dancing girl accidentally stepped into a cake, a fresh graduate walks around, his name is Jerry Walker. He is obviously in shape, because through his clothing it is possible to see how he flexes his arm muscles to the rhythm music.

Some other girl just came in.

"Hey babe. Look at the cake, would like to dance on that, too?" says Jerry.

"Sure! But bring me a drink, okay?" Answers the girl as she jumps on the table.

Dancing on tables was a popular activity for girls in the twenty-second century, and even now it's still considered to be pretty cool.

After a while Jerry returns with two shots of vodka. The girl jumps back down to him, and they both go to the dance floor weaving between the other people.

"I'm glad the hype has finally ended. At last I will get to see some action!" said Jerry referring to his graduation.

"Really? But then you will possibly disappear for several weeks!" The girl answers sourly.

"I'll bring you some alien worms or something, okay?"

"Very funny!"

Both are dancing for a while across the dance floor, but when they meet again, they passionately rub their bodies up against each other.

"So will you sleep at my place? I have the suit of an ancient warrior and I want to enjoy you today as a defenceless villager. "

The girl smiles, but her expression also looks as if she is wondering what to say.

"My warrior, you'll have to try a little harder."

Jerry is gently slapping her on the butt and just smiles.

They are so focused on themselves that Jerry accidentally bumps into the passing-by analyst Rone and spills his drink directly down his clothing. He looks pretty annoyed and Jerry tries to excuse himself with a friendly smile.

"What the fuck are you doing?"

"Sorry, buddy. It was an accident."

Rone's clothes starts drying automatically. It sounds a bit like blow-drying, and his shirt fills with air and inflates slightly.

"What's your name?" Rone asks him directly.

"Jerry Walker."

Rone smiles with satisfaction at his colleague Mimzy. Both know what's going on.

"Look Jerry, do whatever you want, just watch out and stay away from me, okay?" Said Rone with effortless authority in his voice.

"I understand." Jerry agrees, although he would prefer to say something else.

Without using any further unnecessary words, Jerry pulls his girl towards the toilets.

"Do you see that dumba, Mimzy? If every one of those agents make small mistakes like that, our work will remain with us forever."

"Such a nerd!"



CHAPTER 2

Sammy Scoopers is Jerry's friend. He gets off the antigravity bus that just landed at the bus stop near the ceremony.

Immediately behind the bus stop is a beautiful busty girl named Susan. She is wearing a tight red dress that emphasizes her breasts and rounded bottom. Apparently she is waiting for someone.

On his way towards her, Sammy is trying to figure out what to do. This could be a good opportunity!

"Hey, do you know when the ceremony is supposed to begin?"

"In about an hour?"

"Oh, great. Hopefully we won't be bored to death."

"Certainly not, I heard that there will be a lot of drinking. It will definitely be fun." Susan smiles.

It's Sammy's first celebration in life, yet with so many women ... But he assumed it would seem weird if she noticed that.

"Well, it always depends on the people... so let me buy you a drink in case you get bored, ok?"

"Sure." Susan smiles uncertainly.

Okay, time to get out of here. Sammy winks at her and starts to walk away, as if he had this kind of conversation every day.

In fact, for the last seven years he was quite socially isolated until now, due to the training,. He only had the opportunity to talk to similar retards like himself, and the only women he has bumped into, were his grandmother and the lazy, ugly specky-eyes lady from stock.

In the Academy Hall, the ceremony is in full swing and three-dimensional models of different things, tools and technologies are being projected on the stage...

The order of projection and commenting are intentionally adjusted to be "funny". After all everybody knows well that there's a gap between primitive and modern civilization.

Analysts Rone and Mimzy are standing beside the podium. Susan who we met at the bus stop in front of the Academy, is also there with them. Rone listens closely to the presentation, looks around and slaps Susan proprietorially over her plump ass.

"... and this is the tattoo technology that acts as an energy shield." The commentator describes the next frame. It shows illustrations of a tattooed human figure which shatters laser beams and reflects stones, sword, axe and hammer attacks. Meanwhile the commentator continues:

"Energy weapon or gun, assault with primitive sword, axe - our agent even survives bomb attacks ... for a while."

The audience laughs and applauds.

"So far the civilizations we discovered are very primitive. Their most commonly used materials are usually wood and stone. They build stone houses,

plates, cutlery. At first we thought they probably clean their teeth with stones as well."

Again people started to laugh. Susan somehow did not notice the joke, so she asks Rone to excuse her as she has to go to the toilet.

She hurries to the toilet and at the same time she opens a silent communication channel to talk to her parents and tell them she will be bit late tonight.

In that moment she bumps into Sammy. It's almost an hour since they met, and so because of her curiosity regarding this unknown but charming guy, she closes her communication channel.

"It's a bit boring, as I said." Sammy tells her.

"It also has bright moments, but I really don't get why all you guys are so into this technical stuff."

"When you figure out how they are used, it can also be fun." Sammy says most eloquently.

Susan looks at him without moving a muscle in her face.

"You think so?"

"I think I owe you a drink. Do you want to go over there to the bar for a while?"

"But not for long, I have some things to do. Meet you there in a bit, okay?" Susan said, and without waiting for an answer, she quickly walks away.

"Beautiful." Sammy said to himself as he turns to see her busty figure.

The audience around him watch the show intently and marvel and laugh as one.

Suddenly Sammy is stopped by Jerry. Finally he meets a familiar face.

"Ah Sammy, just a few days back in civilization and already trying to get some chicks here?"

Jerry has quite a lot of experience in this field.

"You know, I missed a few things over the years."

"Well, I don't want to spoil your fun, buddy, but this girl is here with Rone. Do you know the student who just got a job in the commission?" Jerry explains to him.

Sammy looks towards Rone with a display of arrogance on his face.

"That asshole can kiss my ass."

Jerry is obviously not sure how to react to this response, so he just smiles, shakes his head disapprovingly and walks away.

Sammy is sitting at the bar with busty Susan. Although it is less than 10 minutes since they last saw each other, but to Sammy it seems as if she looks much, much better now that she is sitting right next to him.

He sometimes loses control and looks into her cleavage more than he should.

"So this is the whole thing. Seven years in school and then we'll see." Sammy is trying to shorten his story.

"You're not so excited about it, are you?"

"You saw those people. So excited to begin working for someone, to listen to commands."

Susan is not sure what to say.

Sammy watches a dance, that's going on behind the bar. One guy there is dancing with four cool girls.

"See that girl over there? She looks just like you."

"No, she doesn't." Susan smiles and pushes her full breasts closer to his hands.

They enjoy the nice moment. They seem to be tuned into a similar wavelength ... Even though this is

mainly due to the manual of "How to get a pretty girl with a finger in the nose", which Sammy was reading when he was bored during between tests.

What he hasn't really got yet was how to start something more exciting. So before it's too late, he suddenly says:

"Kiss me."

Susan looks a little surprised, but she wants to do it. Well, then Rone appears.

"What are you doing here, Susan?" He asks with anger in his voice.

She turns to him and talks to him as if he was her brother.

"I met a friend, I'll be there in a sec, okay?"

But Rone doesn't want to leave. Susan is sitting way too close to the college boy.

"Who the fuck are you?" He asks Sammy.

"Who wants to know?"

Rone would prefer a kinda stronger calibre of conversation, but half the people at the bar are watching them.

"Susan come here, we gotta go."

She waits a few seconds for Sammy's reaction, but he looks even more surprised than her. Then she stands up and goes to Rone.

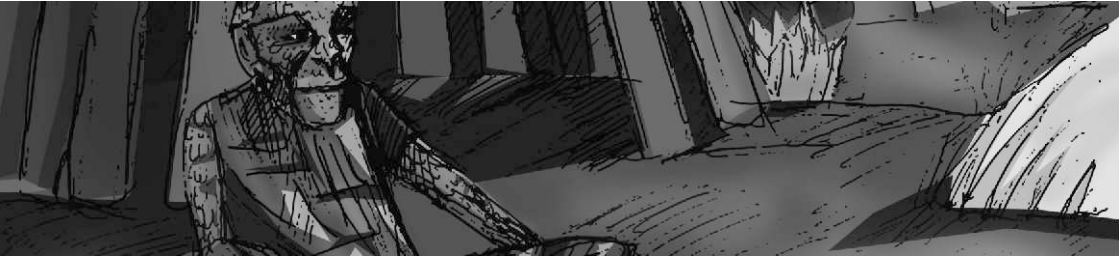
"See ya, Sammy."

"See ya."

Rone laughs.

Well, that was weird. Why did she actually go with him? Sammy is thinking about it, but he realizes that he doesn't really have a clue about these kinds of things.

The good news is that he only acted like an idiot once in front of her that night.



CHAPTER 3

Zebra is a rocky planet where there is very little water on the surface. Most is covered by deserts, mountains .. and only a few green valleys.

Jaffa and Neme are two young aliens. Their species is about half the height compared with people, their skin is red in colour. The inhabitants of Zebra also have an extraordinary ability to survive without food.

These two have just finished school. Their main subjects consisted of very pro-ecological topics such as "how to build a shelter whilst not hurting the plants" and so on.

An alien civilization that is only in the stone period and they have already learned how to be respectful to their planet. However, this concern wasn't instilled into them by themselves. All inhabitants pass forward the rules, as any damage to plants is life-threatening.

That's because some of the plants are very powerful and intelligent.

The Inhabitant's way of life is therefore really tricky. They try to survive in nature, without damaging it.

Jaffa and Neme, however, have never been very good listeners to old traditions. They don't like poor vegetarian meals of baked mushrooms, wet leaves and fallen dried fruit. Once they became independent, it was



time to go hunting.

Neme approaches Jaffa's modest hut. He just ties some sharp stone to a stick.

"What are you doing with the stone?" Neme asks without having a clue.

"One of the elders gave me this advice. When long ago they hunted wild boar, they stunned them by using with one shot. Look."

Jaffa makes a brief swing with his weapon. It looks almost like a mace skilfully done. Later, he returns to his colleague:

„I can see you have dressed up for hunting. Isn't that your last piece?"

Neme is looking at his trousers made from animal skin.

"We'll go into the jungle around the hut where Layka lives. I can't be seen by her on a hunting expedition dressed as a scarecrow."

Jaffa probably doesn't get it.

"Maybe, you should have focused on your weapon rather than your wardrobe. You're not going to catch anything with that in the forest." He says nervously.

Neme is checking his not so sharp stake.

„A well dressed corpse will be no use to Layka." Jaffa laughs.

Layka is a plump young alien with shapeliness in all the right places. You can see that, although she lives in a similarly meagre hut as the rest of the village, her parents give her special care. If she is well-fed, one day she will marry the fittest man from the village.

Layka sits in front of the hut on the edge of the village, she's rotating dried fruit. Jaffa walks by

with Neme and both wave at Layka.

"She is looking so pretty today." Neme says dreamily.

"At least you'll try hard. If you don't catch at least one animal, you can forget her straight away."

"Layka is not like that."

"It's just because she has never been starving." Jaffa thoughtfully flips his weapon from one hand to other. "And you won't impress her parents any other way."

The rest of the journey to the jungle Neme is busy thinking of what Jaffa said and what he meant by that. Sometimes he looks worriedly at his poorly trimmed stake and closely monitors the area to see if something alive may appear.

Jaffa is delighted that Neme begins to think about important things. Jaffa has always felt good when others relied on him.

In this state of mind they make their way through denser and denser fauna.

It's obvious that they're not in the jungle for the first time, because even though after walking a kilometre they haven't yet bumped into a single animal, a single beetle or even a tiny fly, they are carefully watching where they step and approach the Jungle only on tiptoes so they don't accidentally hit something green.

After about half an hour's walk Jaffa pulls the first trap out of his bag in the form of a self-closing cage with a bait of dried fruits.

"I have only two because my father took one. I seriously look forward to finishing building my own hut, this really drives me nuts." Jaffa mumbles while laying traps.

"Relax. I suspect that today will be a really successful hunt and we will be home before lunch."

However, the reality was somewhat different. The only living creature who they'd encountered all day was a small monkey, looking a bit like a rat, it had just climbed up a carnivorous tree. But in a split second a large carnivorous leaf wrapped around it, the monkey was shaking inside for a few seconds then it's pain stopped.

On the way back their traps were still empty, so the hunters shared fruit bait and headed home.

Similarly it continued for about a month. Life in the forest, however, had the advantage that although hunters didn't find anything decent to eat, there was always a rivulet, from which they could drink, or they found a few fallen berries which had been thrown on the ground by the wind.

For the entire history of planet Zebra it hasn't yet happened that the jungle has been completely empty. Sudden reality made Jaffa believe that he will have to look around in places, which everyone knows that there is a very little chance of survival.

These locations were called "dead forest". A dead forest means the most dangerous place in the jungle. Even carnivorous plants there are so hungry that they began to lure their prey with their natural ability of telepathy.

The special ability of plant telepathy wasn't developed by accident on Zebra.

The only creature that has gained resistance to the telepathic attraction is the Actan. A small animal, living underground like a mole, its behaviour reminiscent of a beaver, because it builds underground shelters from branches.

Jaffa and Neme just passed a path resulting in one such dead forest. At first glance you can see that some of the plants are wilted and slowly drying out.

"So listen to me carefully," Jaffa stops for the last time. "We look only to the ground, the fruit on the trees don't interest us whatsoever, right?"

"Sure."

"Traps are ready."

Each of them carries one cage prepared with dried fruits.

"You put it down there by those holes, I will put it about ten paces further on and then we run quickly back, okay?" Jaffa assures for the second time so that Neme understands.

"You think I will be enjoying the beauty of the killer trees and fall into the trap?"

"I'm just making sure you bear it in mind. I've been there a few times with my dad, we had a big craving for those red berries. He had to pull me back by force, otherwise I probably wouldn't be here now."

"I've heard that. But the only meal that I'm going to think of, is the food that Layka will prepare for me when I become a real hunter." Neme plays down the situation.

Jaffa is trying not to laugh. He has never really been so in love with his wife. They have been best friends since childhood, so when the time came, they didn't really think about it too much and went straight for it.

"Well then think of Layka, just don't climb on any tree, okay?"

"Sure!"

Jaffa starts to sprint first and is immediately followed by his colleague. They both throw their weapons on the

ground. While running they are trying to hold their traps as carefully as possible so they aren't opened by any sudden shocks before they are placed on the ground.

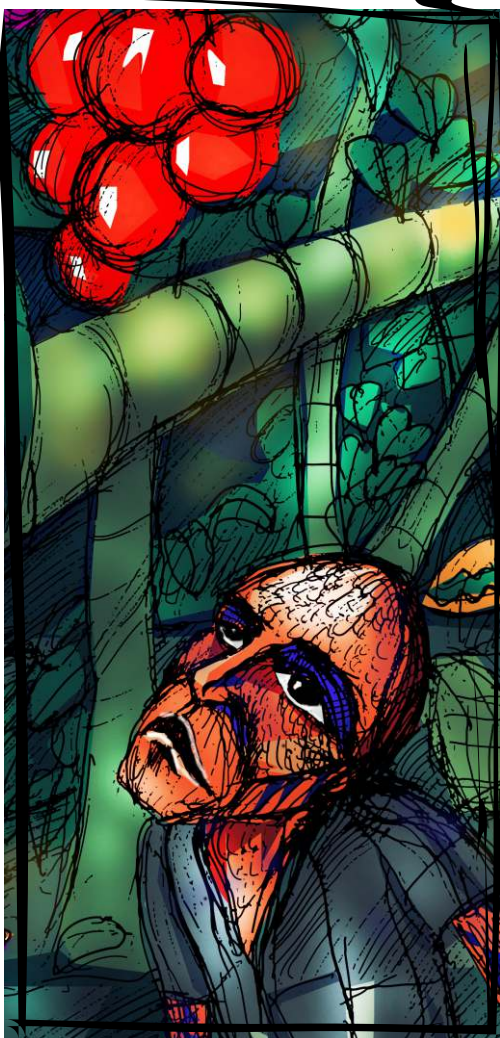
Right on the edge of a dead forest the carnivorous plants don't wait for anything. They register movement in direction where new visitors enter.

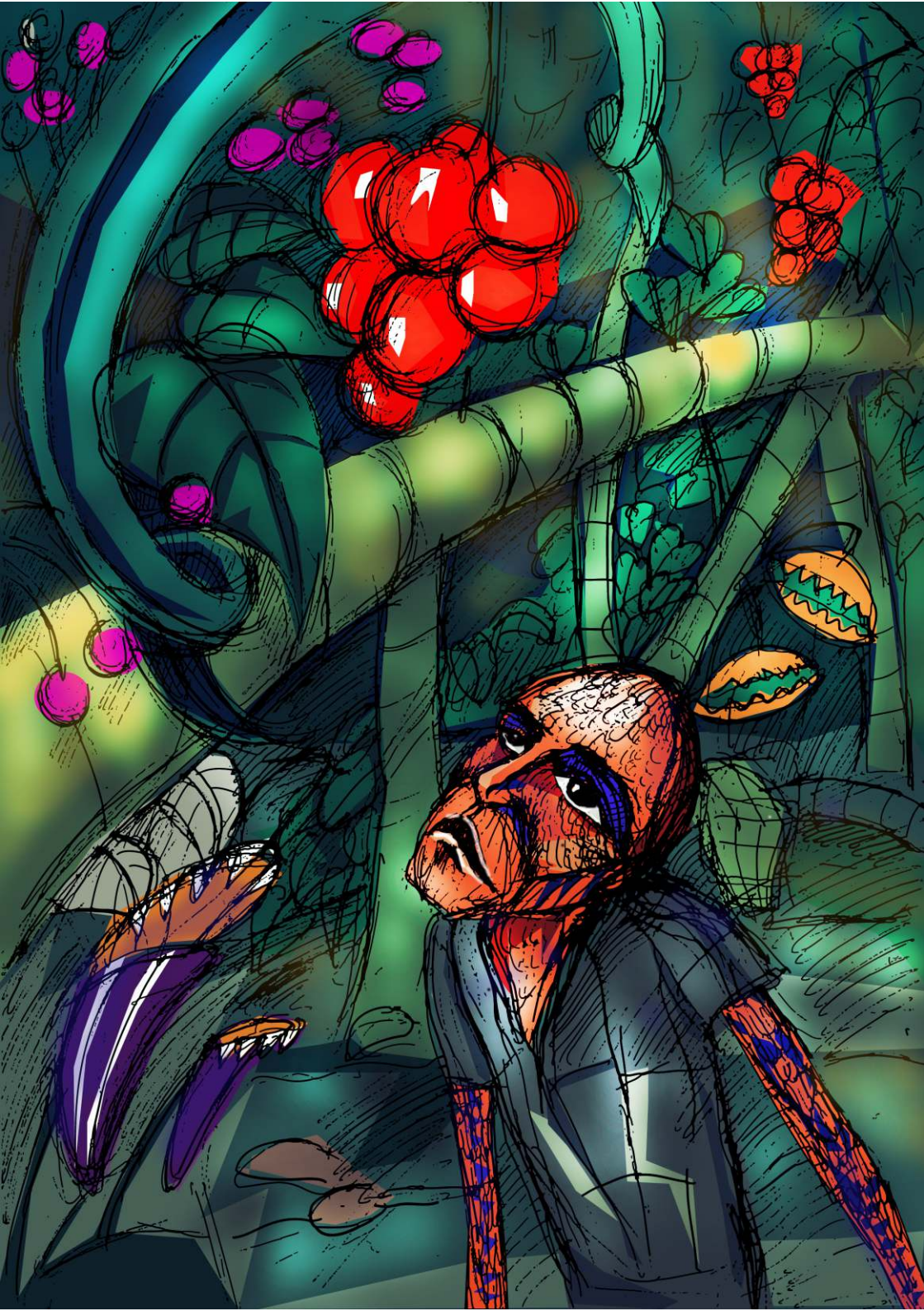
First plants send visual messages to the hunters showing delicious juicy fruit in the subconscious, activating the salivary glands and gastric juices.

Neme is in the place and already feels hunger like never before in his life. He carefully puts the trap down where he was supposed to, but instead of going straight back, he looks towards the sprinting Jaffa.

He's also doing very well and runs with his trap without a hesitation. Neme is pleased by that, but as he is looking around he suddenly forgets where he actually is. Instinctively he looks at the large juicy berries nearby. Now they look much, much bigger, juicier and more enticing than they really are.

A few moments earlier it was just a couple of rotten fruits reminding him of animal shit, but





with every passing second, they appeared redder and juicier!

"Ah damn, such beautiful juicy berries and Jaffa the idiot is running away!" Neme laughs and can't believe his own eyes.

"Come to daddy, my sweet berries!"

He runs out toward the carnivorous tree and quickly climbs on the branch that is about a metre in height. Jaffa just puts down his trap and during the sprint back he registers that Neme is trying to get to those beautiful juicy berries!

"Don't do that!" He shouts to him desperately from a distance and is running back to him, as fast as he can.

Along the way, he is really struggling, in his head a total mess starts to hum and he feels sick. He has never felt this bad.

He picks up a stone that lays in his way and runs with the stone in his hand towards the carnivorous tree.

He gets to the place literally at the last minute. With a rapid swing he throws the stone at Neme's head. This is a game of seconds! Neme falls to the ground, unconscious, just in front of a live vine and a large leaf, soaked with a paralyzing poison.

During those few idle moments when Jaffa's stunned friend falls to the ground, Jaffa is forgetting what's happening. He just feels that he has to rest for a while, but at the same time he feels the urgency to do something.

With one last effort he takes Neme on his shoulders and runs out of the dead forest, even though at the last moment he doesn't even know why.

Once in safety, he throws Neme on the moss, kneels down, vomits, and losses consciousness.

A little later someone is waking him up. It's Neme with a bloody gash on his forehead.

"Wake up, are you alright?"

"Come on, wake up!"

Jaffa feels like something has broken inside his head, but it doesn't hurt, he just suspects that something serious had happened.

"What happened, Jaffa? How come I'm bleeding?"

"You don't know?"

"Don't know what?"

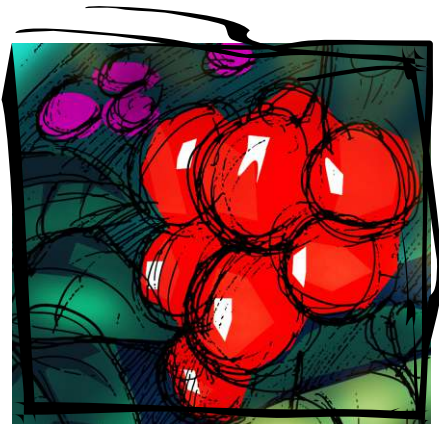
"You're an idiot and began to climb for fruit, so I had to shot you down." He answers sullenly.

Neme is trying to recap what just happened.

„Oh, sorry.“

"We were supposed to be there only for a moment, even a snowflake wouldn't fall down to the ground during that time! Can't you watch yourself?"

"I don't know how it happened, I remember only flashes of the fruitiest berries in the world!" Neme tries to explain.



"Have a look at those rotten turds again, even worms wouldn't eat that crap!"

Jaffa is sitting down and rubs his eyes to recover from the experience.

"Hey look!" Points Neme towards the traps.

Jaffa stands up and tries to focus on the first cage, in which two Actans had been caught and in the second one are three Actans.

"Great, we mustn't hesitate too long and kill them as soon as possible before they destroy the cages! It looks like you are very confident in a dead forest, you'll get them by yourself now, ok?" Jaffa smiles ironically.

Neme is afraid, but he tries to rise above it.

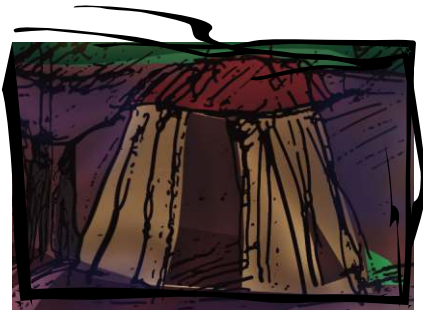
"They can't surprise us for a second time!"

"Keep saying to yourself: This Actan is going to be baked by Layka, this one is going to be baked by Layka ... it might help."

"Yeah!"

They both look very focused now, as if nothing had happened. They set off towards the cages. Neme repeats loudly to himself "This Actan is going to be baked by Layka, this Actan is going to be baked by Layka ...".

This time the sprint is successful, and although they both run back with the last effort of psychic strength, their mission is successful and each of them holds a



Successful expeditions to the dead forests were going very well for some time. Neme brings a little Actan to Layka every day. Whenever the sun is approximately above western jungle trees, Layka carries on with her work in front of her

house or she just stands there and waits for the guys to come.

They aren't shy anymore. Neme always goes straight to her to talk about the adventures they experienced during the search.

While he is talking she supplies him with spring water and they treat each other more and more intimately.



CHAPTER 4

We are located in the 23rd century holographic training arena back on planet Earth. The training course is full of clay, sand, trees, shrubs and rocks ... while just behind the dividing line is a pure synthetic floor.

Old instructor William Murphy, who (judging by the scars on his face) encountered many fights, is standing nearby, watching how the young, brown-haired cadet Jerry. His opponent is a trainer android, an electronic form of life, developed for more than two centuries.

They have bare hands and Jerry manages to successfully pass another test with a smooth kick to the android's head.

Murphy opens his palm, and it suddenly shows a virtual display with difficulty presets. Without hesitation, he is increasing the difficulty levels of the android.

"Level 15, spread out your arms! Another test weapon is a mace."

Jerry smiles confidently. A mace is his favourite weapon.

All of a sudden a mace with sharp edges appears in the right hands of both fighters. The fight begins.



The trainer android attacks. Level 15 isn't for any greenhorn and even a very promising historical warrior like Jerry barely manages the attacks.

The android tries all kinds of tricks, first a full power straight hit, after Jerry successfully jumps away, it immediately starts a false attack from the right side and a kick to the shin bone, oh it weren't a fair move!

Jerry starts to concentrate and moves to attack, one swipe, a second swipe, then he eliminates the android's attack by attacking it back, as if he was hitting a baseball, and then he jumps and grounds him with both feet right into the chest!

The android falls to the ground, while quite comically pretending to have a hearth attack and muscle tics.

Murphy can no longer keep a serious face and spontaneously applauds Jerry. Level 15 is a difficult nut to crack with the classical defence/attack strategy.

The scenery with trees, shrubs, dirt and sand suddenly disappears. It was just simulation and Jerry and android are standing on a flat, synthetic surface.

"Very good! The offensive defence was an improvisation or did you learn it somewhere?" Murphy asks happily.

"A little bit. This android is very fast, so I tried a lucky shot."

Murphy has his hands in his pockets, Jerry goes to him to check out the fighting statistics.

"The android is different to what you are used to from school. We changed the program quite a lot. Theoretically, it can go up to a maximum level of 30 and still act like a human. It can do everything, one day someone will be able to do the same too." Murphy winks at him.

Now, Jerry sees the android with completely different thoughts.

"I'm just a bit upset that these machines are so cool every time. I would appreciate it so much if they got a little angry after losing!" Jerry says dissatisfied.

Murphy shakes his head at the young cadet.

"A good warrior fights only for himself."

"Sure, but I've never seen a warrior who fights for just so it can be reconnected to a charger."

Murphy is trying to suppress a smile.

"So I passed?"

"You definitely made a step in the right direction, son." Murphy agrees.

Soon they are both driven by a levitating escalator towards the offices. They are up on the other side of the building, so first they must pass through several kilometres of the entire training centre.

There are a lot of semi-permeable windows to see into a room where the training fields are. All are busy during the ongoing final exams.

One cadet is pointing his gun at a small, cute tiny squirrel. All of a sudden the squirrel jumps in his direction, becomes five times bigger and wants to bite its prey with its huge teeth, but cadet fires a well timed shot! Nice shot, Murphy thinks.

Behind another window are scary and almost invisible creatures forming that are reminiscent of large cockroaches. They look crystal clear, like somekind of walking glass.

The cadet is holding just a sword and is shaking with fear. He can't stand it, screams hysterically and runs out of the arena.



"So when will I go?" Jerry asks, while they both watch the show.

"Where you mean?"

"You know, into space, to inspect some discovered planets." Jerry tries a familiar tone.

Murphy doesn't seem to mind that from him, actually he likes it.

"I wish I had a good news, but I really don't know. They instructed me to

check if you're well prepared for the first mission."

"Oh ok." Jerry sighs.

They are still on the escalator, watching other training arenas.

"But I can tell you that I didn't expect such good results as you have." He's trying to calm him down and continues: "In a moment I'm going to test some new graduates from the cognitive training department. One of them might be your colleague." Murphy winks conspiratorially.

Jerry apparently doesn't quite understand what the instructor means and nervously scratches his neck.

"But why?"

"You'll have a much better chance to get somewhere this way, trust me."

Students with cognitive skills are trained differently to normal agents or staff for the office. It's the second year the academy has used so-called telepathy. Subliminal image sequences and sounds are sent from a computer to a subject's brain that change their moods and stimulate different feelings.

These agents learn to act despite their feelings and

make their decisions in a far more rational way.

Telepathy is very progressive for the 23rd century, yet still an unknown area. Doctors don't always evaluate the situation correctly, and so, for example, a month ago during an expedition to the universe one student had gone crazy, he turned back and attacked the Earth with nuclear weapons. Fortunately the Earth's own weapons can be diverted by the military headquarters at a distance, so the event wasn't even in the news.

Jerry thinks that an expedition with one of those freaks wouldn't be a bad opportunity. At least he could soon go on the trip!

Nothing is worse than rearranging data and drinking coffee in the office, Jerry thinks. Just sitting in front of virtual monitors and doing something that another two billion people can easily manage.

After a moment he says to Murphy. "I thought only old veterans can go out with them."

"Not anymore. Since that incident with the weapons fired at the Earth, they better keep them a bit out of the way. Who knows, cognitive lessons could be cancelled completely."

"Hmm."

The holographic training arena is busy again. The natural 3D scene in the middle is already in its place. Nobody is fighting yet because Sammy the cadet still hasn't arrived.

This time Murphy is not alone behind the dividing line. There are two men in white coats beside him who look like doctors.

"Cadet Sammy Scoopers is already ten minutes late," says Murphy and adds with anger: "I hope for his own sake he comes up with a good excuse."

One of the doctors makes a special circular gesture. A two-dimensional display listing Sammy's characteristics appear in front of him in the air.

"I wouldn't be so disappointed, Mr. Murphy. Check out his profile."

Murphy thoughtfully passes all the data.

"What is this man doing in the final exams?" He asks puzzled.

"For the cognitive-emotional training, Sammy chose an unusual personality. Arrogance and passive aggression are the dominant, minor features are curiosity and caring. Check it for yourself." The other doctor joins in and shows Murphy another graphically processed analysis.

"I hope he will be better in combat than the last one."

The doctors laugh.

"You'll see. He feels almost no fear. Therefore, he seems quite reckless at times." A more patient doctor tries to explain the basics of cognitive psychology. "As one of the few students he managed to fully take advantage of the part of the brain we call cerebellum. He knows how to be fully automated, so also, his reactions in man to man combat are lightning fast. Furthermore, when he was in a good mood, he asked for the most brutal scenes and subliminal perceptions that we could think of, sent telepathically into his unconscious."

The second doctor shakes his head in confusion.

"Sammy seemed to us as if he was just making fun of us."

"Exactly. We thought he might be unstable after such intense telepathy, but it looks like he can handle anything he wants. So far we haven't figured out how his mind actually works, but it looks very promising."

The doctors are talking among themselves, as if they were dealing with somekind of cardiac surgical intervention. T entire conversation quite disgusting for Murphy. They intentionally adjust someone's personality using this new technology, and yet they still appear to believe it's a completely normal thing, unbelievable!

"Let me ask you another question. Do you think he'll be dangerous? What if they'll sit him in a spaceship next week and send him somewhere?" Murphy's trying to get straight to the point.

"He will certainly behave "safer" than any of us in this room. Only a small fraction of such a telepathic signal would make a psychopathic killer out of you. And now imagine that telepathy subconsciously only awakens what's already been inside you."

Murphy thinks for a moment, this explanation quite satisfies him. During the last ten years have some really strange mannerisms have been introduced, the old instructor thinks to himself.



Cadet Sammy Scoopers has finally arrived. He stops for a moment as if something startled him, then he immediately continues toward the centre of the arena.

The training android also appears and mechanically confronts Sammy.

"This one looks like a Formula One racer. So there are only robots that can just jerk off a shift lever?" He says towards Murphy.

"No comments," Murphy shouts and turns curiously to the doctors: "Have you turned it on yet?"

"It has been running from the moment he walked into the arena, look."

A new display appears in front of them. It shows a lot of special shots in rapid sequences that are sent to Sammy's head, with the purpose of a nervous breakdown - "you can't make it, give up now!", then cute animals dying, tortured facial expressions, huge disasters like the bombing of innocent villagers and so on. All the shots are thematically linked to interfere with self-confidence, caring, to increase the panic and the need to get help and ask for mercy.

Murphy feels annoyed to see this. Previous cadets from cognitive training were influenced by some nervous faces, dark circles and flashes, but this?

"What's that?"

"We had to increase the speed, connect together the shots into a rational topic, and create many diverse scenes. His standard program is different, but this is supposed to be a test, right?" The doctor explains and he just hopes it will pass by Murphy.

"Well, let's see what it's going to do to him." The instructor finally agrees and continues towards the Arena: "Level 10, spread your arms! Your trial weapon is a big battle axe."

Offensive weapons appear in Sammy's and android's right-hands. The surprised student looks at it as if he saw it for the first time in his life.

"You know, I've never fought with this one?"

"No talking during the test, please!" Murphy answers abruptly.

"Why did he ask that?" He turns to the doctors.

They smile at each other again, this time with conspiratorial smiles.

"Sorry instructor, but this is a good opportunity for us as well. We still don't have enough information about Sammy."

The second doctor is checking a display and is very



thrilled.

"Look, he asked only because the signal surprised him! Perfect timing."

"Yes, but he'll soon adapt. Start now!" The first doctor answers impatiently.

Via a small handheld display Murphy gives a command to the android's attack. Combat is a bit slower than Jerry's test.

"What the fuck are you doing, have you gone crazy?" Sammy protests and barely manages to block the first assaults.

"It's impossible, you assholes. How the hell am I supposed to attack with this heavy fucker?"

"Stop whining and fight!" Murphy shouts again.

It looks like a battle that will be decided very quickly by the android. Sammy tries to defend himself as much as he can, but with a simple push the android took Sammy's axe and leaving him unarmed!

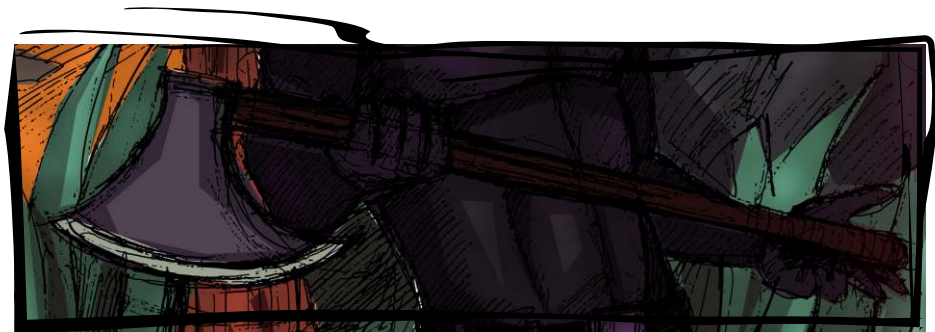
The android is not yet using its advantage, he stands opposite and quickly calculates the next strategy. He has obvious advantage, so "thinking" doesn't take long.

Sammy, meanwhile, looks busy too. In a fraction of a second he notices where his weapon is as well as where the android is. He is trying to concentrate

only on necessary movements, because its current rashness is obviously caused by the telepathic signal. At the last moment he had an idea.

He begins to imagine himself in a situation where he came into the arena to show off in front of a group of pretty girls and this electronic fucker doesn't want to





let him go for it.

It works! The tension is easing.

The android makes an uncompromising assault to the right side of Sammy's head. This is my opportunity! Sammy does a somersault towards the android's feet and with a hard kick to his knees he jumps on the ground to get the axe.

The android "feels" as if it has had both legs broken and helplessly holds them for a moment. Everybody laughs at that.

Sammy, however, picked up his axe and barely manages to defend another android attack. This time he doesn't panic. He blocks the android's axe with his as with forceps and quickly turns both hands. Then Sammy quickly pulls it from robot's grip and with a fast flick he cuts it right on the head!

A direct hit with an axe makes the robot do a few gestures of "dying". It falls to the ground with its muscles twitching.

Sammy straightens up and stretches. There are no emotions on his face, but his gestures show that he's glad how the duel ended.

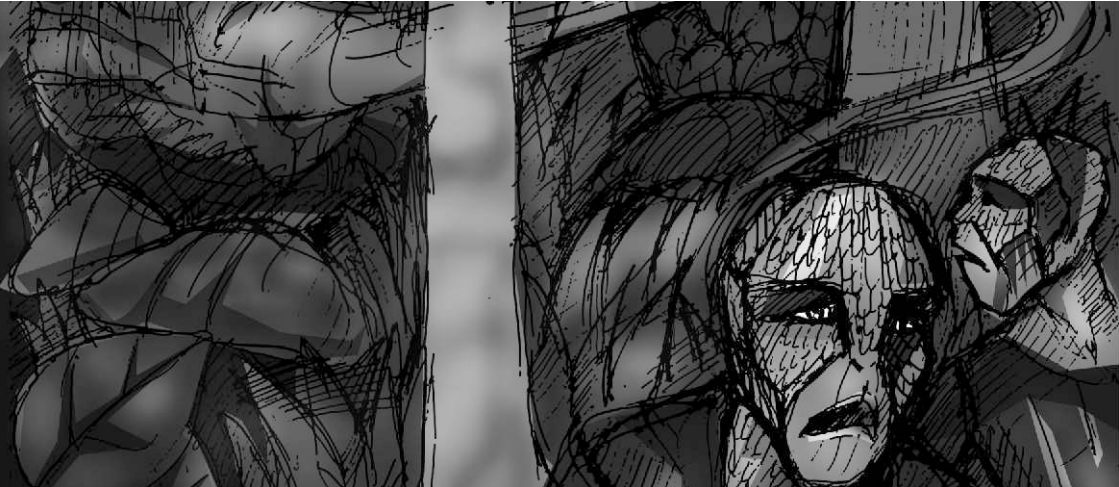
Everyone is silent, the doctors have sly smiles on their faces. Murphy is serious.

"Good job, Cadet. We will contact you soon."

Sammy looks like he's in pain. Then suddenly feels

calm as he's put down a very heavy backpack, such a relief! The doctors have just deactivated the telepathic devices.

Murphy observes the situation with a worrying wrinkle on his forehead.



CHAPTER 5

It's evening, Jaffa is sitting outside his almost finished hut. He holds a roast leg of an animal in one hand and he digs into the dirt with other hand. He is bored and looks somewhat helpless.

It can be seen that his prehistoric hut is almost finished. Support columns are made from the largest and strongest poles in the neighbourhood. Only very brave hunters can afford such a luxury, because freely fallen branches or whole trees can only be found deep in the forests. Cutting down trees is very dangerous.

The only fly in the ointment is the roof, and that's what bothers Jaffa. While roofs of other huts are decades old shells of giant creatures, similar to turtles, his building is tangled from vines and leaves. The installation of a such a roof is quite pointless, because it's already been blown off by strong winds several times. So the young alien is thinking of new ways.

His father comes and shakes his head in puzzlement. He's very slim old man, even though he doesn't match his age. His voice is hoarse and very weak.



"What's up son, got problems?"

"I don't know what to do with it."

"You should go home now, you go deep into the jungle to hunt every day, so I'm sure you'll come across some shell eventually."

Jaffa answers with a different tone.

His girlfriend Arvin comes out of the hut and serves both men with baked pancake made of leaves and fruit.

"Maybe you're right, but we cannot sleep in your place forever. What if a baby begins to grow in Arvin?"

"When a man and a woman are together, a child always grows in the woman." Arvin smiles and strokes her man's hair.

The father looks at them and speaks with a little concern.

"Especially if you see any Raali, run away as fast as you can! "

Arvin gets closer to Jaffa, she is scared.

"Don't say that in front of Arvin, dad. You know that we need to go hunting."

Suddenly, as if some idea came to Jaffa. He doesn't listen to his father anymore, but digs the ground again

and draws squares and ladders in it.

"Sorry, but I have to repeat it to you all the time. You know Raali is the reason why we cannot cut down a single tree! It can see everything, and if you see them, it may be too late."

Jaffa and Neme are on their next expedition in the middle of the jungle. Their only weapons are small stones attached to a short piece of wood behind their belts. They carry ten cages with baits for Actans. Their focus has been closely specialized to hunt in dead forests for a long time and they are so successful at it that they can feed half the village. From their boarders they receive various stone dishes, utensils and rare old pieces of furniture for their home.

This time they decided to go to the nearest dead forest behind a large hill in the direction of the rising sun. They periodically change the areas so they don't extinct Actans before they can multiply. Today, however, they have a particular urge to shorten the hunt and go again to the same place.

When folding the cages, Neme is stretching and warming up like an athlete, to get proper blood circulation in his muscles. His friend initially thought it was a bit strange, but last time Neme was a bit faster for some reason, so he decided to undertake a series of stretching and relaxation exercises along with him.

"I can't wait to have another roast stored inside here." Neme strokes his belly.

"You didn't have breakfast?"

"Layka ate everything for dinner! She is so hungry as if she was expecting a child, it's really weird!"

"What did you expect? Every pleasure costs something." Jaffa says gleefully.

Both are already stretched and ready to take two

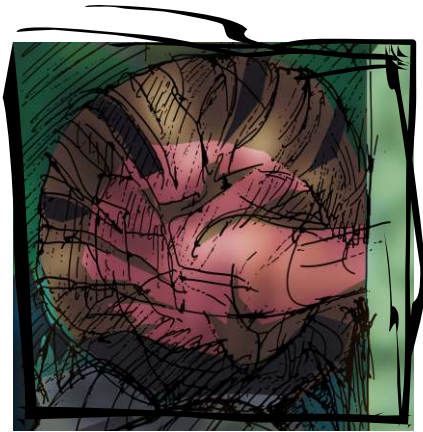
cages carefully so they don't accidentally click and close during the run.

Suddenly they feel a fear they have never experienced before! About ten metres in front of them there is rolling rounded shrub about a metre in size with a weird material inside, looking like jelly.

"It's Raali, run!" Jaffa shouts.

They both throw their cages on the ground and sprint for their lives!

The shrubby ball named Raali spins in their direction with a slight bouncing motion and it's gaining speed. Along the way, a strong, long tentacle extends out of the soft material inside and with a quick flick it cuts down trees on the left and right.



Jaffa and Neme hear the cracking sound behind them and are finding out that the Raali is right behind them and two felled trees are falling in their directions!

They only barely managed to avoid them, Neme jumps aside at the last minute, so he doesn't manage to select the direction where to jump and slams his head into a

a stone on the ground! He lies right next to the carnivorous leaf and falls into a coma.

Jaffa quickly jumps to him and drags him to safety. With horror on his face he checks whether the Raali is approaching, but suddenly it's rolling away from them and then it's gone. He doesn't have the time to wonder why, because his biggest concern at the moment is to bring his friend back to consciousness by slapping him.

Neme is waking up with a dopey expression.

"Layka, come to cuddle me, sweetheart."



The second day, they both set off back to fetch their cages. To make hardened, high quality cage that can withstand the fangs of small Actans, can sometimes take weeks, if you can't work on it from morning till evening. Therefore, it is literally very painful to loose ten (!) such great traps at one time.

They hope with rumbling stomachs that yesterday was just a coincidence, but it wasn't. They are pleased that even in casually thrown cages four Actans got caught, but as soon as they pick them up, two Raali rolling bushes are after them!

Their fear is much greater today than before, but they don't drop their cages during the run. At one point Neme looks back and realizes that nothing pursues them anymore.

With their last strength, their bodies fall on the ground and they are breathing very heavily.

"Maybe I am overreacting, but it looks like the Raalis don't want to get us there!" Neme gasps for air.

"It's strange, and why do they always let us escape? Apparently no one has ever seen them twice in a lifetime!" Jaffa is shaking his head.

They are sitting for a moment and watching the small Actans as they try to bite out of the cage with their fangs.

"Better not risk it and let's run home. We will kill them at home."

"Yeah, right!" Neme agrees without anything further needing to be said they set off to the settlement.

It's evening and Jaffa has built a stone fortress in front of his hut. Very smoothly designed. He used great flat granite as a floor, which was laboriously hewn by a local stonemason, and so far it has served as a kitchen table for Arvin.

Around this granite bedrock are heavy stones built a metre high and inside this stone prison three little creatures have been released. Two females and one male.



Jaffa is on a diet for the second day and he keeps his portions imprisoned still alive. Arvin just shakes her head over that. Neme is approaching them.

"What are you doing ?" He is wondering.

"Two days ago when I spoke with my father, I got an idea. Imagine a place where you can come and just take and bake an animal for dinner."

"What?"

"Or come to a place where there are plenty of harmless shrubs on which juicy berries would grow now and then."

"Such a place doesn't exist!" Neme knocks on his head and has hidden doubts about mental health of his friend.

"But could be! All it needs is to supply everything good and let it live in the place. I call it..." Jaffa makes a dramatic gesture - "Farming."



Neme's silent expression shows that he doesn't understand that one bit.

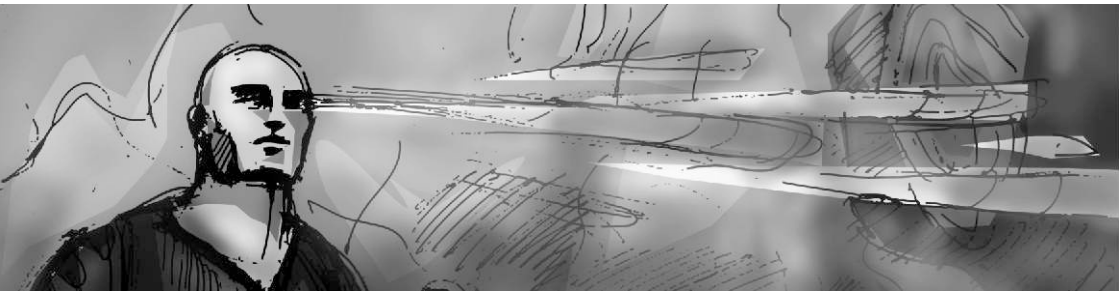
"Stop making fun of me and wake up, Jaffa! You're dragging hard stones, just to imprison rodents while you still don't have a roof over your head!"

Jaffa shakes his head. Since Arvin didn't understand this plan and now Neme doesn't get it either, he is a little uncertain, and again he goes through it all again in his head what it's probably necessary to do in order to make farming work.

"Maybe we bake them in the morning and maybe in the evening, because Actans don't rot now buddy!" He proudly strokes the stone wall.



Neme shows a surprised expression and looks again at the trapped, helpless Actans inside the stone fence. He realizes that it is probably a very good way of storing food!



CHAPTER 6

After ten years the alien settlement on planet Zebra looks completely different. The ruined huts and poor population turned into a big farmhouse, surrounded by stone walls, with plump farmers, pregnant women, and many children under the age of nine.

By one house, in a large stone pool, there is about a hundred small Actans, someone breeds a sort of monkey in cages, there are creatures looking like chickens and horses that help to cultivate a few small fields.

Jaffa ten years older evaluates with a satisfied expression that farming rules. He is standing in front of the place where once he struggled to build his hut. Instead of that, there is now a stone house with two large rooms and a solid wooden roof.

The house resounds with the laughter of several small children. Arvin is coming to him, carrying his leather bag.

"And don't forget to collect fresh leaves, we are running out of diapers!"

"Yes yes, I know."

He takes the bag. From the house you can hear the sound of something breaking. Arvin turns and runs in to shout at the children, without saying bye to Jaffa.

Jaffa with an unhappy sigh checks the large wooden club. Thoughtfully he attaches his bag with rope to one shoulder and a bow to the other.

Neme is also coming out. His friend is waiting for him outside the house and conspiratorially ding on the bow-string.

"Hi Jaffa! So are you ready?" Neme shouts at him enthusiastically and sets off towards him, also laden with different hunting weapons.

"Have you got a bow?"

"Sure! Who shoots down more cones, he gets the wife of the other as a reward!" Neme jokes.

Layka is coming out the door behind him, nervous, and hysterically yells at him.

"And come back for lunch, or don't come back at all, you bastard!" She yells at him and for herself she adds: "He is going to have fun in the forest and leave me here alone!"

Their children are crying inside.

"You meant, he gets it as a punishment." Jaffa adds with a sad irony.

And they both set off silently towards the stone walls at the entrance to the jungle.

In the jungle they move cautiously so they don't step on a carnivorous leaf. A hot acid from such a leaf leaves burn for few days. They have apparently stepped into similar trouble a few times because their legs are pretty scarred in those places.

Jaffa wants to shoot the arrow at the red-coloured berry at the top of one tree. While he notices that in the sky some kind of gigantic stone with a whistle lands towards the south.

"Look at that! The flying stone must be huge!" And shoots his arrow in that direction.

"Missed!"

The arrow just turns back in the air to the ground in about a kilometre from the spaceship.

"It looks like it's pretty high!"

"A huge flying rock!"

They both continue in silence on their way towards the west. They have well-researched this part of the jungle, so they know they won't encounter the dead forest or Raali anywhere near.

After about an hour, they turn and go back. Their women don't like it too much when they reside outside the village for a long time. The aliens fearfully look at each other to see the reaction on the idea of going back home as soon as possible. They haven't been hunting in the forests for so long. These walks are intended to capture some free game which would eventually expand the already diverse variety of animals on the farm. However, the truth is that they haven't seen any game for a quite some time.

Since the invention of farming life in the village has taken a completely new direction. People are no longer hungry. Adventurers no longer exist because they aren't needed, and therefore women have nobody to look up to. Stories about various experiences are repeated in the evenings by the fire and incidents of new adventures don't happen every week as they used to.

Now, there are other, more important obligations, which need to be taken care of.

A terrestrial spacecraft with a soft hiss lands on the plain near the place where Jaffa and Neme walk through.



Two young astronauts and an android that is unrecognizable from a human, are getting off in their astronaut suits without helmets.

Sammy takes a deep breath.

"I would say that this air is way too fresh."

Both earthlings are beginning to feel sick.

"Did you rise up the level of oxygen in the cabin before landing, you metal-head?" Jerry tries to suppress vomiting.

"Why should I?" Android asks.

"Well, if you haven't noticed yet, people need to breathe to live."

"Please specify your explanation."

The android stands in a place without signs of discomfort and waits for the instructions.

"The air is alright, we just need to adapt a bit. Five sprints around the ship and the last one to finish, goes to collect caterpillars with the metal-head!"

Sammy sees that Jerry understood so he sets off first and then they both sprinted off as if something was chasing them.

A few minutes later, they are sitting on the nearby stones, trying to catch their breath. John the android is meanwhile unloading various boxes and bags from the ship.

"Yeah, I still got it!" Jerry says, watching John's work wearily and turning to Sammy with a grin.

"How could you piss him off?"

"Who?"

"Rone from ODP."

Sammy's expression is suddenly bored.

"I was trying to get his girlfriend. Do you remember the last party?"

"Yeah, but I didn't think you could really do it." His colleague giggles.

He cannot believe it and after a while he explodes with laughter. Sammy is silent and just watches him. Then Jerry gets it.

"Oh yes, I see, she goes out with Rone, the most arrogant moron around. I bet that girl adores types like... you."

Sammy rolls his eyes up and goes to help android with the unpacking.

"I would bet that you adore your mother."

All three Earthlings are already in the forest, dressed in camouflaged clothing, a little like that of a soldier. John the android carries all their luggage, Jerry and Sammy holds small pulse pistols in their hands, just in case.

"Well John, get out a map." Jerry commands.

One of John's eyes begins to glow as a three-dimensional projection of planet Zebra appears in the air in front of them. Jerry stretches and moves fingers over the projection, and it zooms in so to see the place where they are currently located.

"So we landed here, about three kilometres south of the turtle shells. Because you are such good friend with Rone from the commission," he turns to Sammy and continues: "We got rewarded with an android, which is useful in the jungle like a robot for the production of whipped cream."

"There are only trees, bushes, rivers, and maybe a couple of turtles. Calm down."

Jerry still thoughtfully examines the map and looks around. His training in the academy for space agents was among others primarily focused on orientation and survival in the wild.

"Look, if we continue north for about three kilometres, we can't miss them."

Suddenly the map projection begins to shake. John's leg is getting wrapped by some weird half-live lain, which tries to pull him away. John can't stand very well, but he makes every effort not to interrupt the map projection.

"John, you're in danger, so don't take your job so seriously and save your ass first." Sammy shakes his head in disbelief.

"Thank you." The android replies.

After about a second of idleness he turns off the map and quickly fires a dose of pulse rays from his eyes to the lain.

"Lesson number one, John. Nature on this planet can be very hungry and we are its food."

Jerry is silently disappointed.

John is idle for a few seconds, as if he was frozen. Then he suddenly furiously spins around and his eyes shoot a brutal volley of pulsed rays on trees, shrubs and grass around!

"Stop! Hold it! What are you doing?" Jerry screams urgently.

John stops to answer him.

"Prevention, dangerous kind of alien life should be eliminated."

"Great, and what we will take the samples from, you



metal-head?"

Both earthlings shake their heads after watching the mess, their android has just made.

For a kilometre around them not a single plant stayed alive after five seconds of John's work. Everything either burned immediately after contact with the laser, or it's burning out and smouldering.

"What the hell did you tell him?" Jerry asks with anger.

"Just to watch out for himself! How could I have known that he will go nuts?"

"You are supposed to be the brain of the operation, but you probably aren't the best with artificial intelligence. We have to delete this part of the record from John's mind, so Rone doesn't eat us for breakfast."

"That asshole would be in seventh heaven if he saw the mess." Sammy agrees and scratches his neck.

His colleague points his finger at John, he is obviously upset.



"Never use that thing again, we have our own guns, see?" Waving a gun in front of him.

John calmly looks at their weapons, and then "freezes" again for a few seconds.

Jaffa and Neme the aliens are already on their way to the village with their bags full of mushrooms and delicate leaves that their women use as diapers for babies.

Neme sniffs the smell of burning in the air.

"Wait, do you smell it?"

"Well, its like someone's making a fire on the other side."

"Do you think it's spontaneous?"

Jaffa looks puzzled about the fine cloud of smoke above the trees, at about kilometre from them.

"I don't think so, the smoke is everywhere, but it's not too dense. It's more like two or three separate fires were made." He expertly estimates.

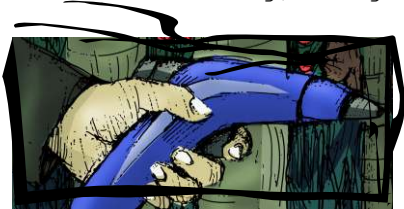
"Shall we go there?" Neme asks excitedly.

"The women will yell if we're late, but what if some young hunter lit it?"

"Raali will get them!"

So without further hesitation they are headed off to the place.

The group of earthlings continue walking through the jungle. The vegetation around gets thicker and thicker. It seems strange to them that they still haven't encountered any animals, beetle or even a fly, anything but weird-looking, dangerous plants.



Sammy and Jerry sometimes shoot at the closest carnivorous leaves, moving vines or anything that looks suspicious to avoid another accident with the Android.

Sammy likes that.

"Finally a place where I can enjoy myself with impunity!"

"It's scary here." Jerry states uncomfortable after a while.

Everything around moves, yet no one is here.

"Maybe all the plants on this planet except grass are carnivorous, look how weird they look."

Both men with bated breath, re-examine the leaves on the trees with reinforced stems and something that looks like a jaw. And wispy growths that aren't blown by wind, although they are soft and move. It looks like they are monitoring the events around them and mainly those guys.

"Tell me about it, it looks like a party, hosted by your psycho-crackers training club. It would be a miracle if any woman showed up."

After a while of continuous journey, Jerry asks a question.

"Tell me, how did you convince her to go out with you?"

"You know Jerry, I don't think it's so difficult to actually do it. You always talk about getting girls as if it was some special privilege. But in the end you actually do shit for it and just wait for things to come."

"No no no," he laughs mischievously: "Don't think you'll get out of this so easily, buddy. Tell me, how it happened!"

Sammy looks in his direction. Jerry suppresses laughter and tries to look innocent

"All right. I spoke with her twice before, trying to be cool and stuff. And when it worked out, the most important was to get out somewhere else as soon as possible... so when we meet next time, she would think

that we kinda already ... know each other."

"What? And what happened afterwards, Mr. Scientist?" Jerry responds immediately with a fine irony in his voice and shoots at several carnivorous leaves nearby.

Sammy gets involved and also burns a few leaves around so he looks busy and gets time to think what to say. After a while, he continues.

"You know, the final ceremony was boring and we just met, so I invited her to the bar... it looked as if I was used to kill time with tentative conversations and things like that. It was fucking hard to say something that would make sense every time, but when we looked at each other at the bar... then it just went naturally from there."

Jerry smiles with a little more understanding when he sees, what Sammy actually fights with.

Sammy went through completely different training in the academy. It was the so-called cognitive-emotional specialization, in which the students are put in different hypothetical situations. During their solutions, the doctors send differently prepared sequences of emotional pictures and sounds into their brains to stimulate "contradictory" tendencies. So, the student learns to decide on something, despite their feelings.

What they don't learn at this school, are the social ties and life with other people.

To gleeful Jerry it seems comical again that Sammy brings him to his crooked privacy.

"So, did you enjoy? Wetting yourself?"

"No."

"What? How come?"

"Rone showed up after a half hour and took her away, end of the story."

Jerry stops and continues in the conversation.

"The bastard! So you at least confronted him, right? What did you say?"

"Confronted ... what?" Sammy looks at him, he apparently doesn't understand at all what he meant.

Jerry is disgusted and squeezes his thumb and forefinger on his nose. This is unbelievable!

"You aren't trying to tell me that an arrogant asshole like you did absolutely nothing about it, are you?"

"And what do you think I should have done?"

"If you told him to piss off, you could have maybe got laid that night."

Sammy thoughtfully stands for a moment, he takes a deep breath and his eyes scan the surrounding nature.

"Wait, how is it possible that I would get laid?"

"You know, Mr Scientist," Jerry explains tired and doesn't really understand it all: "What if she went for drink with you, mainly because she wasn't happy in the relationship?"

Sammy stands and thinks, looks around at the trees, plays all the key moments with Susan hastily in his mind and compares them with what Jerry just said. In the meantime both of his colleagues leave him alone and quietly keep walking.



KAPITOLA 7

The earthlings suddenly hear a suspicious rustling and human voices. Sammy and Jerry give an instinctive instruction to the android to hold back. During the desperately long seconds the unknown voices are approaching them.

The earthlings are quite nervous. Apparently they didn't expect any company. The only possible explanation is that the dead planet was inhabited by the Space pirates and they use it for the trans-shipment of goods.

The endless seconds during which the earthlings are pointing with their pulse guns towards the directions where the suspect noises are coming from, are at the end. Two small, red aliens about one metre tall, dressed in primitive tunics and trousers made of animal skin, comes out of the carnivorous jungle. They are carrying bags and a few primitive weapons. They are Jaffa and Neme, who decided to follow the smoke trail.

Both groups are now staring at each other dumbfounded.



Jerry decides quickly and speaks to his colleagues through the silent communicator that every earthling has implanted into their brain from birth. It is one of the few technological implants that are legally available to Earth.

"How come humanoids are here?"

"Pirates don't dress like that. Maybe a group of hippies who decided to live in forests?" Sammy thinks.

"I wouldn't say so, look at their weird, scaly heads and they are so small. We don't know anything like this."

Inhabitants of Planet Zebra look really weird.

"Exactly, it's like their ancestors were bored and masturbated in a lake."

Jerry and Sammy bursting out laughing, but they are trying to control themselves.

Aliens are now even more surprised. Neme takes bow and arrow off his shoulder.

"What are you doing, Neme?" His colleague turns to him.

"Can't you see that they are pointing sticks towards us and laugh?"

"They aren't animals, are they?"

"Look at the clothes! They are black and white like tree trunks, what if the trees became fully alive!"

The aliens' concern grows and they are both preparing to guard themselves.

"Can you translate it, John?" Sammy asks about their conversation.

"Unknown language. I could use a universal interpreter, but to do so I need more information."

Jerry decides quickly. He makes a few steps toward them and throws his weapon down.

"What the fuck are you doing? Do you want to retreat?"

"We have no masks. If they are locals and see us like this, they must be scared. Dropping weapons means a peaceful gesture, understandable in all cultures."

Jerry tries to look confident, but friendly. About three metres in front of them he stops and moves his head towards his empty palms.

Jaffa looks around and puts his weapon on the ground. Neme cannot believe his eyes, why does Jaffa do that?

"Where are the Raali, where do you have them?"

A flash of despair appeared in Jerry's eyes. He doesn't understand, so he decides to gesture.

He points with his finger to his mouth and coughs a few times theatrically, pretending he suffocates. Then he turns around and pulls his arm in the direction they came from. There still is a mild smoke. Thanks to John's failure they have a common topic.

"He probably can't talk."



"This is a bit strange. The plants want our help?" Neme is scratching his head thoughtfully, but keeps the bow pointing at the earthlings.



"It's been more than ten years since the Raali attacked us the last time, do you remember?"

"But this is not Raali! Raali is a rolling shrub with lithe whipping tentacles!"

Jaffa makes a few steps toward Jerry and thoughtfully looks at his masking clothes.

"You should let him do that, maybe it wants to sniff you." Sammy thinks.

Jaffa pokes his fingers into Jerry's clothes, then he rubs it between his fingers.

"This is a very finely woven grass! How did you manage to weave so soft and firm grass?"

The aliens are ecstatic! Those won't be plants, they are just wearing them as a dress!

Neme now jumps to Jaffa and they both pull Jerry's sleeves but they cannot cut them off.

"Oh great, now they've gone crazy."

"They've probably never seen clothes." Jerry smiles and gently pushes them away from himself with his other hand.

"Can you translate it now, John?"

"Unknown language, it's very complicated and so far there is no repetition."

"A complicated language? Those two look as if they have never been to the dentist. How rich does their vocabulary need to be to capture some squirrels?"

The conversation is hidden from the aliens, so it looks like the creatures in strange clothes are just standing silently all the time and watching them.



"Perhaps we should present ourselves, they look friendly." Jaffa said.

"Hi, I'm Neme and this is Jaffa. We come from the village nearby. Where are you from?"

The earthlings don't understand, but Jerry repeats Neme's gesture. He realizes what's going on.

"Jerry," he is pointing to himself, "Sammy, John", he is pointing at his colleague and the android.

"He can talk!"

The presenting carousel continues for about ten minutes. Apparently both sides are entertained. The earthlings need to repeat simple sentences, so John can find a context for translation. Jaffa and Neme are just so excited that there are other people in the world, who certainly come from a faraway place and can weave very strong and delicate fabrics from grass!

While both races somehow try to communicate, not far behind trees, a Raali rolling shrub appears and stops in alignment behind a piece of rock.

The Raali looks like it doesn't know what to do, because it just peeks out from behind its occultation, goes back then, as if it's stuck in the middle of a reflex, it continues doing it over and over again.

Meanwhile, John has learned some basic necessary phrases and rules of local speech. The earthlings now stand still and let the brain induce the new language through the silent communicator.

"I've just remembered. Our elders used this speech. It will take time to remember it." Jerry turns to the aliens.

"That's great!"

But Jaffa decided to check every detail, before he let them go.

"Where is your village? This is the only forest far and wide, there are only mountains and a desert, you know."

"On the west there are mountains, behind the mountains is the desert and behind the desert is a forest. It's easy to get lost, but we escaped from the plants and managed to seek help."

Such an explanation seems right. Neme takes the bag off his shoulders. There are two leather bellows with water. He pulls one out with a smile and offers it to Jerry.

"*Ah, the local hospitality.*" Sammy ironically comments the offered water and he is smiling just because he's supposed to.

"*Wild tribes tend to help each other, each favour will then be returned to them.*"

"*I wonder what favour they will want from us. I hope we won't have to sort out its leaves from the bag at night.*"

Jerry drinks and answers by the silent communicator.

"*These are definitely hunters, housework will be done by women. By the way, this liquid is really good. It tastes a bit like our mineral water.*"

John the android joins in the conversation.

"*I need a sample for analysis. If the water is infectious, I have to get you on the ship, Jerry.*"

Jerry holds one sip in his mouth and spits it at John. The android without any detuning answers Jerry with a smile and loud in the alien language.

"Thank you, Jerry."

"So, are we going to catch a little pig, or whatever it is you eat?" Sammy immediately suggests a tolerable favour that he could do for them.

"Why did you do that?" Neme asks Jerry about spitting the water. Jerry obviously acted faster than his thinking.

"Our tradition is, to spit the gifted water on the closest friend."

The aliens laugh. One of them takes the bag with water, drinks and enthusiastically spits a flow of water and sticky saliva into Sammy's face.

"Oh, what a great idea."

"No, no," Jerry stops him from continuing. "Only if someone gives you water, which you haven't asked for."

The aliens understand that it is a friendly gesture. Their eyes are burning with curiosity, what else they can learn from the visitors.

They've just decided to invite them to their village, but at that moment, the Raali behind rock stopped to move back and forth.

A small antenna extends from inside the shrub with gelatinous guts, which starts to vibrate gently in the air.

Sammy feels extra pressure inside his head, which knows only from the cognitive training at the academy. He can't believe his own senses, right now on an alien planet in the middle of nowhere, he feels the familiar telepathic signal, although much weaker than usually.

Jaffa, Neme and Jerry get into an aggressive mood. They can feel hostile thoughts very intensively. The others certainly want to kill them!

"Well, stop playing innocent, we know why you're here!" Neme waves his clenched fist in front of Jerry.

"Hey your little shrimp, if you wanna fight, just say it. Your scales are starting to pretty much piss me off!"

"Scales, did you hear him?" Neme shouts at his

companion and picks up the cudgel.

The aliens are still waiting to see what's gonna happen, but their eyes are burning with rage.

Jaffa looks around, to see if they are on their own and suddenly he can see the living shrub behind the nearby rock.

"That's Raali!"

Jerry, meanwhile, gets into fighting position.

"What are you doing, Jerry?"

"Shut up dumbbo, I'll handle it myself!"

Sammy is surprised with that answer. Something's getting into his mind, so he closes his eyes and discovers that someone is sending a shredded quick sequence of battles to his head and aggressively looking alien faces at some burnt place.

"That's strange, is there some kind of special training going on?" He thinks to himself and looks around as if he wanted to check out where he actually is.

Jerry picks up his discarded pulse pistol and points it triumphantly towards the aliens.

"I shoot you into small pieces, you red scales!"

"What do you want to do with that stick? Scratch our backs?" Jaffa laughs.

In corner of their eyes they register that the Raali is approaching them. Within a second they sprint away through the jungle back to where they came from. Jerry runs in their direction, as well as the Raali.

John and Sammy stayed alone. They look surprised, although the android looks more as if the situation didn't concern it at all.

"I wouldn't expect them to go crazy. What are we going to do? Jerry waved his weapon around like a fool.

Did you see his eyes, John?"

"Yes, but I don't understand the context, I need more detailed instructions."

"Good thing we have an energy shield. I knew it could be useful. A hit from the pulse pistol dries up a human's blood." Sammy exhales somewhat helplessly, trying to figure out what's going on.

John's programs freeze for a while.

"The inhabitants of this planet aren't equipped with pulse weapons."

"But Jerry is... Or do you think that all this is just a simulation?"

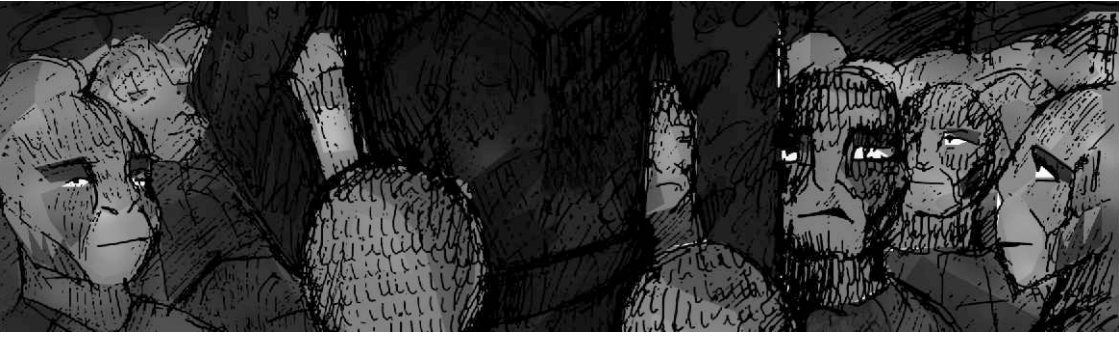
"Please specify the term of 'simulation'."

"Are we on planet Zebra at the moment?"

"Yes."

"So where the hell is that coming from?" He thinks and looks around.





CHAPTER 8

Sammy and John walk alone in the jungle. Sammy thinks he knows what's going on, but he doesn't want to talk about it out loud.

"How long have we been going after them?"

"13 minutes and 14 seconds." John replies mechanically.

"The pressure in my head has increased."

"Are you alright, Sammy?"

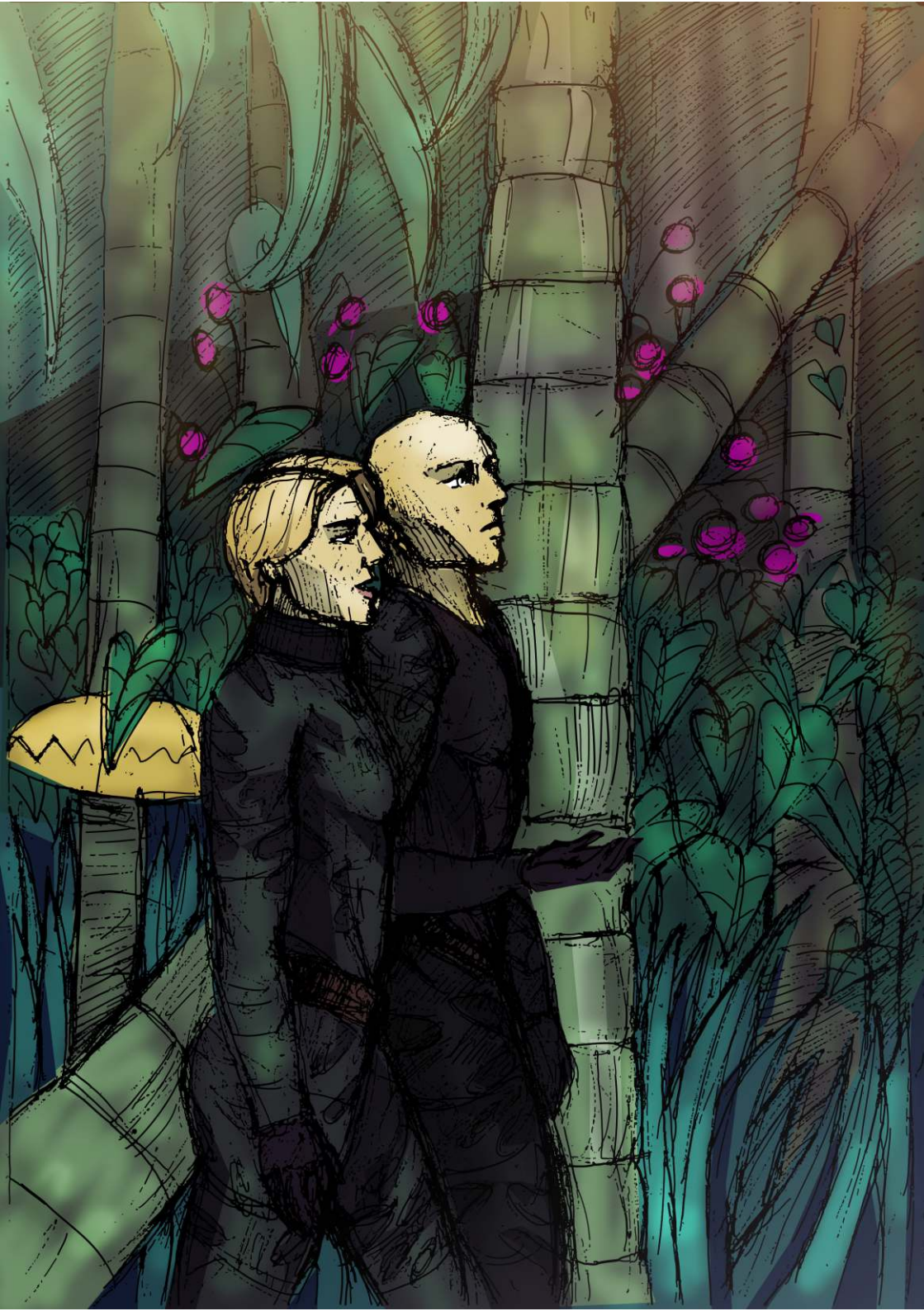
"So far, I have been successfully blocking it, but we need to find out where it is coming from. It's like the telepathic signal changed somehow. What exactly those aliens shouted as they were running away?"

"One of them mentioned the name Raali."

Sammy thinks. With his head somewhere else, he automatically shoots a pair of preventative pulses into the carnivorous leaves.

To yell something unknown and run away from it in a place with lots of carnivorous plants, sounds like it wasn't a coincidence, but one thing was probably linked to the other. But Sammy doesn't get why they didn't see "it" as well.

Until it proves otherwise, Sammy must count with the



variant that they are space pirates who stole a telepathic terminal.

"Raali is apparently a name for something that is trying to somehow subconsciously influence us. But on this planet there are no traces of technology."

"Please specify your conclusion 'there are no traces of technology'." The android asks.

"Have your detectors found anything?"

"No."

Sammy's getting impatient.

"Think a little, you moron! Where would such a telepathic signal come from?"

The tension in his head changes again and increases its intensity. Sammy's adrenalin is growing. He tries not to panic. He subconsciously feels which way the inner emotions are dragging him and he tries to block them by thoughts of something similar, but harmless.

"My database lacks the required context." John replies.

"Exactly! They won't have a name for it, if they don't know it and haven't seen it at least several times. Which means it's not any kind of technology, because they would shit themselves from our weapons a long ago... there must be something else going on."

Just as Sammy said that, suddenly in front of them a small Actan starts to dig itself out from under the ground. The earthlings stop and as quietly as possible they move behind a rock ledge close to them, so they don't scare the little creature off.

"Are you taping it, John?"

"Recording is activated."

"Why are you so uptight? Didn't they install you with some software for personality?"

It's not particularly pleasant for Sammy to end up in the present situation with a similar companion.

"At the moment I don't have any online connection for searching software."

The Actan curiously runs to one of the half-burned carnivorous leave and snuffles to it. It's seems quite thrilled. It doesn't carry the leave away, but eats it with an incredible speed.

Then it quickly runs to another one, pulls it and takes it underground.

"Mole?" Sammy wonders without waiting for any reply.



To his surprise, John begins to project a 3D model in front of him with anatomy of the creature they have just seen.

"A kind relative to humanoids on this planet. Unlike them it has strong jaws with prominent fangs and claws."

"What are the jaws and claws for?"

John responds to the question by projecting an earthly mole and beaver.

"Strong teeth of similar creatures on Earth are intended for processing wood. According to the shape, the claws are closest to mole, which uses them for digging."

"Where did you get the information?" Sammy asks surprised.

"Metal-head" is probably not completely useless. Maybe it just needs to be asked in the right way.

"Information on terrestrial animal species is normally a part of the projection unit for androids. During the flight, Jerry requested me to project for him daily human females of different shapes and in different positions."

"Oh really!"

"I'm sorry, if I knew that it would be necessary for the mission on the planet Zebra, I'd get to know you too."

Sammy laughs.

"Now look at you, you actually have a sense of humour! But now tell me more about that mole or whatever it is. Time is pushing us a bit."

John takes time to turn "on". His machine logic didn't process Sammy's note successfully.

"In addition to body structure, the most striking difference compared to the local humanoids is the different structure of their brain."

John now projects something that looks like a walnut with lots of symmetrical paths, diverging to the sides like on a plant leaves.

"The front lobes are completely missing and the joints, which should lead to them, are streaked with cranial bone."

"That little rat must be immune to the telepathy! Do you know what that means, John?"

"What does it mean, Sammy?"

"That thing is been here for millions of years."

Earthling Jerry, aliens Jaffa and Neme go through the jungle together, their faces reflect many unasked questions.

Jerry feels a little guilty. He realizes that he's been chasing the two aliens for about two kilometres through the jungle, although he doesn't have a clue why. Why was he so impulsive, and why did the aliens came back for him when the feeling disappeared?

He tries unsuccessfully to call Sammy and John via his silent communicator, but in an environment without civilization and local connection, the signal can only reach a few kilometres. They have to be a little farther. Maybe they are already dead. All he can do is to follow the aliens so he doesn't create suspicion, and in the meantime he's gotta devise a plan.

Out of nowhere the jungle thins out and large stone walls appear before them. About two metres high, not too well aligned and not decorated.

One older inhabitant of the settlement is standing at the main gate without any doors and looks dumbfounded at Jerry. Obviously they aren't used to see visitors ..at all.

Jerry surprisingly looks at the construction and settlement with farms, situated behind the gate.

There's something wrong, he thinks. The data from the probes available to them, didn't mention any humanoids, never mind such buildings. Even analyst Rone himself recommended the graduates for this "simple" mission. Well, maybe that's why.

"What's the monster doing here?" An extremely scaly guardian stops them.

Masking would therefore be a natural part of the equipment.

"This is our new friend. He comes from a distant village behind the desert and mountains." Jaffa explains.

"Let us in, dumbass. My wife's going to be very angry by now." Neme goes on and pushes him aside. After all, he's been one of the 'elders' too for a few years.

Behind the walls you can see the settlement in all its glory. Emerging agriculture and animal husbandry, single-story buildings of stone and wood. As in the classical, agriculturally developed civilization from

the Stone Age, known from all the history books and two alien civilizations that humanity discovered already.

"Welcome to our village." Jaffa spreads his arms proudly as if he was holding the settlement in his hands.

"I'm glad you brought me to your place after all."

"It was definitely a Raali, like I said. Neme and myself know this sudden feeling very well!"

"Don't worry!" Neme adds and smacks him on his back.

Such reaction means that Jerry is one of them and not a plant as they first thought.

Jerry recognizes, however, that he should continue to work on his identity of a visitor from a settlement beyond the mountains, who tried his luck and looks for help for his comrades.

"I never thought that it would be possible to live with animals!" Jerry shakes his head in surprise: "You must have lots of food!"

"Well, yes kid. It's been a few years since we came up with the idea of farming."

Neme eagerly nods.

"Jaffa is too humble, he came up with that idea himself! Since then we have had a wonderful time!"

Everyone is thrilled. The aliens experience an unknown sense of pride over what they have done for someone completely strange to them. Their colony is the only one in Zebra. In fact, humanoids don't live anywhere else.



Meanwhile, Sammy and John wander through the jungle and the telepathic signal transmitted to his brain keeps changing. At one point, everything seems a little scarier, then he feels hungry, sometimes everything seems more colourful and prettier to him.

"Fuck, it pisses me off, my moods change more often than those of a pregnant woman."

"Can I help you, Sammy?"

"Yeah, make the least possible noise. Don't even breathe, nobody will see you here and that irritates the shit out of me!"

"Activating silent mode." John replies calmly.

"I have to concentrate on something else other than my own thoughts. Would you like to sing? Maybe it will attract the natives."

"To sing?"

It doesn't seem that John completely understood. But when Sammy starts, he repeats the words after him.

My mood is obviously getting better, fortunately, the entire forest is dead, Sammy believes.

A whole crowd of aliens from the settlement surround Jerry. Lots of pregnant women and children up to ten years of age.

"That's alright, calm down. It's our new friend from a distant settlement beyond the mountains," Jaffa explains.

Present faces are even more curious and discuss it noisily among themselves.

"Look how big and white he is!"

"What is he wearing?"

"He looks like someone has skinned him!"



The crowd bursts into laughter.

The smallest children try to touch Jerry, until a pregnant woman pushes them away.

"It looks like a ghost." A little girl babbles with her high voice.

Jerry starts to become annoyed. He tries to encourage Jaffa and Neme to get him out of the curious crowd.

"The settlement, from which Jerry comes, is behind the desert and mountains at the end of the world!"

"Uh?" The whole crowd sighs in disbelief.

"He came to see how we farm here to help his people. It was a long journey, so give him a bit of freedom, let him rest." Jaffa continues dominantly.

Neme is obviously impressed by the tone of his voice. His old friend, he meets every day, has the final word in the entire village!

Jerry feels a little bit awkward. They make a space for him to pass.

Finally, if I had a mask, this monkey business could be avoided completely. Good thing they're not cannibals, Jerry thinks, while he registers a woman who isn't pregnant and not so flaky, how she stares at him. The woman licks her lips and sends him kisses.

"So are we going to eat anything?" Neme looks up high into Jerry's face.

"With pleasure."

They get through the crowd toward a line of buildings.

"Since we've been farming, our village have experienced a population boom."

"Jaffa is being too modest again," Neme smiles while trying to push a few children away from Jerry. "When we

were kids, there were only a few people in the village, we ate only berries and leaves. The Raali took somebody almost every week and ate them. But since we've been farming, they try to avoid us."

"How is that possible?" Jerry wonders.

"Our older inhabitants think that the Raali wants us to be happy."

"Raali wants you to be happy?"

Jaffa and Neme ignore the ironic expression in his eyes.

Jerry meanwhile notices that some roofs look like giant turtle shells.

"What the hell is going on here?"

"What?" Neme asks just to be polite.

"Oh nothing."

In the meantime, they approached the building. The alien crowd dispersed and left to do their own things. After all they have lots of responsibilities around the farm animals, and so on.

The buildings have grown and you can see that trading basics has started to flourish here. There are stands selling meat, vegetables, clothes, tools and also weapons.

Jerry pulls his guides towards the weapons. He doesn't expect that he could use the pulse pistol, without arousing suspicion among the natives, but with a proper sword or spear he can defend himself.

An old arms dealer watches the visitor with hesitation, but after he receives an explanation of what's going on, he's sniffing out a convenient deal. Unfortunately, in the shop are mostly sticks, bows and stone maces more suited for "their" size than Jerry's. In the hands of a human they look like little hammers for dolls.

Neither of Jerry's guides looks too enthusiastic. They have to shop from that ass-kisser Sabera.

"So, you fighters would like some weapons? Well I think my offer won't disappoint you."

"We're just looking, thanks." Neme says grumpily.

"No wait, I'll really need something for the way back!"

"I didn't want to say it, Jerry, but your friends are probably already dead." Jaffa says sadly.

"We can't be so sure."

"Even if they managed to escape for a while, they don't have a chance against the Raali or the dead forest."

Jerry doesn't respond to that and looks at the greatest maces of wood and stone. The window displays all kinds of shapes.

"I don't think so. I'll go back to jungle, first thing in the morning." Jerry says.

Old Sabera senses an opportunity and smiles from ear to ear.

"You sir, you seem like a very strong young man." And after looking shaky at his skin without scales, he carefully continues so he doesn't insult the visitor: "For such a strong young man I have a big, strong club, what do you say?"

Jerry is bothered by something, and tries to figure out how to ask.

"Uh, do you use for making weapons ... so to speak ... materials other than wood and stone?"

"My arms are made from the best wood and the hardest stone, what should they be made of?"

"Oh nothing, I was just curious."

Jaffa and Neme look at each other puzzled.

Old Sabera has an feeling that he is missing a great opportunity, so he tries to save the situation.

"A good weapon isn't just a tool to hunt or fight with, but it's the thing that represents you in front of others. You will feel much better when you wear this nice bow, finely decorated."

Jaffa and Neme roll their eyes and turn away from the merchant, so they don't have to watch him any longer. They've heard it all a million times. Hopefully Jerry will be done soon.

"If I can offer you something special, take this curved club. It's the only instrument made in a similar shape. The edges are slightly stiffened for a stronger punch and when you meet someone else on the hunt, you can be sure that it is you who is holding something special and looking really cool."

While it appears that this weapon looks almost the same as the others.

"I'm here only for a short time, but I'll take it, and also the bow with some arrows." Jerry smiles politely.

"Yes sir, you made a great deal!"

Sabera spreads a bunch of leaves on the counter and proudly wraps the weapon into them.

Jaffa feels quite embarrassed when he sees it and nervously rubs his palm over his face.

„You don't have to pack it up, we're fine.“

Sabera feels a bit upset.

After a while, Jerry is finally armed and walks with his guides to Jaffa's building.

"I must apologize for the merchant. He's just trying to ... " Jaffa wants to defend the reputation of his settlement.

"It's alright, we have them too."

Later in the evening the sun falls down over the village and now there are two moons and millions of stars in the sky. This makes a twilight everywhere even during the night.

Jerry sits inside one of the houses and eats grilled meat along with some strange corn pancakes. Jaffa's four children aged 8, 7, 6 and 4 years sit at the table with Jerry. On the other side of the room in the corner, a pregnant woman prepares food while she feeds a baby suckling her breast.

Jaffa smiles at the children. Then he takes a piece of meat from the plate and hungrily bites it.

"So you have a lot of children, Jaffa."

The children laugh.

"I 'm looking forward to when they get little older. Then we will farm and go hunting together... " Jaffa is proudly looking at his children.

"I was with my dad in the jungle twice." One child says.

"Me too!" The younger one says.

"No, you didn't go because you're a coward!"

"You are both brave boys!" Jaffa stops the debate: "One day we will kill a Raali together!"

The woman in the corner of the room suddenly moves. She looks very strict.

"What did I tell you? Raali are dangerous! Don't say such nonsense to children!"

Jaffa doesn't even try to resist, but still doesn't want to feel embarrassed in front of Jerry, so he leans toward him and quietly whispers.

"Women, what do they know huh?"

Jerry understands what's going on. Earthly women from his century are also accustomed to deciding

everything. Although he doesn't have problems with his girls.

"Back home I also have a girlfriend." Jerry says and winks at Jaffa to let him know he understands what he meant.

"How many children do you have?"

"What? Oh, no." He hesitates for a moment: "I have to first prove to her father that I deserve her."

"Do you have any special tradition of proving yourself to her father? I also have a daughter." Jaffa casually moves his eyes towards his four-year old daughter who wrestles with a piece of meat and has it all around her mouth.

"Yeah, but I think with this farming it's not going to be a problem anyway." Jerry laughs.

"Would you like to show yourself to her father? Now it's your chance!"

Jerry doesn't understand. Jaffa with a mysterious expression stands up, goes to the corner and takes two training sticks for a close combat.

The children laugh.

"What? You wanna fight with me?"

"If you're not scared. If you lose, I'll say to your girlfriend that you're just a scared piece of shit." Jaffa encourages.

The children quickly run out of the way, excited about the fight. Jerry takes one of the fighting sticks and tries not to look too confident. After all, passing tests against androids which handle all the known combat techniques, prepared him for absolutely everything.

Besides the size of the aliens is like if they are somekind of midgets.

Both leave the house. Jaffa's woman doesn't protest this time because practice fights have become a

a traditional entertainment every evening since they've had plenty of food.

In the meantime the children managed to summon everybody around to go watch the fight, so all the aliens with loud chants of "Jaffa! Jaffa!" gathering around the fire to make enough space for the fighters.

"It will be nice to stretch a little bit after dinner, take Neme with you. You are too small for me anyway, no offence." Jerry provokes.

Jaffa senses an opportunity.

"I wanted to get you on my own, but if you want to squeal in pain like a pig, okay."

Neme readily jumps in. He will to help his friend get this white giant down!

"Don't worry and fight hard, because so I will! And if you lose, I'll get the word out in your village that you're too weak for your woman!"

Jerry tried not to, but he explodes with laughter for a second. Jaffa is surprised by his reaction.

All three fighters look focused now while the whole village loudly applauding.

Jaffa is trying to surprise his opponent with a direct attack to the head, Jerry bounced back his attempt, but then receives a hit like from cannon right into his stomach. The audience is so excited and the kids are screaming with joy.

Jerry quickly recovers from that and makes one attack after another. One for Jaffa, another one for Neme .. but they cover them!

During another onslaught from nowhere Jerry receives a hit below his knee. He's not fighting with amateurs! So he brings on a different style. He spins his stick in ninja style. Aliens have never seen such movements and their confident expression freezes.

After a while it's not so difficult to defend himself from the aliens' assaults. They aren't very well synchronized and when one attacks, the other one is holding back. Jerry doesn't want to torture them any longer. He blocks Jaffa's stick and encloses it with his other hand. Then with a strong jerk he disarms him and throws it on the ground. After Jaffa's disarmament, Neme gives up.

The audience is silent through amazement. Jaffa probably doesn't lose around here.

"I had very good teachers." Jerry breaks the astonished silence.

Jaffa is obviously shocked, and it takes time till he can produce some words.



"Tell me about it, we should all applaud our guest, one really good fighter Jerry!"

The aliens are in awe of what they just saw! They applaud as perhaps they never have before! Jaffa's adrenalin raises, but he doesn't want to let them know about it. He realizes that Jerry is just a guest, and this is nothing personal. It's very difficult to lose when someone is constantly used to winning.

Suddenly, one side of the audience where the children and pregnant women are standing, start to yell. Then run away screaming "Raali!".

The earthlings Sammy and John are approaching them. The crowd is calmer as they get closer, because they can see that they have the same skin as Jerry.

"Look John, who is still alive."

"Hello colleagues! How did you find us?" Jerry welcomes them by waving from the other side.

Sammy passes through a group of aliens and

ironically evaluates them with his eyes.

"It wasn't that hard. We just tracked the places where you shit yourselves."

Jerry immediately turns to Jaffa with an apologetic expression, but Jaffa ignores him. The Raali doesn't kill anybody anymore, it seriously got a brain.



CHAPTER 9

Later the expedition from Earth is in an abandoned building, where the visitors are allowed stay over night. The small hut isn't completely repaired, as if it was an unfinished renovation.

All three members of the expedition were given some dried meat and water, if they got hungry overnight, a volume of fine leaves for the toilet and a large pile of hay is in the room.

Jerry is obviously concerned about the course of the evening.

"You should be careful about how you're talking, they're not used to your little quirks."

"Relax, they were obviously thrilled that we came." Sammy replies and wants to start a new topic: "It's strange that people in prehistoric times already know how to behave so nicely to each other."

They both lie in the hay, John stands at the corner of the room and his detectors monitor the surroundings.

"When you can lose your life, you have to find mates." Jerry replies.

Sammy feels uncomfortable, so he moves to a better spot in the hay, but even through his space suit, it's still pinching him.

"I thought that these clothes were made from a tight material."

"Could you finally stop that? All I can hear is you and your swishing!"

"Just wait a minute. I'm not used to sleep on cattle food."

Jerry sighs to calm down and nervously rubs his hand over his face.

Sammy finally found the right position for sleeping and feels comfortable. He begins to think about their situation. He looks at John, as he stands in the corner of the room like a statue, but he has a flickering light in his ear. This android is discreet like a big fat bee on a blooming meadow, Sammy thinks.

"Can you guide us back to the ship in the morning, John?"

"Yes, I have kept every path in my database."

"We will simply go to the south, it's easy." Jerry joins in the conversation.

"No wonder you were doing so well with those villagers."

For a moment they are all quiet.

"You haven't lost your sense of humour, have you?" Sammy concerns.

"No, I'm just thinking about what I found out about them. It's really weird. The intelligent Raali plant lives here, it killed almost the entire population of humanoids, but it suddenly stopped."

"This may explain why our super technological detectors didn't find anything ten years ago." Sammy replies ironically.

"Also ground probes found nothing back then."

"What do you think, John?"

John turns to them for a while, watching them lying comfortably on the hay.

"I have no data regarding intelligent plants."

"And here we go again."

"However, I tried to apply a parallel adaptation for further understanding during my free time ... I've found out that dominant behaviour of a stronger type usually leads to the extinction of the weaker species." The android continues.

Sammy yawns.

"I don't like to think, we have no sugar and I want to sleep."

"But we must prepare the message which we will send to Earth. It's our first mission, you forgot or what?" Jerry argues.

Sammy again starts to rustle and turn around on the hay, which is driving Jerry mad again and he regrets that he said anything. Then his annoying colleague gets up. He is approaching the end of the room where is John standing and then checks his face closely.

Suddenly he raises his hand up and gently pokes into the synthetic eye with his finger. John moves back without a word, as if he had an instinct.

"These new types of androids must be quite up-to-date. Parallel adaptation, did you say?"

"Yes, the first firmware with this tool was applied in version 16.20."

Suddenly Sammy figures something out.

"What if the plants come to the same conclusion as John? What if they have developed such a deep consciousness that forces them to think more deeply





about their future, what will happen when their food runs out?"

"What?" Jerry asks with no signs of any interest in his voice.

"It's simple. There will be no animals, no people, which means no food. The plants must now try to deliberately prevent their extinction... don't you get it?" Sammy continues triumphantly, but the look on his face appears as if he was hit on his head by something heavy.

"Yeah, even Jaffa said that the Raali wants them to be happy. It was kinda strange."

Sammy thinks over Jerry's remark, scratches his neck and obviously feels quite uncomfortable. Probably time to go to sleep.

"I will never stop wondering how you people managed to get to know space trips without cognitive learning. You're all so slow." Sammy shakes his head and continues: "Almost every woman here has like five children. Men don't care about anything other than food and farming."

"It's ancient times, Sammy. What else should it be like?"

"I don't know, a dance around a totem pole, to be mad at a neighbour, enjoyment with friend's wife? But these aliens are almost always so fucking cultured, friendly and happy."

Jerry shakes his head disapprovingly thinking Sammy is somekind of freak.

"I think your cognitive head should be checked by doctors. Straight away in the morning after our arrival."

Sammy yawns and goes to sleep. It takes him a while to fall asleep. At night, a few horrors awake him and once he dreams about having sex with one alien woman.

It takes ten minutes afterwards to clean his overall.

Rone Sonéz enters his office. He works in SODP, in the so-called Group for Supervisory Over Discovered Planets. As an analyst he together with his colleague is Mimzy responsible for data evaluation and monitoring the compliance of the rules within various missions.

His girlfriend Susan almost cheated on him with agent Sammy and Rone can't stop think about it. Such a loser and my Susan!

"Our plan is working, Mimzy. I told you it would turn out great."

"As you say, you're the boss." Mimzy replies uncertainly and quietly sips his lemonade.

Rone is convinced that he has the situation under control. Although at this moment they are risking their careers.

"Don't be such a milksop. We would have to get rid of those two anyway. With the results they have they could become new heroes!"

"I know."

"The bastards would be just telling you, what to do ... we aren't their servants, right?"

Mimzy in silence once again sips his lemonade. This isn't a good situation. Rone, however, had no idea that the stress will knock his colleague down, well maybe the thought did cross his mind a little.

"Look, they'll certainly die on that planet and if not, nobody can prove we falsified the data!"

"But why are we risking so much, Rone?"

"You want to be promoted, right? Look at this."

Rone creates a virtual display with statistics with

a wave of his hand in front of Mimzy.

"Over the last two years the failure rate of data from planets has increased by about 2%. I'll go tomorrow morning to see the general committee and propose new security measures to them to ensure something like that will never happen again."

Mimzy is interested.

„So the two astronauts will actually die for a good reason.“

„Precisely.“

Both analysts let out another meaningful giggle.

It's early morning. Everything smells of the fresh forest. Jerry in a hurry, runs out of the building where they spent the night, holding the toilet leaves.

He quickly checks the nearest bush for carnivorous leaves, red berries or the antennas that move against the wind, so that he could hunker down and relieve his need.

At this very moment Sammy calls him via the silent communicator.

"Don't panic, Jerry. Now be quiet and listen, I gotta tell you something very important before it's too late."

"Could you at least wait a second?"

"I just woke up, where are you?"

Jerry is not responding. Sammy comes out to check out the situation and sees Jerry squatting behind a bush.

"Oh I'm sorry."

"It's not very cool, but the result is just the

same."

"Ah, good to know. But don't go anywhere, we have to decide what to do." Sammy replies with a grin and rolls his eyes.

Jerry is finally alone, so he can do the necessary. After a while Sammy stands inside next to John. The hay remained with two dips where they had been sleeping. John looks busy. With a minimum of information and updates that he received before they set off on the expedition, it must be difficult to get some orientation in a reality for synthetic brain.



"Why's the retard so long?"
Sammy states impatiently.

Then his attention focuses on John and he continues via the silent communicator.

"How many times have you used your weapons here, John?"

"Once in the jungle after landing and then Jerry decided to forbid me from using my weapons."

Sammy is lightly kicking the hay nearby, while spinning his pulse pistol on his finger.

"Check everything that we have said, every dialogue, every mention of anything from the moment we landed on Zebra. Has anybody mentioned that we can call a remote module that transports us back to the ship?"

„No, Sammy." John answers within a few seconds.

Jerry is coming back to the house, he is relaxed and feels fine.

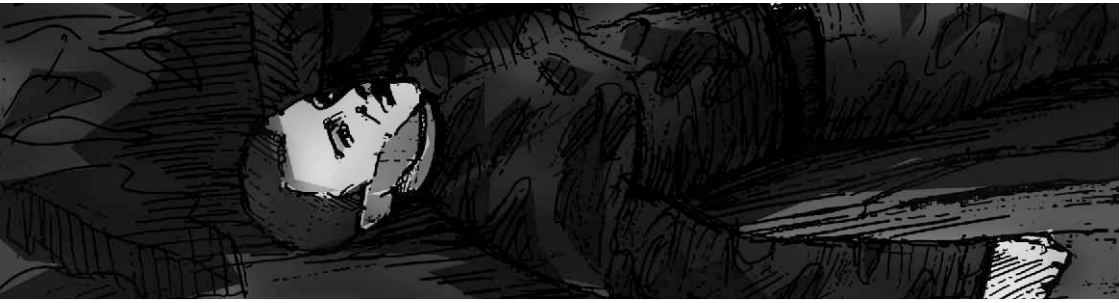
"What was it about?"

"I have to eat something quickly or I'll die." Sammy exhales.

"That's why you needed to talk to me so badly? I can offer you a little help over there behind that bush."

Sammy doesn't accept the notion with much satisfaction.

"Sometimes I wonder how the hell you managed to get any kind of social status on Earth with this sense of humour."



CHAPTER 10

The earthlings Sammy, Jerry and John, who carries a heavy backpack with water and food, are going to the jungle with the aliens Jaffa and Neme.

A little farther the aliens are working on small farms and fields. Other inhabitants are just standing there and staring at the departing earthlings, many small children are among them.

"I don't know if it's a good idea to let you go alone, without any help." Jaffa objects on the way.

"Are you sure you have everything you need?"

Their guides seem to be worried. Jerry is trying to calm them down with his confident gestures. It wouldn't be good if they'd decide to go with them. They would have to go towards the desert and go over it, maybe even as far as ten kilometres until they are out of sight.

It was Sammy's main condition in the morning planning and Jerry didn't object. Academy graduates are not yet accustomed to these lengthy walks through infinite nature.

"We'll be fine, don't worry. Your idea has saved our village, you couldn't do more for us!" Jerry encourages their conscience.

"Exactly, I can't wait to try your style of farming, guys. My hands are trembling with impatience, just as

I think of digging the first hole in the ground."
Sammy suppresses laughter.

The aliens are obviously flattered.

"You can give it a try today; just stay with us a bit longer." Jaffa doesn't let them to leave so easily.

Both aliens don't seem to want to have their lives back on the same track.

Sammy smiles, but for a moment he needs to turn his back to them so he can relieve his face and make an ironic expression saying "what the...?".

Jerry has prepared an argument.

"Unfortunately, every day of waiting means a great loss to our brothers and women. We are dying too fast and cannot wait. We came to you just to look for an answer and we got all the food that our friends and families had... When things get better at our place, we'll come back and celebrate, deal?"

"I see." Jaffa replies.

Life is certainly much more important for him than fun.

"I hope you'll get home alright and let your inhabitants know about us!" Neme adds.

"We definitely will."

The expedition is now behind the walls and trying to get through the jungle. Neme and Jaffa stand and say goodbye to the earthlings with prolonged waving even though they are already lost among the trees.

As soon as the earthlings manage to get out of sight, Jerry contacts Sammy via the silent communicator despite the fact they are walking next to each other.

"Don't panic, Jerry. Now be quiet, I have to tell you something important before it's too late."

Jerry rolls his eyes.

sloup.

„Proč to sakra děláš?“

„Johne, můžeš nás slyšet?“ Ignoruje Jerryho námitku.

„Jsem připojený.“

„Bezva, takže pamatujete si, co jsem vám řekl včera? Moje podezření o těchhle rostlinách je stále pravděpodobné. Každopádně jestli jsou inteligentní aspoň trochu, nepustí nás zpátky do lodi bez boje.“

„Myslíš, že ten Raali na nás zaútočí?“ Ptá se Jerry a znepokojeně strílil z pistole několik preventivních pulzů na blízké masožravé listy. Ty se syčením umírají.

Samy chvíli instinktivně kontroluje jak moc je jeho pistole ještě nabitá. Zbývá kolem tří čtvrtin energie. To není špatné.

„Už jednou tě telepaticky rozzuřil k nepříčetnosti a to byl ten keř možná jen jeden. Řekls mi šuline.“ Povídá trochu dotčeně Samy.

„Jo, byl jsem rozzuřený jako blázen.“ Připouští Jerry.

Džungle houstne a pozemšťané se rozhlížejí po divně namotaných liánách, zvláštěně proti větru se pohybujících výrostcích na stromech, různě zbarvených bobulích a spoustě ozubených listů, nasáklých žaludečnými kyselinami a jedem.

„Navíc jsem ti nezmínil ještě jednu věc. Ten telepatický signál se u mě od té doby nepřerušil. Pořád mi ho posílají do hlavy a často se mění.“ Sděluje Samy co nejcitlivěji.

„Cože?“

„Říkám ti, oni nás odsud nepustí! Hlavně se uklidni, máme s Johnem plán.“

Jerry není ve své kůži.

„Kurva, já se tak těším, až budeme na lodi a konečně

"Why are you doing that?"

"John, can you hear us?" Sammy ignores Jerry's objection.

"I'm connected."

"Great, so do you remember what I told you yesterday? My suspicions about these plants are still very likely to be true. Anyway, if they do have a little intelligence, they won't let us back to the ship without a fight."

"You think that the Raali gonna attack us?" Jerry and shoots a few precautionary pulses from his pistol on the nearby carnivorous leaves.

Sammy instinctively checks the charge in his pistol. About three quarters of the energy is still left. Not bad.

"They have already telepathically influenced you to insanity and that was probably just one bush. You called me dumbass." Sammy says offended.

"Yeah, I was mad as hell." Jerry admits.

The jungle thickens and the earthlings are looking at strange vines, tree growths oddly moving against the wind, berries in various colours and leaves with many teeth, soaked with stomach acids and poison.

"Moreover, there is one other thing I didn't mention. The telepathic signal hasn't stopped for me. They are still sending it to my head and it often changes." Sammy says in the most decent way possible.

"What?"

"I tell you, they will not let us out of here! Just calm down, me and John have a plan."

Jerry doesn't feel well anymore.

"Shit, I can't wait to get on the ship and finally have a sleep in our soft blankets." Sammy stretches as if nothing was going on.

The tension in his head intensified once more. This is another piece of proof that the plant perceives the spoken words, but cannot hear the electronic communicator.

Sammy is also aware that it depends on what he visually imagines. When previously he thought of some technology or events from home, as if he had suddenly a taste to think of them in more and more details.

The Raali not only wants to find out who it is, but also where they're from and all that the Earthlings can do. When it starts, Sammy blocks the Raali by using his thoughts of the beautiful round ass of that girl from the bar, or of how he once found himself in the heat of passion with a young English teacher. At that point Raali usually gives up. The plant has no interest whatsoever in the passionate adventures of earthlings.

After a moment, Jerry speaks to him again via the silent communicator, this time with much more respect.

"Why is John supposed to hear that? He's not doing anything anyway, he's just walking beside us... and it was you who said that it was just a metal-head."

"He must record what we say to each other, so the engineers at home can put what's going on here into perspective. Also, I think that when we meet with the Raali and you go crazy again, I'll stay here alone with John."

The realization of that is very annoying to Jerry. But he can't do anything about it. It's as though an ugly fat woman is going to sit on him, and he realizes at the last moment that he is chained to the bed.

"That shit, I made this morning, could be handy for the Raali since it's a bush, isn't it?" Jerry says aloud to courage himself.

"Certainly, the Raali must be pretty smelly pig. We gotta hope it's not gonna invite us to its birthday party."

It doesn't take too long, and they enter the places where John fired a kilometre circle in the jungle the previous day.

"Do you remember this place, John? Are you at least a little bit ashamed?"

The Android gives a very cold look around.

"These buildings were destroyed by my pulse weapon."

"I can't believe you're the newest version." Jerry says shaking his head.



Suddenly, when the expedition takes them through the burnt centre of the circle, Jerry collapses on the ground and gets something resembling an epileptic fit. He's shaking and then lies motionless, but with his eyes fully open.

Sammy looks around waiting to see what's going to happen. Meanwhile, John jumps in to help.

"Are you alright, Jerry?" He asks and watches him with his biological analyzer.

"The state of health is good. No signs of tissue or nerve connection damage," he says aloud and records it into his database.

Sammy is sitting down by him and tries to wake his colleague up with a few slaps.

Jerry begins to blink blankly and gets to his feet with the Android's help. But he still has the strange blank expression on his face. Once he is standing, he withdraws a few steps from them and speaks in a low, modulated, authoritative voice:



"We took your friend. Drop your weapons."

"What are you doing?" Sammy asks, even though he already suspects the answer.

He begins to feel a new, but this time much stronger wave of telepathic signal. As if the reality around was shattered into a million pieces, everything looks plastic and he can hear a rumbling of low frequency waves.

He calls quietly to John.

"There are more of them here, John. I'll try to block it, just don't do anything, they got Jerry!"

At that moment, from the east side of the jungle, about 10 hopping tumbling bushes rush towards them.

Jerry points a pulse pistol at Sammy, while the Raali are forming in a circle around them and rolling slowly, as if they were waiting for something.

"Drop your weapon, stranger, right now!" Jerry yells at him.

Sammy is trying to take time. He slightly modified his thoughts, focusing on the shrubs, he's curious and wants to know who they are. They move very oddly, wrapped in branches to be able to roll. It works! As if something in his head cracked and the telepathic pressure moved to back of his head. Such a relief!

John is standing next to him and does nothing, as Sammy requested. So he drops his weapon to the ground.

"What do you want Raali?"

The telepathic signal is amplified by hundred-fold, the bushes stand around them and sway up and down intently. Sammy's thought blockade, however, works very well. Now he wonders why they are swinging up and down, and all he feels is a slight burning at the top of his head.

After a while, it becomes very boring.

"Can you stop it? You're just wasting time you moron."

The telepathic signal stops.

"Thanks." Sammy appreciates.

Nothing happens, the bushes are lazily rolling around them and Jerry is still pointing his weapon towards them.

"You and your electronic friend are immune to my influence. The only creatures that are immune are Actans."

"What is it, Actan?"

"You called them moles."

"So you've heard all the things we talked about." Sammy changes the topic.

The conversation is interrupted for a while and again nothing happens.

"Now you are going to see Raali, a long journey awaits you." Jerry speaks and with a wave of his gun suggests to them to move.

The shrubs form a line and slowly roll in the direction from which they came.

"John, stay close to me ... by the way, they probably aren't very intelligent. We are going the same way they came from, no secrets about what we said. What do you think it is?" Sammy asks and he doesn't want to show what an exciting opportunity they are getting.

"But you were talking to Jerry, Sammy." The android replies.

"Thanks for the information, I wouldn't have noticed it."

"You're welcome, Sammy."

The expedition surrounded by the rolling Raali continues in along the way for quite some time. The only one who looks exhausted is Sammy, because John doesn't need to simulate fatigue in this situation. Jerry is still telepathically controlled and watches the two from behind with a gun in his hand.

"We're almost there, strangers." Jerry suddenly says.

Sammy doesn't try to accelerate, slow down or do any other unnecessary movements. He only has to put one foot in front of other.

"By the way, the bush never gets tired? Shouldn't they drink water or dip their roots in some shit?" Sammy tries entertain himself.

"That's none of your business!"

The group enters a meadow with a shallow grass. One of the Raali separates from the group, rolls very quickly to the nearest large tree and cut it with a fast, strong flick of his long tentacle.

"Dude, aren't those trees your cousins or something?"

"They are my servants." Jerry replies.

The Raali and Jerry stop in the meadow beside the cut tree.

"I have to ask you to turn your android off before you can visit me."

Sammy and John are giving him a puzzled look.

"Why?"

"Don't play stupid. I know it's got a weapon in its eyes and can kill all of us. Turn it off right now, or you and your friend will die." Jerry insists and points the gun close to his head.

Sammy thinks for a moment and tries to concentrate. The telepathic signal returns. Oh here we go again,

that's all they needed at this moment.

"John, before I turn you off, you have to set the remote module from the ship, the time and place where it should pick us up." He turns to the android quietly and tries to focus on how to wipe off the glue shit off his shoes.

"No problem. What settings do you need?"

The plant changes and intensifies the telepathic signal again, as if it had suspicion, but it doesn't know what's happening.

Jerry suddenly falls to the ground and vomits violently.

"What, what happened? I feel as if a hammer hit my head."

Sammy smiles at Jerry and immediately passes to John, as if the Jerry's release was exactly what he wanted.



"So quickly, John. In about 20 minutes, one kilometre away in the directions where we are going, over there beyond that hill. Set it to immediate park next to two people. It must be done really quickly, do you get it? What's your deactivation code?"

"I understand, the instructions have been sent. My deactivation code is 12345."

"I noticed that your developers are probably massive assholes." Sammy says.



By entering the confirmation code into the uncovered stomach control panel, John turns off. Before closing down he winked conspiratorially at Sammy. Such a gesture was totally unexpected.

Jerry is just watching and breathing heavily. They are right in the middle of circle of bushes, it seems weird to him, but still he can barely stand.

"You are turning John off, so we're probably in deep shit, huh?" He says with the feeling of being choked.

"Something like that. Raali fiddled about a bit with your brain, so don't try to talk or think too much, if you know what I mean."

"Okay. Pull some water out of the bag or I'll die of thirst." Jerry giggles with the sun in his face.

It seems quite comical to Sammy, who less than a minute ago was receiving completely different set of commands from the same person.

They didn't even get time to refresh and shrubs around them start moving again.

Jerry is so surprised that he almost choked again. He wants to point his weapon at them, but Sammy stops him.

"These are the famous Raali, our new buddies. By the way drop your gun on the ground." Sammy grins ironically at him.

"What's going on here?"

"We are more than half a day's journey from our ship. The Raali came and captured us and you were nicely mutating. Now don't stop and follow them before they change their minds again about your freedom."

Jerry finally gets it.

"How do you actually resist telepathy? I feel as if grenade exploded in my head."

"My training, remember?"

"Yeah, but anyway. It must be difficult." Jerry looks defeated.

At that moment, the telepathic signal transmitted interrupts Sammy. What a relief again!

"Thanks, Raali."



CHAPTER 11

The earthlings together with a group of rolling bushes pass over a small hill. The jungle is behind them and now the ground becomes rocky, like it's made of crushed rocks. It looks so unnatural.

Behind the hill there is a small creek, which empties into a large swamp and a gigantic bushy ball about the size of a spaceship sits there.

It's a giant Raali, which has its roots sunk deep into the swamp and moves up and down like a big fat whale that's about to sneeze.

"So we're in deep shit, buddy." Jerry comments on the monstrous creature.

"Yep, we are."

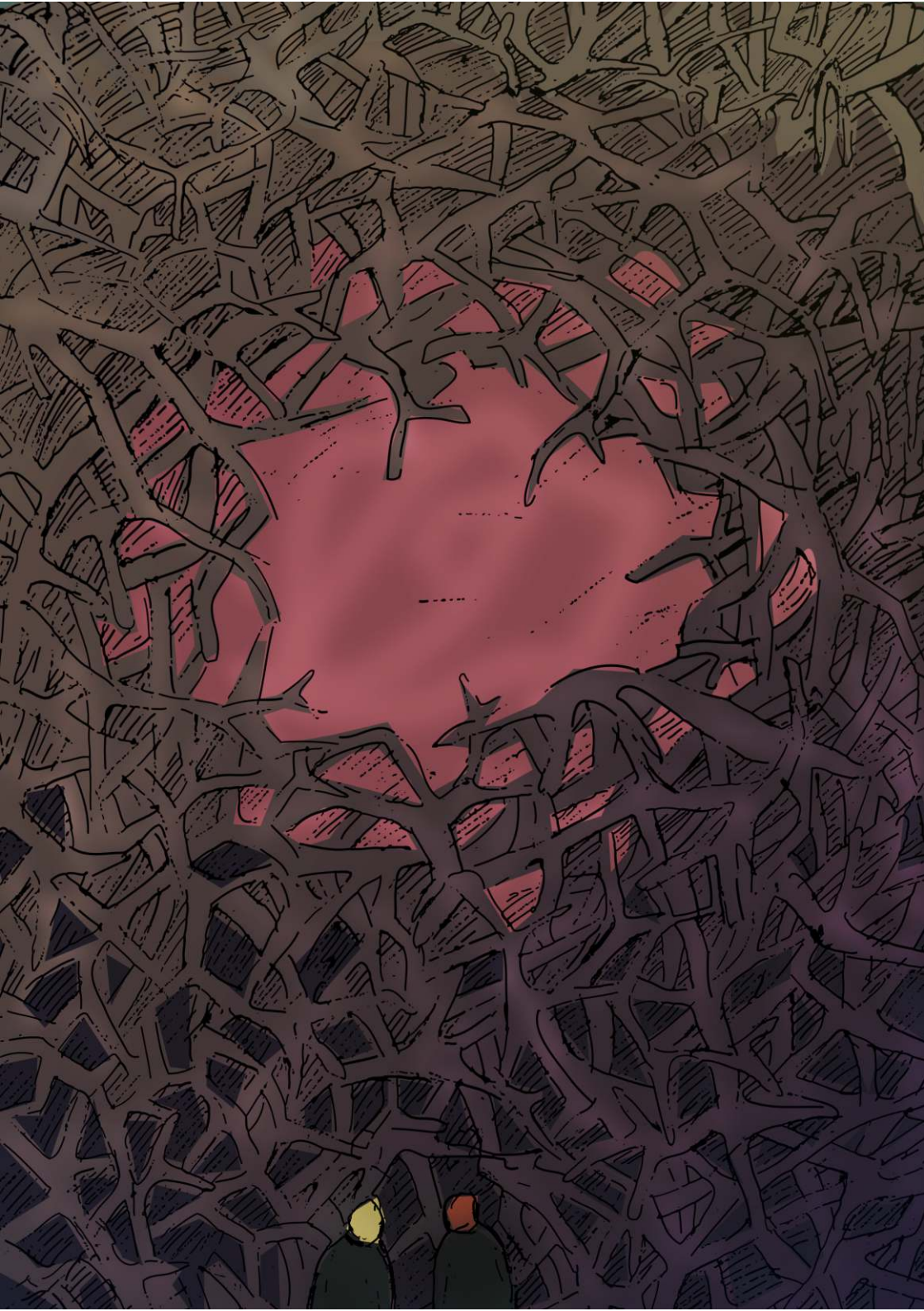
Suddenly, on the side, where the earthlings are approaching, a part of a bush spreads to the sides and something resembling a mouth is being formed from the gelatinous mass in the centre. And indeed, it can talk!

"Come closer, strangers." The gigantic Raali says with a rough sounding voice.

Meanwhile, its smaller versions quickly move away from the earthlings and jump into his big body, as if they belong there. It is probably composed of thousands of small Raali, Sammy thinks.

"You come from another world."

"What do you want from us?"



His question, however, was rewarded with a new batch of telepathic signal, after which Jerry chokes and vomits again.

"Every time you don't co-operate, Jerry will suffer." The gigantic Raali announces.

"You can stand it, can't you? Do you remember that party where you got drunk and threw up for almost the entire second day?" Sammy tries to encourage him.

But his argument doesn't really help Jerry, during his next vomit he just shakes his head disapprovingly.

"You're such a shit." Sammy says and turns to the gigantic Raali.

He has to bend backwards a lot so he can speak to it, because its mouth is as high as a five storey house.

"You know what, you won. We cannot help ourselves anyway ... so where should I start?" He asks and wanders pensively from side to side to gain time before their module arrives.

"OK. We come from the old world with lots of different tools, moving things and all that electronic stuff. Because our scientists found a way to visit new worlds, and that's how we got here."

"New worlds?" The Raali asks surprised.

Sammy realizes that this information can be easily said because when they run away, the plant will go after them and see how they got here anyway. Unless it already knows...

"Do you ever look at the sky when the sun goes down, Raali?" He begins his explanation familiarly, while scratching his nose and continues: "So those glowing things in the sky are stars, and each of those stars is just one such sun... they are so small, because they are very, very distant. Well, our sun is so far away that you wouldn't even see it from here."

As if something inside the gelatinous guts of the gigantic Raali moved back and forth.

"How come I can affect your friend but not you?"

This may be information that should stay confidential. If Raali finds out the fact that human can become immune to telepathy, he could make life difficult for the aliens.

"I have a partly electronic brain. It's trained by high-frequency charging from the special outlets in our microwave ovens." Sammy makes up his answer.

"Now you tell me something about you. How come you can send whatever pleases you into the subconscious?"

"I have no idea, but it's me who is asking the questions here!" The gigantic Raali shouts.

"Ok." Sammy answers mechanically while he understands now. The heads of aliens are really big, and yet they cannot even read. They are smart, but their schools don't actually exist. "So you actually brought the local residents up?" Sammy asks as if they were talking about something else.

"Yes, and something tells me that you will soon be out of control." Raali replies.

It responds to the interactions Sammy didn't mention. It won't be too developed as it answers something they didn't even talk about in the first



place, even if it's a fact. Sammy thinks.

Any detective wouldn't be ashamed to have Sammy's ability of deduction.

Jerry already gets back on his feet. He is hesitant whether to speak, but he can't resist.

"Can't you just let us go? We from the Earth will not hurt you in any way, either way you are a new discovered species and we have laws for this."

"Yeah, and plus we have a lot of meat there and some supplies would be very useful to you, what you say?" Sammy adds.

"You are too dangerous for me with your electronics. You're not going anywhere!" Raali replies thunderously.

Jerry begins to look around, his usual movements are like an accelerated movie. He is ready and decided to say everything.

"You miss the equipment for travelling at higher speeds faster than the speed of light. You have to do some..."

But he can't finish his sentence, because he's knocked down by Sammy.

"I'm sorry, Raali, but I can't let you do that."

Giant Raali's telepathic concentration focuses on Sammy. He is theatrically waving with his gelatine tentacles, but it's far away and it doesn't want to hurt him physically. It focuses all his mental strength to take control of Sammy in order to know the truth once and for all.

"You can't get out of this, Sammy. You will do exactly what I want you to!" Raali shouts.

His already gigantic sculpture swells and he increases in size to around twice as big. The roots, which were sunk into the swamp below him, pull out while the fat monster is swinging, and Sammy receives incredibly huge

dose of telepathic signals.

Sammy feels that his initial control, directed at the top of his head still works, but something is changing. As the signal is going through his neural connections in his brain. He would give anything for a cigarette, coffee or any stimulant.

Sammy's personality dangling beneath the bushy giant is gradually changing. From the arrogant expression he now has a naive childish look and the pain fades a bit, now he's got it! The signal wakes only desires and emotions gained during life, he just has to remember how a little child would react, a little Sammy with a clear head!

While Raali telepathically saw his last functional emotional ties, Sammy starts to get bored and looks to the grass on the ground. He tears one blade of grass and sniffs it.

"Dude, that's weird. I nearly lost my sense of smell." Sammy says and tries to pass the blade to him.

"What?"

"Maybe we could play some game till you get it. How about hide and seek?"

Sammy looks around, as if he saw all that for the first time.

"You know where you are right now, Sammy?"

"Yeah, of course I know, you monster from the swamp!" He laughs childishly. "But that doesn't mean that we can't have fun, right?"

Suddenly, a hundred of Raali disconnects and quickly rolls towards the earthlings. The module just arrived!

Sammy didn't really expect it, but quickly opens the door of the module, throws Jerry in and flies away quickly. Shortly after the start two bushes swing the module with their tentacles with full force, but the

protective energy field absorbs the impact without any serious problems!

The transport module flies over the hill from which the earthlings came. Meanwhile, the gigantic Raali separates into thousands and thousands of round versions of himself about metre in size and the module is chased on the ground by a river of green plants!

The module quickly bears down behind the hill. John, still turned off with his head laid to one side is standing next to the felled tree.

Sammy quickly gets out, takes him on his back and throws him into the module. This will be very close, the bushes are quickly approaching them!

Immediately after closing the door the module swiftly rises vertically above the ground. Some Raali manages to jump, but this time they can't reach them at all.

The module goes in the direction of the ship as well as the green river of rolling bushes.

The transport module is already close to the spaceship and gets down in a hurry to open the door.

All three crew members are on their feet and run to the ship as fast as their legs can carry them.

"John, connect to the control panel and quickly prepare the launching sequence!" Jerry screams on the way into the cockpit.

"Wow, that was close." States a relieved Sammy.

"We haven't won yet. The sensors indicate a horde of strange living creatures, headed straight at us!"

That was fast. They really won't give up.

"How come we haven't taken off the ground yet?" Jerry asks while controlling data from the detector.



Sammy quickly starts the launching sequence by crossing virtual displays. One after another appears and asks for information.

"It's a hell of a lot of buttons and screens, Jerry." He excuses naively.

What's wrong with him? Jerry wonders.

"They're here! But the energy shield should easily manage a couple of swings of their whips."

Sammy doesn't answer and at a terribly fast pace flips the displays back.

"I said the shield should handle it, or don't you think so?" Jerry asks nervously.

Sammy's on the page with options to turn the automatic defence on.

"I forgot to turn it on somehow."

"What?" Jerry jumps up from his chair. "Come on, contact in 3 seconds!"

The first Raali followed by a horde of other, jump up, holding out the whip and flagellates it around the ship. The steel surface without the energy shield bends under the whip and it has a first hold.

Meanwhile, the crew tries to activate the defence mechanisms of the ship.

"They're here! How come it didn't immediately activate after the module landing?" Jerry asks urgently.



"You know how bad the ship starts with an activated shield? I would have to confirm 6 other options about redirecting the energy circuits... unnecessary work." Sammy knocks on his forehead. At that moment he thinks that Jerry is an idiot.

"You're so irresponsible! If they get into the ship, we are dead!"

In the meantime, inside the ship they can hear ominous booming sounds, as if it was jumped on by one thousand whips at the same time.

From the outside the ship is literally wrapped by hundreds of Raali bushes, who jump on and bent the steel structure with their strength.

"Don't freak out, you asshole. I've got you out of the mess, right? So it won't be a problem for the second time, look!"

Sammy enables the energy shield, a deduction to its full participation started.

"Ten seconds to turn on the shield." Jerry says with his voice cracking with fear.

"These fucking tubes take ages to warm up." Sammy rolls his eyes.

"What's wrong with you, Sammy?"

"It's okay, dude."

Jerry doesn't think that their situation is funny.

On one side of the ship, the Raali managed to break through the hull.

"The shield is turned on," Jerry exults.

"There are two intruders in the zone of the ship." John announces mechanically from the controlling panel.

Two shrubs passed through just before closing the cockpit shield. Outside, it hisses as the shield absorbs more swings of his whip.

The ship is cracked, so only reaches about two kilometres in height.

"We took off, now what do we do with these two in the ship?" Jerry asks.

"They have tentacles stronger than me." Sammy shakes his head, watching his hands.

But the shrubs just circle round and round in the unknown maze of

corridors. Yet they aren't too far from the cockpit.

"It looks as if they couldn't orientate themselves." Jerry watches their track.

"Close the cockpit, they can be sucked out through the hole to the universe, what do you say?"

"Finally, a good idea." Jerry replies.

The space ship picks up speed and moves away from the planet. Both astronauts anxiously watch the path of the two groping shrubs. Twice they were just outside their door and rolled away again.

"If they weren't so dangerous, we could take them with us, they look funny when they are helpless." Sammy says.

Nobody answers.

In another moment the atmosphere gets thinner and they are immediately in the orbit of Zebra. The shrubs aren't sucked out but they die in place without air.





CHAPTER 12

Sammy and Jerry are awakening from hibernation and enter into the cockpit. They look devastated as if they haven't slept for weeks.

John the android sits in the control panel and mechanically announces:

"We slowed down to the speed of light, I launched the second phase of the braking sequence. The expected landing time is in 20 hours."

Sammy shakes his head.

"We gonna be here for another 20 bloody hours? Last time the braking lasted only two!"

"Yes, but remember, before you turned on the shields, the plants managed to destroy four brake motors." Jerry says with the greatest of ease.

Sammy is holding his nose and he watches in disgust that a special dried stain is in the cockpit.

"Nobody has cleaned the cake you threw up here."

"Really?"

They both look at John, but it actually doesn't bother them at all. They are happy that they have done this unexpectedly demanding mission successfully.

They flew to Zebra just to watch the half dead wildlife. But no one knew that there is no life due to the intelligent carnivorous plants.

Sammy doesn't want to be bored and loads cartoon from the archive about the adventures of duck city and dogs who are trying to rob the richest of them.

This childish fun means nothing to Jerry, so he tries to entertain himself by conversation.

"Do you think you're going to be like that forever?" Jerry asks.

"Like what?"

"Childish. Now you are watching a movie for kids, you know?" He tries to emphasize his impression and cracks his fingers in front of him, as if he wanted to wake Sammy up.

"It's going to be alright."

Jerry wonders how to change the subject.

"How did you actually convince Rone's girl to go with you for a drink? When I see you now, I cannot believe it even for a minute." He looks at him with a grin.

"You know Jerry," he turns away from the animated display: "It's because you're a cunt." Sammy laughs.

Jerry's insulted, but he doesn't want to look sensitive in front of his colleague.

"Oh, but you aren't going to get out of this so easily. Tell me, how do you get her?"

Sammy watches him thoughtfully for a while and tries to choose the right words.

"Eeeeeeh I had a theory - when we meet the next time, she will think that somehow we know each other and it will break the ice. So we just exchanged a few words and then I disappeared."

"And what happened then, Mr. Scientist?" Jerry asks and has to use big effort not to crack up with laughter.

Sammy slaps on the control panel and pauses the animated film and walks to the minibar.

"The ceremony was terribly boring so on another opportunity I invited her to the bar. I tried to give the impression that she will help me to kill the boredom." Sammy suddenly seems to realize something.

He goes back with a glass of wine. There are no longer any sign of his childish tastes.

"If you saw how nicely she was shaking her perfectly busty body." He laughs.

Jerry feels a little awkward. Rone got quite mad, so his colleague had to be really good that night.

"So you scored?"

"No." Sammy answers disappointingly.

"What, why?" Jerry asks, his voice shows a little concern by which Jerry is surprised.

Sammy feels that something's wrong.

"Hang on, we've already talked about it."

Jerry is silent and goes to the bathroom.

Sammy realizes that now at the moment he didn't behave so childishly.

Jerry comes back pleased by Sammy's return to the people, but suddenly he can see that he is watching the animated series again.

Sammy nods conspiratorially at him.

"I understand what you're trying to do, but right now I don't give a fuck, so give me a break."

The remaining 19 hours of the braking sequence, there's not much interesting happening. Sammy, however, thinks that he should have a word with Rone.

Jerry and Sammy walk into instructor Murphy's office. In addition to him there are also two doctors and Rone. They are all in a good mood. They sit sprawled out on the comfortable sofas and they are obviously thrilled to have found another planet with intelligent life.

Rone, however, quietly dissembles. The agents were supposed to die on this mission and not come up with a new discovery and yet happily return!

"Here you are, agents," Rone turns to the incoming people and looks like he was the happiest man in the room. "Our research team is in awe of all the results that you brought back from Zebra."

"Exactly," instructor Murphy says "nobody would expect new cadets to handle the unexpected situation."

"And your improvisation was perfect! Anyway sorry for the android, who was assigned to you without all of the critical updates. We had no idea that the technicians would send you an empty machine with only basic firmware."

Jerry and Sammy started to listen more carefully at that moment. Rone excuses them to their faces and yet he laughs!

"Why are you lying, Rone? You fucked it up!"

Jerry explodes in front of everyone.

Sammy recalls a recent conversation with Susan and the problem at the bar. It is obvious that in this situation Rone has no choice but to clean it under the carpet somehow, on the other hand, Sammy got now a perfect opportunity to 'correct' his face and to redress his reputation in front of Susan.

To look like a milksop in front of such a nice girl probably really sucks, Sammy thinks. Especially if she wanted to be with me as Jerry said!

Sammy comes to Rone and enjoys that his competitor's

face looks somewhat uncertain.

"Come on guys don't overdo it!" Rone is trying to save the situation. "I suppose you have faulty information, what's wrong with you?"

Without much emotion Sammy takes him by the throat and pulls him off the couch. Rone doesn't fight back, because the room is full of authorities and Sammy's error will certainly have its consequences.

"Let him go, cadet! That's an order!" Murphy yells at him.

Sammy gives him a look and smiles.

"Sorry coach, it's personal. He took over my girlfriend."

And he smacks his fist into his face and one after another in the stomach. Sammy runs like a sewing machine and after a while he stops.

"That's for Susan, asshole."

"Nice one, that's how I like you!" Jerry encourages him.

Both doctors are together with Murphy in shock and don't know what to say. While Rone is collecting himself from the ground, Murphy says:

"Next time solve your personal things in your free time." There's a hint of glee.

The analysts of the Group for Supervision are a pain in the ass for all agents.

Sammy is standing at the bus stop where a module of public transport is just landing. Beautiful Susan gets off the module and from a distance she smiles at Sammy.

"Today, you look especially great." He praises her skirt, which is ripped on the left leg.

Susan does a little pirouette in front of him with a

smile.

"Thanks. I hope that you won't take the advantage of it." Susan says, her eyes reflecting the promise.

"Rone just got what he deserved."

"You know that he couldn't defend himself in front of others."

"Yes he could, but he is just a douchebag." Sammy replies.

Susan presses to him and her wet lips begin to fondle Sammy's neck.

Everything ended up much better than his expectations.

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