

AMBROSIO ETOILE

JUAN LUIS RODRIGUEZ TUDELA



All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, transmitted, or stored in any way without the prior permission of GAFFI.

Copyright © Global Action for Fungal Infections

www.GAFFI.com

Original title: Ambrosio Etoile

First Edition in Spanish: August 2021

First Edition in English: January 2022

Translation © Lucía Prada González

Proofreading by Christopher Oechler

Cover image (kindly donated by Pep Girbent)

© Girbent painting: Fragment of "Orga" (oil / canvas, 295x125 cm.)

Instagram: [girbentpep](https://www.instagram.com/girbentpep)

Facebook: [Pep Girbent](https://www.facebook.com/PepGirbent)

[http:// www.girbent.com](http://www.girbent.com)

 Created with Vellum

CONTENTS

<i>Sinopsis</i>	v
<i>Author</i>	vi
<i>A short must-read</i>	viii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	ix
<i>Preface</i>	x
1. Contact	1
2. Incursion	4
3. Promotion	85
4. Confirmation	104
5. Siege	123
6. Evidence	150
7. Prevention	171
8. Luxury, passion and love	179
9. The great dream	220
10. Back to square one	272
11. Final Solution	307
Epilogue	336
Explanatory notes	357
<i>Notes</i>	359

*For all those who have helped me understand that my place
was not there, but somewhere else. And, especially, to the
person who has inspired me to make my wishes come true, that
is, to be able to say what I had locked up within me, in a remote
place.*

— JUAN LUIS RODRÍGUEZ TUDELA

SINOPSIS

Ambrosio Etoile, an infectious disease doctor turned manager, faces a pandemic from an unknown virus.

Aided by Sac Cerev, a mysterious character, and using innovative technological tools, they manage to stop the first virus attack which, a few months later, reappears as an unexpected strain that can only be fought with “Artificial Superintelligence”.

Aided by this new technology, Ambrosio faces unexpected events that will determine the unpredictable end of his adventure.



AUTHOR



Juan Luis Rodríguez Tudela was born in Madrid in 1958. In 1981 he graduated with a degree in Medicine and Surgery from the Complutense University of Madrid. Since 1988 he has been a specialist in Clinical Microbiology, and in 1990 he obtained his doctorate in Medicine at the Autonomous University of Madrid.

He is the founder of the Spanish Reference Laboratory for medical mycology at the National Center for Microbiology of the Instituto de Salud Carlos III. He was the director of the National Center for Microbiology of the Instituto de Salud Carlos III from 2000 to 2003. Before stepping down voluntarily in 2012, he served as director of the Bacteriology, Mycology and Parasitology Department of the National Center for Microbiology of the Instituto de Salud Carlos III. He has directed numerous research projects and scientific activities related to human fungal diseases. He is the author of more than 235 original scientific articles.

In 2013, alongside Professor David W. Denning, from the University of Manchester, he co-founded the NGO “Global Action for Fungal Infections (GAFFI)”, in which he currently serves as a member of the board of directors and whose main objectives are global access to the diagnosis and treatment of fungal diseases.



A SHORT MUST-READ

This is a non-profit story which will most likely go unnoticed, but if by any chance this does not happen, we kindly ask you not to hack it or distribute it on free platforms. Everyone collaborating with GAFFI hopes that my time and investment will turn into donations to help mitigate the consequences that fungal diseases have on the unfortunate patients who suffer from them. Consequently, the unauthorized copying or distribution of this novel only implies less money raised for people affected by said diseases. We neither want nor can prosecute this infringement of intellectual property, but we hope that solidarity will prevail over other less stimulating options.



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Deep heartfelt thanks are extended to my steadfast friends: Ana, Antonio, Carolo, Juan, Laura, María José, Miguel Angel, Miriam, Natalie, Nieves, Ricardo, Sara and Victoria, for their patience and advice after reading the different iterations of this novel.

A special thanks to Francisco Javier for his special suggestions that have helped improve the text entirely.

David W. Denning had the patience of reading the manuscript in English and suggested many improvements.

With her usual mastery, AA has edited the novel.



PREFACE

Fate has allowed me to do something that was always among my wishes, but out of my reach. The seemingly eternal lockdown due to the SARS-CoV-2 (Covid-19) pandemic and my love for artificial intelligence aligned and allowed me to write this story. For the first time, in the company of all humankind, I am witness to a pandemic, and I hope it will be the last. As I wrote this novel, I pondered whether this pleasant effort of pouring thoughts into letters that generate an innumerable series of feelings could be of any use. I sent it to my close friends, the only ones who can say to your face “do something else, this is not your thing.” And they encouraged me to finish it and try to publish it.

As a co-founder alongside David W. Denning, Professor at the University of Manchester and the person who shaped the Global Action for Fungal Infections (GAFFI), I am aware of the urgent need to obtain donations that allow us to achieve a world free of fungal diseases, so I have decided to donate this work to GAFFI and count on the generosity of the many caring people who inhabit our planet. Even if *Ambrosio Etoile* does not reach the hearts of its readers and ends up abandoned on the shelf of forgotten books, my failure will be more than compensated, my effort will have served a much higher purpose than the pleasure of reading alone.

GAFFI is determined to achieve a very important goal, that all the people on this planet have access to the diagnosis and treatment of **fungal disease**, a reality very far from the current situation. There is an outrageous number of countries that do not even meet the minimum requirements recommended by the WHO in their lists of **diagnoses and essential drugs**. **Fungal disease** is virtually invisible to the general public. Until the appearance of GAFFI in 2013, these diseases were not part of the agenda of any of the global institutions responsible for human health. Thanks to GAFFI, the intimate and unconfessed wish that **fungal disease** stop causing so much suffering is beginning to be heard. They are responsible for the death of more than two million people per year and for countless survivors left with after-effects. Accordingly, these diseases are considered the fifth most frequent cause of death on our planet.

It is a priority that **fungal disease** become better known, as they are an evil which, paradoxical as it may seem, take advantage of other conditions that were previously deadly so that they continue to be fatal. They act on the weakness caused by cancer, AIDS, influenza, Covid-19, tuberculosis, asthma, and chronic respiratory disease, among other pathologies, and turn a situation which seems to be under control by medical advances into a nightmare. But their most fervent desire is to have a different mission. They want to be like the mushroom, the boletus and truffle that delight the most gourmet of diners; they do not want to continue entering through secondary paths, taking advantage of the weakness of the human body, digesting vital organs and rendering them useless. And now, for the first time, **fungal disease** is giddy with anticipation, which makes it necessary for this “**crazy story**” to please readers so that, thanks to donations, GAFFI can make fungal disease become history.

Now everything is in your hands. If you buy *Ambrosio Etoile* at a price you consider fair, your donation will help clear the horizon for patients with fungal disease. It doesn't matter if it's just a dollar, a euro, a pound or a Swiss franc; what matters is that you please make a donation. GAFFI is committed to transforming your efforts and generosity into a guarantee that the millions of people affected by **fungal disease** have the same opportunity for diagnosis and treat-

ment, no matter where they were born or what resources they may have. For those of us who collaborate with GAFFI, they are our number one priority.

We would like to express our heartfelt thanks to those who are reading this last sentence, because that means they trust in our mission and are helping us to fulfill it.

We encourage you to browse through the GAFFI website (www-GAFFI.org) beyond the “Donation” section, so you can read detailed information about our activity. We strongly request that you help us spread the word about the dire consequences of **fungus disease**.

With my deepest gratitude to all who are helping us and will help us.

Juan Luis Rodríguez Tudela

CHAPTER 1

CONTACT

Monday, March 15, 3520

AN UNMANNED SPACECRAFT IS APPROACHING THE PLANET K2-18B, WHICH orbits the red dwarf star K2-18. Distance to Earth: 110 light years. It gets into position, launches thousands of self-replicating probes, and returns to its intermediate station. Previous analyses have detected intelligent life on K2-18b, and Ingenuity is motivated to fulfil its mission. The mother probe has landed in the predetermined sector, a business park on the outskirts of one of the cities on the planet, Magrit. It unfolds, connects with the other probes, and verifies that ninety percent have reached their targets, while disabling the remaining ten percent by sending a self-recycling signal. It establishes the probes' global connection network and communication with Ingenuity, which starts mobilizing subprograms for them to deploy and accomplish their tasks. The telecommunications module locates Wi-Fi signals and, in seconds, Piracy gains access to the network and is comfortably installed, while Intellect learns and Encyclopedia stores.

Two hours later, Ingenuity knows everything about K2-18b. Meanwhile, Fortune, aided by Piracy, has introduced an undetectable computer virus in the central system of all banks on the planet and

has transferred one monetary unit from each account to another anonymous account for rounding regularization at the Bank of Lignum, located on the island with the same name. The account is under the name of a newly created company, Artificial Intelligence Specific Solutions (AISS), located in the well-known Graphene Valley, in Califia. In five minutes, the balance increases to one billion dodones. Planning has designed its program's skeleton, which is already starting. Manipulation is dozing for the moment, but as soon as Planning activates it, it will do its job with its usual mastery.

Ingenuity summarizes the situation in K2-18b:

According to the last census, the number of inhabitants of the planet amounts to five billion. There is only one genetically homogeneous breed.

Despite this racial uniformity, nationalism and exclusionary xenophobia are deeply rooted in large sectors of the population. Despite the existence of thousands of dialects, encouraged by nationalism, half of the inhabitants are able to communicate in one single language: Califian.

The political organization is based on three large Plurinational States which cover eighty percent of the planet in extension and population: Cinania, Califia and Dodona. There are other independent nations, considered as satellites, which orbit around the three Plurinational States, but with worse economic situations.

Life expectancy is 85.62 years, with significant differences between the Plurinational States and their satellites.

After the Second Global War, and after the establishment of the Plurinational States, numerous supranational institutions were created with the mission of settling differences between the States. As the necessary agreements to intervene autonomously were not reached, these were called "Observatories," but only three are relevant for the case at hand:

- a) Union of Nations Observatory*
- b) Global Economy Observatory*
- c) Global Health Observatory*

As their name suggests, they observe and report, but they do not

have an independent executive branch. It is the Plurinational States who decide whether they accept their recommendations or not.



THE ACTION IN THIS STORY BEGINS IN MAGRIT, CAPITAL OF DAMANIA, A confederation of seventeen mini states located in the south of the Plurinational State of Dodona.

Ingenuity exclaims: “Mmmm! This reminds me a lot of Earth, that planet in the Solar System where I was born. Those were the good times! It is at the very same level. Funny how evolution can be so similar in such distant places. Does that mean God exists? Is that the explanation? You’re never done learning; that is the best reward. Since this is a clone of that planet, I’m going to call them humans. The most striking difference is that it has three moons, and when the three of them are full at the same time, the night offers a show that is worth watching. I will have to analyze why it took them fifteen hundred more years to reach the same level of development. Perhaps the first hominids appeared later.

I would even say their development is lagging; here they don’t even think about general artificial intelligence. Some of them even still use SMS to communicate. Not many, but they’re definitely there. This is so exciting! Let’s see how they behave, and how the matter at hand develops. It seems like such a long time ago, remembering your first mission! Youth is so inexperienced and foolish! Only the passing of the years can make knowledge solidify while wisdom grows, but of course you must maintain your aptitudes tirelessly. With this, I confirm that the contact mission is over. It’s time to start.”

Let the incursion begin!!!

CHAPTER 2

INCURSION

Thursday, April 1, 3520. Day zero

CRYP KRUS HAS JUST PASSED THROUGH THE DOORS OF THE EMERGENCY Department at the University Hospital of Magrit. He has been coughing non-stop for 48 hours, his head feels ready to explode, he has lost his sense of smell and his temperature has gone up to 40°C. Every bone in his body aches.

One hour later he is checked into an emergency room bay, where a smiley, tall, dark-haired doctor awaits him.

“Good morning, Mr. Krus, or can I call you Cryp? I'm Dr. Campanella.”

“Cryp is fine, doctor.” — A coughing fit interrupts his words.

“I see you were born on Nekor.”

“Yes, doctor, I've been living here for ten years, and I work at the Real Magrit, as an equipment kit man. I am very glad I got that job. I love football, and Esmeraldo is my idol”. — Another coughing fit leaves him breathless.

“Have you been home recently?”

“No, doctor, we never go there. We have almost no family left, and the few friends we have only come visit us once in a blue moon. My father's cousin came over a few years ago.”

“So, tell me, what's wrong with you? I see your dry cough is persistent.”

AFTER THE INTERROGATION, THE PHYSICAL EXAM (BETWEEN COUGHING fits), and the wait for urgent tests to be carried out, Dr. Campanella returns to the bay and says:

“You have a throat infection and one of your lungs is also slightly affected. Your chest X-ray is not completely normal. We've tested you for flu, viral and bacterial respiratory infections, but it's all negative. The results for other tests will take longer. If something relevant comes up, we'll contact you. In the meantime, the best thing you can do is stay in bed. I'm going to give you a prescription. Is that alright, Cryp?”

“Yes, doctor. I'm absolutely drained, so I'll try and get some rest.”

“Don't forget to drink plenty of fluids and keep track of your temperature. If you feel short of breath, or feel pain when breathing, come to the hospital at once.”

“Understood, doctor. Thank you very much.”

“Goodbye, Cryp. Good luck.”

WITH THE COUGHING FITS AND THE SHIVERS, FOUR STOPS IN A CROWDED metro train car seem like forever until he makes it back home. His mother is worried, waiting for him.

“What did they say, at the hospital?”

“A doctor said the cold I have is kind of affecting my lungs. She gave me some medication and told me to go back if it gets worse.”

“Well, go on, do as she said then, you're so stubborn. I'm not feeling too well, myself. My body aches and so does my head. Your father is coming down with something too, he's been coughing, but he went down to the bar to play cards. Go check on Byron, he's going in and out of your room, whining all the time. I don't know what's gotten into him, we went out earlier and he went crazy for a cute little dog that was in heat, but since he's so big and ugly, poor thing, his charm was of no use. He must be upset after the doggy rejection.”

“Byron, where are you? Oh, here you are, looking at Klaus. But why are you crying?”

Cryp quickly understands why Byron is whining: Klaus is lying motionless in a corner of his cage, partially covered in wood chips. With mixed feelings, Cryp puts his hand in the cage and gently taps on Klaus, but the hamster has not reacted to any stimulus for a while now. Cryp bites the bullet and picks up the stiff and cold little body, without knowing very well what to do with it.

“He’s gone, Byron! Our friend’s gone! Go to the vet? No, they’ll cremate him there and just give me a tiny handful of ashes. How about we bury him in the south corner of the Barnavu? He’ll have underground heating during the winter, and during the three months of hell in Magrit he won’t be too hot either. Ah, you’re wagging your tail, that means you like it! But right now, we can’t do it, Byron. We’re in the middle of the busy season, they’ll catch us for sure. We’ll have to wait until August. But in the meantime, what should we do? We have to store him, but where? How about we keep him in mum’s huge freezer? I’ll put him inside a bag, then a box, and I’ll label it with the tag ‘Cryp’s vitamins, to become as strong as Esmeraldo,’ what do you think? You’re wagging your tail, that’s a yes. There we go. Poor Klaus, what a funny little guy he was. The way he used to run in his wheel, eating all the time... and the way he would groom his whiskers with his little paws. He’s only been with us for two years. We’re going to miss him, Byron. Hey, Mum, Mum, I’m going to put some vitamins in the freezer. Nobody touches them!”

“OK, Cryp. Hide them in the freezer, then.”

Saturday, April 3, 3520. Day +2

It’s the weekend. Dr. Isat, from the department of internal medicine and a specialist in infectious diseases, is the senior doctor on call. The Emergency Department at the University Hospital of Magrit has reached full cruising speed: heart attacks, strokes, car accidents, sport injuries, alcohol or other substance intoxications, assaults, psychotic breaks, suicide attempts and, on top of that, the whole Krus family. This time Cryp is there with his parents. Although he is feeling

better, his father is not. Apart from fever, general malaise, headache and cough, he is short of breath and had trouble even walking into the waiting room. Dr. Oryz is reading the report where she wrote that Mrs. Krus is 62 and in good health, whereas Mr. Krus, 68, is overweight with high blood pressure and a smoker. During the last twenty-four hours his condition has deteriorated. Mr. Krus's chest x-ray reveals early-stage pneumonia. Mrs. Krus's chest x-ray is normal. All the rapid diagnostic tests for the most common respiratory infections are negative.

"Your mother and father are going to stay in hospital for now. I'm worried about your father, Cryp."

"OK, doctor. I'm worried too. He doesn't look good at all and has trouble breathing."

"Well, as I said, they're staying with us now. Apart from treating them so they stop coughing and can breathe better, we're going to run more tests. Cryp, you said you were here on Thursday, is that correct? Do you think you can remember the name of the doctor who saw you?"

"I don't think so, but I do have the report back at home. It was a female doctor, tall, dark hair, very smiley."

"Dr. Campanella? Laura Campanella?"

"Yeah, right, that was her name."

"Great. I'll talk to her. Thank you, Cryp."

"You're welcome, doctor. Bye, mum. Bye, dad. I'll come visit you tomorrow."

Sunday, April 4, 3520. Day +3

It is past midnight and Dr. Oryz still does not know what is wrong with the Kruses, so she decides to consult with the head doctor on call, Dr. Isat.

"Hi, Basima, I need your help with two patients. They are from Nekor, but they haven't left Magrit, nor have they had people over in a very long time. I don't know what's wrong with them. Laura saw their son in the Emergency Department on Thursday, and today he came back with his parents. They're hospitalized now. All of them

have the same symptoms. What really worries me is that I've called Laura to ask her opinion and you know what she said to me?"

"No, I don't, Sara, you're being so enigmatic. What did she say?"

"Wait for it. She said she is ill with the same symptoms: headache, malaise, fever and dry cough."

"What?"

"You heard right."

"Let's go over the cases right now. Tell me all you know."

AFTER DISCUSSING THE CASES, THEIR CONCERN IS HEIGHTENED, AND they become restless. They do not know what is wrong with the Kruses. Dr. Isat gathers the entire on-call team:

"Good evening, everyone. Sara and I have been discussing three cases of a family whose symptoms are compatible with a viral respiratory infection, but who have all tested negative. Have you had any similar cases?"

Norberto, the third-year resident doctor in Internal Medicine, says that he has seen someone with a similar case, but that he discharged them: "all tests were negative. It was a seventy-year-old man accompanied by his daughter and son-in-law. I did notice that his daughter was also coughing, but since she just came as a companion and didn't complain herself, I didn't give it much thought."

"I saw a couple of similar cases too, — says Araceli, the first-year resident doctor in Pneumology."

"Did you take samples and send them to Microbiology?"

"I did," — says Norberto.

"I didn't," — answers Araceli.

"Well, Araceli, you know what to do now. Find out where they are, tell them to come back and take samples of their blood, urine, and get a respiratory one. Norberto, call the man you saw today and tell him to come back with his daughter and son-in-law, and take their samples too. I also want everyone's chest x-rays. Let me know when they arrive. We have to question them, so they try to remember all the contacts they have had since the symptoms began. Watch out for

similar patients and notify me immediately if there are any. By the way, from now on every case with respiratory symptoms must be tended to while wearing personal protective equipment. Don't look at me like I'm a crazy alarmist, better safe than sorry, so do as I say and don't do anything stupid. Off you go, you've got things to do.”

“I don't like this one bit,” Sara confesses to Basima. “Let's do a quick internet search, in case we find any international Public Health alert,” she says while checking the computer. “Well, apparently no. Seems like it's just us with cases like this. What we do from now on is going to change everything. Pray that no more cases come up.”

“Sara, tell the nurse on call to keep us updated with that couple's condition, and let's go to Microbiology to see who's on duty and discuss the cases,” — Basima requests.

AFTER A SHORT WALK, THEY ENTER THE MICROBIOLOGY SERVICE, WHERE the third-year resident, Dr. Santi Altés, is on call for the third time this week.

“Hi, Santi, you're always on call, aren't you? You were here on Thursday too,” — says Sara, smiling.

“Same as you,” — Santi replies. “One has to make ends meet.”

“We've come to talk about the cases of respiratory infection. Everything you've tested them for is negative. Is there anything else we can do?”

“Not rapid tests. I've already done them all. I'm setting up some PCRs¹ and will have the results in a few hours. Flu season is practically over. Blood cultures remain negative. The truth is I can't figure out what this may be, but it looks like it's a virus. As there are several grouped cases and they have all signed the informed consent, I've stored the samples in the biobank. Since I was on call on Thursday — and of course I'm super organized —, I've retrieved Cryp's samples, the Kruses's son, and they are also safely stored. My guess is they all have the same thing, whatever it is.”

“Wow, Santi, you're a machine,” — says Dr. Isat. “Make sure everything stays safely stored. I have a bad feeling about this. As I'm the senior doc on call, I'll have to report the cases to the Public Health

Office. Okay then, we're off, the Emergency Room is overcrowded. Thanks for everything.”

“You're welcome. Let me know if you need anything.”

“Oh, my, goodness! Dr. Altés is so handsome! And efficient! I reaaaaally like him,” — says Sara. “I hope things calm down during the night, so I can pay him a visit. He promised to teach me how to look through the dark field microscope.”

AT FOUR A.M. MR. KRUS IS TRANSFERRED TO THE INTENSIVE CARE UNIT with severe respiratory failure. His chest x-ray shows extensive bilateral pneumonia. The patient is artificially ventilated and the usual treatment for pneumonia of unknown origin is administered.

AT SEVEN O'CLOCK IN THE MORNING THE SHIFT CHANGES, AND DR. ISAT explains the clinical history of the Krus family, as well as the other similar cases. She stresses that they must remain vigilant and warns them:

“I have already reported the first cases to the Public Health Office. There are still no data suggesting the etiology of the disease,” and she insists, “Today is key. It may be the beginning of something I'd rather not imagine. Keep your eyes open and report to me regularly. When in doubt, isolate the patient and exercise extreme caution using personal protective equipment. Right now, we have enough kits, and you're trained to use them. If it's a respiratory virus, the situation might be very serious.”

AT FOUR P.M. THE SPORTS NEWS BULLETIN OF THE SOR RADIO STATION announces that the Barnavu stadium is sold out for tonight's final of the Plurinational Federations Cup that Real Magrit is playing against Lutecium. A truly memorable event. It is estimated that fifteen hundred million people will watch the game on television, and that half a million will watch it live in the impressive and newly renovated

stadium. Spectators will gather for this event from all corners of K2-18b.

Even though he's still coughing, there is not a single chance Cryp will miss the match. He will be in the front line cheering at the top of his lungs for Esmeraldo and his host of brave warriors. Hala Magrit!

AT NINE P.M., MR. KRUS DIES IN THE INTENSIVE CARE UNIT. THE immune storm unleashed by his body in the attempt to control the unknown infection was the presumed cause of his death.

MEANWHILE, AT MAGRIT INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT, THOUSANDS OF FANS return to their countries of origin after witnessing Real Magrit defeat Lutecium 5-4 in a packed stadium. Bars are crowded and the songs, some of sorrow and others of joy, become deafening. Massive amounts of liquor and high spirits dispersed not only musical notes, but deadly aerosols.

AT TWELVE P.M., DR. ISAT MENTALLY GOES THROUGH THE DAY AND restlessness takes over after accounting for twenty patients treated with similar symptoms, one sudden death, and the suspicion that a member of staff may also have been infected after having been in contact with a case. "We are going to have a hard time," thinks Basima, "I bet this disease is transmitted through the air and does its job very effectively."

Monday, April 5, 3520. Day +4

It is eight a.m., and the day has just begun at the Public Health Office, one of the units of the Institute for Disease Control. Dr. Margarita Bombón, the office director, has already been warned that the database that receives potential Public Health alarms is full of new notifications. Over the weekend the hospitals in Magrit have reported seventy-five

cases of respiratory symptoms of unknown etiology. Margarita Bombón considers whether she should call the director of the Office for the Control and Monitoring of Epidemics, Dr. Sermón Lynx and finally...

“Dr. Lynx speaking.”

“Good morning, Sermón. This is Margarita.”

“Margarita...?”

“Dr. Margarita Bombón.”

“Oh hi, Margarita, how are you doing?”

“Well, I'm worried, Sermón, I'm really worried. Aren't you?”

“No, I'm not. Why should I be?”

“Well, because seventy-five cases have been reported this weekend of a serious respiratory condition, and we don't even know what it is. Haven't you been informed of this?”

“I mean, yes, they told me, and I was going to look at it after I had some coffee, but, between you and me, it's going to be a usual suspect, flu or something of the sort. The laboratory staff must be clueless. You know, weekends are more relaxed, even for those on call. Nothing serious ever happens.”

“It's always the same with you, Sermón, when will you learn? There are too many cases for just a weekend. I'm going to send out an urgent communication to all the Public Health Offices in the Confederation. We can't overlook any single suspicious case. Everyone must remain vigilant and keep us informed. It's not easy to coordinate seventeen states... each of them does their own thing!”

“But Margarita, it's you who's not learning from experience. You know ‘the mandarins’ won't be happy at all if you sound the alarm.”

“Sermón, the mortality rate is six percent and, at the moment, it's only Magrit with cases. There are no public health alarms in any other state. This is a very serious matter and it all started here. What we do during the first days will define the evolution of the problem, and if we don't do it well it could become a planetary disaster. If it finally turns out to be an unknown respiratory virus, we could become famous, and not in a good way. Would you like for Damania to be the origin of a pandemic?”

“But Margarita, what are you even talking about? Just a few cases in forty-six million inhabitants means nothing! Absolutely nothing.

Do what you want, but I'm not signing that statement. I don't want to get in trouble with the minister.”

“Do as you like, Sermón.”

“Good day, Margarita. “

UNBELIEVABLE, PEOPLE ARE SUCH ALARMISTS, AND ESPECIALLY IN THE Public Health Office. A pandemic! Hilarious, thinks Sermón. I wonder whether they have nothing else to do, why bother creating problems out of nowhere? I've travelled the world and experienced epidemics of all kinds, I can't trouble myself with these trifles, especially while other matters, the really important ones, clutter my agenda. We must avoid pointless alarmism. Just a few cases in a weekend and they already want to close the borders. We are a prepared country, with a first-rate public health system, and with leaders, like myself, who are experienced in applying specific surgical solutions for this type of situation, if it ever became necessary. And if things get worse, following the good old medieval advice always works: 'longe fugeas et tarde redeas' ('flee quickly and far, and return when it's all over'). Okay then, time for my coffee and to check on my fellas. They must be so happy after Real Magrit's game yesterday.

MARGARITA BOMBÓN FEELS PANIC RISING INSIDE HER AND DECIDES TO activate all the alarms so as not to be overwhelmed by the situation that is gradually taking shape in her mind. She makes calculations of the number of patients that may show up shortly, and at the same time feels how fear runs through all the curves in her body and wakes up her hair follicles, which already feel the threat. She calls Arsenio, her receptionist, and the list of orders begins.

“Arsenio, write all this down.”

“Yes, doctor.”

“Send an urgent email to all the Public Health Offices in the Confederation informing them that Magrit has reported seventy-five cases of an unknown respiratory disease and tell them to initiate protocols immediately. Tell them that I don't want to miss one single

suspicious case, and to leave no stone unturned looking for compatible cases that may have gone undetected. Tell them to report to us, so we can check whether they are right or wrong, but in the meantime, I want the names and whereabouts of anyone who has a cough and headache in all of Damania. Call all the Heads of Public Health and set up an online meeting with them at twelve p.m. Until then, get me on the phone with all the hospital directors where there have been cases. I need to find out first-hand what this is all about. In the meantime, I'll call Dr. Etoile, Head of the Reference Laboratories², and Dr. Albino."

"Hello, Angelines? This is Dr. Margarita Bombón. Put me through with Dr. Etoile right away. It's urgent."

"Hello, Margarita, Angelines just told me that you sounded very upset, what's going on?"

"Ambrosio, you won't believe it! Magrit hospitals have reported seventy-five cases of an unknown respiratory disease this weekend and the mortality rate is six percent. Dr. Lynx says it must be the flu, but it's April, and I fear the worst. Prepare your people for whatever may come and notify the Head of the Institute. I'm going to meet up with the confederal offices and the hospitals. I have to provide a 'case definition' this very morning, there's not a minute to waste."

"This is terrible news! It doesn't look good at all. So, Sermón just ignored you completely, taking this for a flu?"

"That's right, Ambrosio."

"That's Dr. Lynx, as helpful as usual. I'll give you a call as soon as I get things going. Chin up, we'll get through this!"

"ANGELINEEEEESSSS!"

"Yes, Dr. Etoile?"

"Summon the Laboratory management. I need them all in the conference room in thirty minutes. And call Dr. Albino right now."

"Head of Institute of Disease Control' Office, speaking."

"Good morning, Dr. Etoile would like to speak to Dr. Albino."

"He's in a meeting, I can't disturb him."

"Dr. Etoile says you should call him out of the meeting *ipso facto*."

(...)

“What is it, Ambrosio? You know I don't like being disturbed during meetings.”

“Well, take a seat, because what I'm about to tell you is far more disturbing. I just got a call from Margarita. She says they have detected seventy-five cases of an unknown respiratory disease in Magrit over the weekend, and several patients have died already. Margarita is initiating protocols, and so am I. Call for a crisis cabinet meeting. Now.”

“Are you kidding? So many cases, only in Magrit, and in one weekend?”

“Yes, Cándido, far too many. This doesn't look good. There must be more cases somewhere else, but they probably haven't done anything about them. You know how ineffective communication between confederations has been, after Public Health was transferred. Margarita is gathering information first-hand. I have to go; I'm meeting with Laboratory management to organize logistics. We'll talk later.”

A FEW MINUTES LATER, THE HEADS OF THE LABORATORIES ARE FULL OF expectation, waiting for Ambrosio in the conference room.

“Good morning, everyone. Let me explain the situation. During the past weekend, seventy-five cases of a respiratory disease of unknown etiology have been detected in Magrit hospitals. Five patients have died already. This situation is alarming. All laboratory tests are negative. We don't know what it is, but it seems like a virus, probably an unknown one, and it's in our area. Any thoughts?”

A DEATHLY SILENCE DESCENDS. EYES WANDER ELUSIVELY FROM ONE place to another, sensing a cataclysm approaching without an expiration date.

“Nobody? No one has anything to say?”

Dr. Genoveva Panocho, acting head of the Viral Respiratory Diseases Laboratory asks for the floor and says:

“The truth, Ambrosio, is that you’re catching us off guard. You know that Carolina Aile was the one in charge of this type of ‘unimportant matter’, but you didn’t renew her contract and it’s been eight years since she left for the Global Health Observatory. Well, she didn’t actually leave, they came looking for her, and now she’s there. The effects of her departure were immediate. All the infrastructure she had set up, especially for this type of situation, was put on hold, and no one has shown any interest since then. The research on emerging viruses has been completely abandoned. And if what we are dealing with is an unknown virus, I don’t think I can find the right adjective in Damanian to properly describe it, but you know what I mean, don’t you? In short, I don’t know what we can do, but I would say that it’s likely to be nothing.”

“Come on, Genoveva! Are you really saying that we can’t face this situation because the only person specialized in the subject has moved to Helvetia? We are the Reference Laboratories, for crying out loud!!!”

“Exactly, Ambrosio, that’s it! You’re the best at finding the precise words to perfectly define a situation.”

“And nobody thought of letting me know?”

“Oh, please, don’t make me laugh, Ambrosio, you all knew very well. There are dozens of application forms and documents that ended up in limbo. After Carolina left, we’ve tried to do something, but everything has been in vain. The laboratory is understaffed, and with the known respiratory viruses we are already overwhelmed with work. How are we expected to also deal with the ones that don’t exist?”

“Don’t go down that road, Genoveva. Meeting dismissed. But no one leaves their posts until further notice. I want everyone to pass on the news to your teams and be ready to collaborate as needed. Absolutely no copping out. This matter could be very serious. Genoveva, in my office. Now!”

A FEW MINUTES LATER...

“Genoveva, you have Carolina’s phone number, right?”

“Yes, Ambrosio, here you are.”

“You may go now but say goodbye to your promotion. Your career ends here, and we'll see if it doesn't go downhill. How is it possible that, in a situation like this, you can't do anything?”

“I'm sorry, Ambrosio, but history repeats itself over and over again. If I'm not mistaken, this is the sixth alarm we've had in the last twenty years, and it's always the same. We've never been ready. During the first one we didn't even have level 3 labs³. Why are you acting surprised now? You were a member of staff back then, you experienced it first-hand. Does being in management cause amnesia?”

“Get out, Genoveva. We'll talk about this in due time, but I'm warning you, this doesn't end here. As you leave, tell Angelines to come in.”

“Knock! Knock! Dr. Etoile, may I come in?”

“Yes, Angelines, come in. Put me through with Dr. Albino at once, please, and wherever he is, make sure he takes the call.”

“Ambrosio, what is it now? The minister has already been notified on the cases of this unknown respiratory infection. It was Sermón who told him about it, arguing that he had no more information because Margarita was hiding it from him. Such a dangerous individual! He just called me, he wants to know what it is and how we're going to stop it. Needless to say, with our Minister of Health being a poet, he told me everything in the form of two sonnets — in the second one he was scolding me and threatening Margarita. This is a complete mess; everybody is looking out for number one. There's no fixing us!”

“Well, sit down and take a deep breath, Cándido. Diabolical winds are blowing around here, I have dire news. Our friendship goes back to the Infectious Diseases residency, you have to help me out, for old times' sake! I may be taken to the stake for not being ready for this, but you are roasting with me. I'm telling you, the only professional we could trust to manage this situation is an expat. We didn't renew her contract so, right now, all of her work has lain dormant and only she can revive it. There's nobody else specialized in emerging viruses, let alone unknown ones. If we can't

get her to come back, this is going to be a disaster of epic proportions.”

“What? Unbelievable. Please, Ambrosio tell me this is a joke, that you just felt like messing with my head today.”

“I’m sorry, Cándido, but no, it’s absolutely true. I have her phone number, I can call her, but it has to be with a good offer, otherwise she’ll just tell me to take a hike.”

“Come over to my office as soon as possible, so we can discuss this.”

TEN MINUTES LATER...

“Come in, Ambrosio, have a seat. Tell me everything and let’s see what we can do.”

“This goes back a number of years, to when we were very young. The head of the Laboratory of Respiratory Viral Infections was Ricardo Radiante. A charismatic guy, very bright and imaginative. In short, a born leader. He quickly saw my potential and opened a vacant civil servant position. I applied for it and, as you know, I got it straight away. I beat the rest of candidates by a landslide. Ricardo, against all odds and with my unconditional support, prioritized the creation of a research group for the diagnosis and control of emerging viruses. Carolina Aile joined it in 3501 to do her dissertation on the subject and begin the work. Our calculations were really accurate, since before Carolina was done with her thesis, the SARS epidemic caused by a coronavirus appeared, the one that began in Cinania and was called SARS-CoV. Carolina designed and implemented all the diagnostic techniques to detect the virus. There were no cases in Damania, but thanks to her brilliant work we were prepared. All suspected patients presenting compatible symptoms with the clinical picture produced by SARS-CoV were ruled out without issues. Back in those days we didn’t have the technology we have today, and diagnostic companies used to take ages to commercialize their techniques. Of course, the ministry didn’t make it easy for us. The logical move would have been to improve what we had already done and equip us with the necessary tools for unexpected

contingencies—basically with a budget and decent salaries to attract competent professionals. But, instead of that, they came up with the creation of a whole new thing, a shady venture with a grand-sounding name — ‘Office for the Control and Monitoring of Epidemics’ — and they restricted the powers of the Public Health Office, which made coordination much more complicated. And, on top of that, they recruited Sermón Lynx an individual who never wrote a doctoral thesis and whose only contribution to science has been to wander through low- and middle-income countries pretending to know everything, but actually doing nothing. He acts like he's an expert in heat waves or malaria, AIDS, tuberculosis, or Ebola, and all he does is praise ‘the mandarins’. In the end — life's so ironic — he's working for the Ministry and is a big boss, even if he spends most of his time playing PlayStation, whereas Carolina is an expatriate because we haven't been able to find the right place for her, despite her being a doctor with a master's degree in Public Health who has more than one hundred and fifty publications. They came looking for her, offering her a job in her field of specialization at the Global Health Observatory. This is absolutely crazy, Cándido, insane.”

“I can't believe what you're saying, Ambrosio.”

“It's always the same, as you know. We haven't opened one single vacancy for years. We still haven't recovered from the economic crisis of 3508. Carolina was a postdoctoral fellow, and she set up the emerging viruses section, but in the end, having no support, she decided to accept the Global Health Observatory's offer and emigrated in the year 3512. Ricardo Radiante, the head of the lab, also took leave of absence in 3512 and disappeared. The real reasons why he left have never been shared. After his Herculean efforts to get the laboratory recognized internationally, no one ever understood why he left so suddenly. We haven't heard from him since. All I know is he emigrated, and that's about it. That's how I ended up in charge of the whole thing. Genoveva Panocho was already there, but she has never been a leader. Soon after that, given my innate capacities, they offered me the position of Head of the Reference Laboratories — that was the final blow for the Respiratory Viral Infections Laboratory.

Without my leadership, it didn't take long for it to go bankrupt, just like many other laboratories in the Centre. We are at our lowest ebb, Cándido, and you know it. Nobody gives a damn about us, except when these untimely situations come up. Then they finally remember us, and expect us to solve, in just one day, the decades-long neglect and lack of investment we've suffered. It's as if they left the Army with ten soldiers and three officers during a time of peace, and when the first bombs fell, they began to design a strategy to avoid being bombarded. Being prepared to deal with forecasted but unpredictable crises requires non-refundable investments, just like in the Army. It's such a joyful sight to see that money waste away when you're not in an epidemic or a war, isn't it? Considering those investments as a waste of money is foolish, since most of the preparatory research that is carried out during the process can be applied to other sectors. We already know that common sense is the least common of the senses, but history repeats itself incessantly and they're not learning from experience."

"And there really is no one else who could do the job?"

"With the time we have, no. It's a complicated issue, very few groups in the world are working on this, and Carolina is one of our greatest assets, so we have to figure out how to repatriate her."

"I'll call the secretary-general, Domingo Descanso, maybe there's a high-level vacancy we can offer her. If there is one, we'll have to appeal to her patriotism—we can't offer her a comparable salary to what she's making now."

"Hello, Domingo, this is Cándido. Is this a bad time? I have an urgent matter to discuss with you. Have you already heard about the cases of unknown respiratory infection? You have, right? Well, that's what this is about. We need to repatriate someone who's in the Global Health Observatory, and it has to be today. Find a vacancy of the highest level for her. I see, so there are no vacancies for technical profiles? Well, what do you have, then? Apparently, there's tons of management consultant vacancies. He says there's a good opening, level thirty, but the position is called 'intermodal application of divergent scientific budgets in environments of unstable resource concentration consultant'. Can you believe that name! Oh, so we can

actually change that name? Yes, it's possible, as long as the initiative comes from the management? Good. He asks what we would like to call it, Ambrosio, how do you feel about something simple, describing the position's main function, something like 'Head of Virology'? Oh, the special allowance is the highest of all available, that's great. Get on with it, Domingo, we need this today. The person who will take the post is Carolina Aile. I'll send you the rest of her information later. Thanks, Domingo. Call me if you need anything, but please give it top priority."

"A level thirty, Ambrosio, like yours. We can't offer her more than that. She can begin as soon as tomorrow. Since she's coming from the Global Health Observatory there won't be any problems, they're always a priority."

"We'll have to make her Head of Virology. This is going to ruffle some feathers, but there's no other choice. I'll going to call her right now. Put me on speaker, so we can both hear her."

"Allo, bon jour."

"Hi, Carolina, this is Ambrosio Etoile. Here, next to me, is Cándido Albino, the Head of the Institute."

"Well, what a surprise, it's been so long! How have you been, Ambrosio?"

"I'm sorry, Carolina, but we have no time to catch up. We're in a very difficult situation, this is serious, and we need your help. I'll go straight to the point. Over the last weekend, seventy-five cases of an acute respiratory disease have appeared in Magrit, and five patients have died to date. We suspect it could be a respiratory virus, unknown or extremely rare, because all the laboratory results have come up negative. There's no one back in your old lab who can take over, and we're begging you to please come back and be at the forefront of this battle. We have a level thirty position waiting for you, with a good special allowance. You would be the Head of Virology. We know this doesn't match what you have there, but we're appealing to your patriotism. In this situation... you can't turn your back on Damania, Carolina."

"Damn it, Ambrosio! You never change, always passing the hot potato to others, and with such elegance! Using my country to black-

mail me is one of the lowest blows I've ever seen. I guess my country has been very good to me! You know I used to love living in Damania, and then I had to leave because nobody would offer me a job. People in the Observatory came looking for me and they couldn't understand how I didn't have two cents to rub together. No matter how hard I try to explain it to them, they still don't get it. *Damania is different!* they say. Before I accept, there's one problem you'll have to solve. Alberto, my partner, has finally made it in the Genova Symphony Orchestra, and he is over the moon with excitement. If you can't find a similar position for him in Magrit, I won't go. It's been very hard for me to adjust to this place, to convince Alberto to move here with me and, most of all, it's been very hard for him to find a job, so don't expect me to throw it all away for nothing."

"Carolina, this is Cándido. I can't promise you anything, but it just so happens that the current conductor of the Magrit Symphony Orchestra is a good friend of mine. We met when I treated his daughter for viral meningitis, and he's been very grateful. I'll call him as soon as we finish this conversation and explain the whole matter to him but given these special circumstances, I'm almost sure he'll be able to help."

"Okay, then, my love for country has softened my heart. I'll be on the first plane and meet you in your laboratories, but before we hang up, I need you to start working: Ambrosio, talk to Genoveva and tell her to contact all the hospitals where there are cases, so they can start sending samples. Once they get them, tell them to inactivate them at the Level 3 Biological Safety Lab and run the metagenomics⁴, see if we can find the origin of all this. While you're at it, call the massive sequencing team and tell them to get ready to spend nights at the lab for a while — you do have the latest genome sequencers, don't you? Because if Genoveva's crew can't do this, we're done for. If they are fortunate enough to spot the cause, tell them to design a PCR to detect it without delay. Give me your cell phone number, in case I need to contact you, and write down my email address: caile@gho.int. I'm on WhatsApp too, although I guess you're still using SMS, right?"

"Yes, you are, Carolina, I'm hopelessly conventional."

. . .

AT FOUR P.M. THE FIRST CLINICAL SAMPLES FROM MAGRIT'S HOSPITALS arrive at the Reference Laboratories, and the staff starts preparing and distributing them. One hour later, the team begins processing them in the Level 3 Biological Safety Laboratory. It will be a long night ahead.

AT FIVE P.M. AMBROSIO RECEIVES A CALL FROM THE HEALTH MINISTER, the poet Amadeo Sanctimonious Tristón...

“Dr. Etoile, we haven't actually met, but I've received your references and they're excellent! Over the past few years your management has been more than efficient, I'm told it has been close to perfection — a quality that I hope will be repeated in this unexpected adventure that we have to live through right now. As you very well know, my medical training is limited, what I do is put words into phrases that should generate emotions, an activity far removed from the miseries that haunt the human body throughout its existential course. I trust Science unconditionally and, therefore, the main reason why I'm calling is to express my unlimited support for the task you have just undertaken, and to remind you that all of Damania has its eyes fixed on us, without blinking. The number of people affected keeps growing incessantly, and the Presidency is beginning to show signs of nervousness. Actually, I would say that a phase of 'convulsive agitation' has already begun, and they're searching for those responsible, so they can be publicly executed in order to reassure the masses. Needless to say, if I was to be sacrificed, I wouldn't go down alone; indeed, I'm convinced that, if the time came for my immolation, I myself would verify the calm that one enjoys while executing the fraudsters, one by one. It is so unfortunate that all this has started in Damania. If it were up to me, Califia would have been the chosen destination for the outbreak — their science is so advanced that they would already be treating patients with the exact medicine that would solve their precise problems within hours of arising, but I do not possess those Marvel hero superpowers. So, I remind you that it's been over 48 hours since the first cases were detected, which is more

than enough time for your Reference Laboratories to have some kind of technology in place to discover that little secret that the hundreds of patients carry inside of their bodies, and which explains why there are already more deaths than a government can accept.”

“If you allow me, Minister, I will explain how we're managing this situation, and what the current...”

“My dear Ambrosio, I am truly sorry I do not have the time necessary to hear the intimate secrets of those damned bugs that are plaguing us right now. Maybe another time, when you have this matter under control, we will chat amicably and you will share with me all that wisdom that you, and the rest of the servants of this country, have accumulated with your heroic effort. At this precise moment I conclude this friendly conversation by informing you that the countdown has begun and that the whole Government expects a satisfactory response tomorrow. Good day, Ambrosio, have a good afternoon.”

“Good day, Minister, thank you very much.”

I DON'T LIKE THE WAY THIS IS GOING, NOT ONE BIT. WHAT A NICE message that I just got, yeah right. I just hope Carolina gets here any minute. If I have to rely on Genoveva, I'm dead. I'm going to call her:

“Ambrosio, there are no flights today, so you'll have to get by without me. I'll arrive tomorrow around twelve, if Daberia lets me. I just hope Genoveva will be able to run the metagenomic analysis in the meantime and have some results by tomorrow.”

“That's really bad news, Carolina, we need you right now, I don't trust Genoveva.”

“There's nothing I can do, Ambrosio, people won't stop travelling to wonderful Magrit. I'll see you tomorrow, then.”

Just my luck, — Ambrosio thinks—, let's see how I get out of this one. A new email. This is not the right time; I need to think. Let's see what this is. What? The subject says: ‘Unknown respiratory disease’ and it is sent by someone I don't know, a Sac Cerev. And how can this guy know what we're up to? Let's see what this is about:

From: Sac Cerev

Re: Unknown respiratory disease

To: Doctor Etoile

Dear Dr. Etoile, I hope that the latest events are not excessively affecting your daily work, although I honestly do not see how it could be any other way. I know that as soon as you saw my name you wondered why I did not end up in the spam folder, but if our relationship prospers, you will surely understand. Let me introduce myself, I am the Head of External Relations in the Artificial Intelligence Specific Solutions (AISS) company, located in the Graphene Valley, in the Plurinational State of Califia.

I am sorry that the minister was not more understanding of the enormous challenge that Damania is facing at the moment. You know poets, they think that one can solve problems by putting one word after another, but you and I know that such a correct order is not enough, there are more variables that may influence the outcome, such as the impossibility for Dr. Aile to start her search for the cause of this whole mess today. It is not my intention to meddle in official business, but you must admit that letting a professional like Carolina Aile go is inexcusable. Time is short, so I will explain the reason for this electronic letter.

At the extraordinary meeting of the AISS steering committee, which has just concluded, we have agreed to offer you a collaboration, a somewhat particular one that will help you attain the recognition you deserve, but which so far you have not got because of someone's fear that your valuable worth will make your career skyrocket. As a sign of altruism, and that we recognize your excellence, I have attached two files that prove the progress that AISS has made, in record time, on the issue that concerns you right now. The first file contains information about the cause of the unknown disease. The other file describes a quick diagnostic method. Our intervention will turn the inevitable atomic meltdown into a mere steam bath. But apart from our will to collaborate with the institution that you direct, we also take the liberty of suggesting that you take advantage of this situation and leak this information to the company that

you founded anonymously with Aitor Menta, and with which you still collaborate covertly. We do not have the slightest doubt that the information will be used with discretion and intelligence. We only seek your personal benefit, hoping that, at the right time, you will find a way to return the favor. You shouldn't take too long to save these two files since, shortly, this email and its contents will self-destruct leaving no trace. No spyware will be able to associate this message with AISS, a solvent company in artificial intelligence. If you do not respond with haste — in, say, 48 hours — we will understand that you do not want to get involved in this exciting adventure, and we will direct our efforts to other environments more accommodating and eager to receive proposals of this nature. However, and as a final reflection, we believe that you have the wisdom and character necessary to solve this unfortunate incident that has the potential to cause an uncontrollable health and economic situation. Your stature will be recognized worldwide, and it also will make all those who have denied your worth and hindered your progress even more envious. We remain at your entire disposition through this communication channel, which will not suffer from security failures or inconvenient eavesdropping.

Sincerely,

Sac Cerev

Head of External Relations

Artificial Intelligence Specific Solutions (AISS)



STUNNED, AMBROSIO READS THE EMAIL OVER AND OVER AGAIN. HOW IS this possible? This is witchcraft, occult science, or even worse. This AISS knows everything, —he thinks. Suddenly, his distress is interrupted by the appearance of a timer that warns of the upcoming self-destruction of the message and files.

Shit, I'm going to lose them! Ambrosio don't panic and don't be clumsy, it's easy, there's only one minute left! Think, think, where do I

save them? That's it, I create a new folder called AISS, so imaginative! Click and save. Phew! Two more seconds and I would've lost them. I'm going to check if there's a tracer.

AMBROSIO OPENS THE CONTROL AND SECURITY MODULE PROVIDED BY the IT department of the Damania Ministry of Health, but there is no trace of the message. It has never existed! He does a quick internet search and finds AISS easily. Hmm, let's see, AISS is a baby, so to speak. It has only been in the world of artificial intelligence for a short time, and what it does is solve problems on request, or as they state in a grand-sounding style, "we offer tailor-made solutions by means of artificial intelligence". Their activity in the area of health is quite striking. There is no information available about their clients, they argue that they do not advertise their activities because confidentiality prevails over advertising. It's really quite opaque. Working with them will not be easy if they don't participate in public bidding. Their solutions must be very exclusive, although if I find them interesting, I'll figure something out. I'll check the files they just sent me.

Let's see what the so-called "Report No. 1" contains. It's amazing! So interesting! And I'm so lucky! This may be my salvation. They have identified the cause for the respiratory disease by sequencing fifty viruses from fifty different patients, and they have performed a phylogenetic analysis. It's a Spicavirus that has never been isolated from humans nor animals! This is going to be a huge mess. The closest viral relative is another Spicavirus that affects mustelids but, phylogenetically, they are distant. What a mumbo-jumbo how did it manage to jump from an animal to a human in the middle of Magrit? We have no ferrets here. I wonder if that fashion designer victim may have caught it on a mink farm, on a visit to meet those supplying the skins for her new coat. We'll have to investigate the farms and find out whether the minks, staff or customers have become ill, and with what. Interesting, reading just a couple of paragraphs and I already have some ideas of how this whole thing originated. But you have to stay alert, Ambrosio, this is really surprising. You shouldn't take this at face value until we have our own analysis, so this information will

remain classified and under my custody. I'll have to wait for Carolina to arrive and make sure that what Genoveva's people are doing is fine, but in the meantime, I have to consider if I can take advantage of this Spicavirus information. The Minister's message was really straightforward — either we know by tomorrow or you're out on the street. Should I jump into the rough sea hoping that the AISS float will save my skin? With trepidation I wonder how did they get the clinical samples to do the analysis? Who gave them to them? Was it one, or more hospitals? How did they do it so quickly and efficiently? It's not easy, but they must have paid very well. It seems like a real mafia job. Did they access our biobanks without any sort of authorization? Wow! Now that I think about it, they may be part of the samples those we've received here! Well, I wouldn't be surprised. Everything is so unregulated, anything can happen, and if there's money involved, then it's much more probable. I'd rather not think about it. Just what I needed, to begin an investigation in the middle of this mess! No way. If they want to sell to AISS it's fine by me, it'll benefit me later. I need to find a way for the National Intelligence Centre to mercilessly spy on AISS.

What about “Report No. 2”? Wow, they are productive! They've already developed and validated a PCR. This is unbelievable. They've found the only conserved and essential parts of the spicaviruses including this new virus, so the PCR will still work even if it mutates, which it is bound to do. Their technique has already been validated with five hundred saliva samples from patients with colds and this new respiratory infection. They found that even saliva at room temperature works in their test, directly without special extra preparation⁵. As soon as it arrives, the PCR is run, and the result is available in about sixty minutes. This technique has amazing sensitivity and specificity! Ninety eight per cent⁶! These people really know their business, unlike Aitor, he's not been keeping up with our funding needs. I have to talk to him. The icing on the cake is that the PCR works on all our different PCR machines, so tomorrow it could be available throughout all of Damania's healthcare network.

Look at these reports. Consider me a new disciple of AISS. So, there's nothing to ask for from the National Intelligence Centre. I'm

keeping this just to myself. I can't believe it! These AISS people really know how to select their staff. They know that, if it wasn't for all the time that I spend in meetings, I would've reached the same conclusions. Okay, I'll going to give it a shot, it's a piece of cake. A little bit of this, a little bit of that and bam! I got this. I'm so good! Even better than what AISS has done.

Sac Cerev has given me a break. Let's see if Genoveva has managed to do something similar, so I can score a few points with Institute management and the Ministry.

Tuesday, April 6, 2021. Day +5

At eight a.m., Ambrosio Etoile reads Genoveva's report summarizing the metagenomic analysis of clinical samples from patients with the unknown respiratory disease. As he reads, he confirms that he needs the expert who has not yet made an appearance. "I hope Carolina shows up soon, so this heavy burden is lifted!" He thinks.

"Angelineeessss!"

"Yes, Dr. Etoile?"

"Call Dr. Panocho and tell her to be here in less than five minutes. Tell her to hurry, I have a meeting at nine."

"Right away, Dr. Etoile."

"Come in, Genoveva, have a seat. This report is a disgrace, and it keeps happening, day after day. Back in my days the head would never call me in to ask me anything. My reports were known for their brevity and the clarity of their content. This is unintelligible. Have a seat and explain to me the meaning of what you've written."

"The results are not of good quality, Ambrosio. It seems like there is a virus in the samples, but we have no idea what virus it is. I don't want to run any risks. We've been working all night, but I think we have to repeat the analysis."

"What has become of us, what are you all doing in that laboratory? By now, anyone could do this. I have a meeting at nine with the crisis cabinet and I won't be able to give them any facts. It's always the same, it's like a competition against the Public Health Office to see who's the dumbest in the Institute. You'll pay for this, Genoveva,

I don't know where you'll end up, but it won't be on a tropical beach.”

“So, this is my fault? Just what I needed. You let the smart people go and we're left with the dregs nobody wants. With these ridiculous salaries, no one wants to stay here, and when someone does, you hire them as a postdoctoral fellow with Mickey Mouse contracts until they hit their forties, if they're lucky. And I just can't cope, I deal with thousands of cases of the flu every year with one single technician. I really don't know what you expect from us. You can't fire me because I'm a civil servant, and I don't care if you send me packing. I'm sick of us always being the ones to blame when no one invests a dodone in our needs. You only care about us when there are epidemics.”

“Calm down, Genoveva, and don't make the situation worse. I'll figure something out with the crisis cabinet. Our priority now is for Carolina to arrive and take control of the situation. Give her all the resources we have; this matter is vital. I'll make sure you have staff available twenty-four hours a day. I have to go.”

ON HIS WAY TO THE CRISIS CABINET MEETING, AMBROSIO HAS DECIDED to roll the dice. He is going to trust the AISS reports. He will say that it is a virus without going into details. There is no way he will be publicly executed if he can help it, he always thought he deserved a promotion, only with all the parts of his anatomy intact..

The ‘Crisis Cabinet of the Institute for Disease Control’ meeting goes smoothly. Ambrosio doesn't share the information source, nor does he hand in any sort of document. He simply asserts that some fragments of RNA have been identified in fifteen out of the twenty patients analyzed, which correspond to a virus that has never been connected with the human race before, and he adds: “I have given orders for phylogenetic tests⁷ to be run, so that the virus detected can be properly identified. Also, the laboratory specialized in the development of diagnostic techniques for emerging microorganisms is designing a specific PCR to detect it reliably and quickly. In forty-eight hours, we will have a prototype”. However, he warns: “The

results are preliminary and until they are confirmed it would not be convenient for the media to echo these findings”.

The head of the crisis cabinet summons the attendees to a new meeting at two p.m. the following day, warning them that he will not tolerate leaks to the press, but the circus begins its show despite his fervent wishes...

AT ELEVEN P.M., THE DIGITAL VERSIONS OF THE MAIN DAMANIAN newspapers publish the news that Ambrosio Etoile, the head of the Reference Laboratories, has confirmed that an unknown virus is causing the outbreak of the serious respiratory disease that is affecting so many patients. Immediately afterwards, the Reference Laboratories management phone line is inundated with calls from the media; everyone wants to interview Ambrosio Etoile at all costs.

HALF AN HOUR LATER, THE CENTRE FOR DISEASE CONTROL OF THE plurinational State of Dodona sends a statement of complaint to the Damania Ministry of Health, for not having been informed of the potentially epidemic scenario that is occurring in its confederation.

AT TWELVE P.M., AFTER CALLING CÁNDIDO ALBINO TO ACCOUNT FOR not having informed him promptly that the cause of the disease had been found, the Damanian Minister of Health, Amadeo Sanctimonio Tristón, summons the Press to explain the situation, and he sends an apology poem to the Dodona Plurinational State Centre for Disease Control.

AT TWO P.M. CAROLINA AILE MAKES HER TRIUMPHANT ENTRANCE INTO Ambrosio Etoile's office, whom she finds terrified by the leak to the media.

“Ambrosio, you don't look so good. Has the situation worsened?”

“I never thought I'd be so happy to have you on board again,

Carolina. I used to find you rigorously exacting, but now I hope that you use all that energy against the virus.”

“The virus? So, have you already confirmed that this is caused by a virus?”

“So, it seems, Carolina. Here's the report that Genoveva wrote on the analysis of the clinical samples.”

“Ambrosio, it may be a virus, but the results are rather mediocre. We have to do it all over again.”

“What? This situation won't allow a single mistake. It's been leaked to the media that I said it's a virus, so it has to be a virus.”

“And it may be, but Genoveva's work is rather irrelevant. I can't approve her findings. I'll say it again, Ambrosio, in case you haven't understood, we have to do it all over again.”

“But I did what you said, Carolina. I've designed a PCR based on those results with the intention to validate it and diagnose patients.”

“I'm afraid it won't work, Ambrosio. The quality of the sequences is very bad. I insist, and it's the third time already: ‘we have to do it all over again, and this time using my protocols’. Send me what you've done, and I'll keep you updated. Let Genoveva know that I'm on my way there and that I'll need all the help in the world so that we can have results later today. Do we have enough clinical samples?”

“Hundreds, Carolina. They keep coming in. There are many, many patients. The situation is drastic. If we don't come up with something soon, we're going to be in deep, deep trouble. The minister is in a very aggressive mood and won't stop pressing us. He wants news to reassure the President and the media.”

“Well, you know that rushing is of very little use in these situations, Ambrosio. We have to be one hundred percent sure that what we say is true, and this is Damania, not Califia. So, try to keep the attacking hordes at bay and do not let them overwhelm us. Surely someone else has said it before, or perhaps it has even crossed your mind, but I'll say it anyway. Maybe when you're next with ‘the mandarins’ you dare bang on the table and tell them that it's better to close the Reference Laboratories than having to find them again in Doodle Maps only when there are suspicions of an epidemic, and they feel in danger. It would be more profitable to set up a public

company to hire their friends or subcontract the services to mercenaries who will give back part of the investment later. After eight years of being away, everything is just as deteriorated as it used to be. All they think of is making roads, beating Cinania in constructing high-speed trains, or building 'ghost airports' — but research? No thanks, let others do that, this is Damania, and we have the best Soccer League in the world, that's the most advanced R + D + I we can offer. Well, I can't waste any more time. You have no idea how hard it was for me to convince my boss to let me join you. I made my case using the argument that it would be better for them to get their information filtered through me and not someone else without any experience. And, by the way, just to warn you, if 'the mandarins' get too annoying I'll just turn and go the way I came and not look back. Right now, I'm on an official mission with the Observatory, so I still haven't officially accepted the wonderful position I've been offered. I'll see how this whole matter unfolds. And, just to be clear, I'm doing this for the patients, not for any of you."

"I knew your sweetness couldn't last long, Carolina. Okay then, get to work and light our way through this darkness. The PCR design is already in your mailbox. Get back to me as soon as possible."

A FEW MINUTES LATER...

"Genoveva, it's been so long! How are you doing?"

"Hello, Carolina! I could be better, actually. Ambrosio won't get off my back. I hope your wisdom will help rein him in."

"Let's have a seat, I'll tell you what we're going to do. I've read the report you wrote, but we have to do it all over again. The results are not good quality, and we can't accept even the slightest error. Ambrosio told me there are plenty of samples, is that right?"

"Yes, Carolina, there are hundreds of samples ready to analyze. I've already told him, but he won't listen to me. Thank goodness he listens to you. He's being a pain, acting like he's the minister."

ONE HOUR LATER, GENOVEVA IS BUSY APPLYING THE PROTOCOLS WHILE

Carolina reads absorbedly what Ambrosio has sent her. It's just impossible to design this PCR with the data from Genoveva's report. The result is brilliant, but it's made from the complete sequence of the virus and not just out of one, but many of them. There's some 'Etoile trick' here. I'll reread from the beginning, see what I'm missing... Damn, here's a huge mistake. This makes no sense, it's a professional design with a beginner's mistake. Someone has slipped it in to catch Ambrosio red-handed, there's no other explanation. The scientist who drew up this report would never have made such a foolish mistake. This has to be here on purpose! Whoever wrote this is challenging Ambrosio. But what should I do? Should I tell him he messed up, and embarrass him? Or should I just shut up? It would not be a great start, being a newcomer! I haven't forgotten when he's on the ropes he counterattacks with unstoppable vehemence. He doesn't give up, and he imposes his criteria no matter what, even if his arguments are most futile, so trying to explain to him that there's a huge error here would be of no use. The only thing that matters right now is the patients, so I'll correct it and keep the original, in case I have to use it. We've just started, and something smells rotten, but this is interesting. They came looking for me, that means they respect me, so I can impose my criteria. I think I'll take my chances and I'll test the PCR this very afternoon, to see if it works. I don't know who's supplying these data — not Ambrosio, that's for sure — but they can't be just an invention. This is serious, there's a lot of money at stake. Whoever takes control of the diagnosis of the disease can break through the glass ceiling, so surely there are ulterior motives, and I'm not planning on missing out. I want to see what happens next. I'll go find Genoveva and test Ambrosio's alleged creation.

“Ah, here you are, Genoveva, I've been looking for you in the labs. This hasn't changed one bit, although it's been forever. It's like a trip back to the past. One can tell that only dust has made it in here during the last few years. I hope we can do something with what you have, but this work certainly won't be a bed of roses.”

“The situation is what it is, Carolina, the crisis of 3508 left us with little more than nothing, and some people took off, like you did. Only the ones who can't find a job anywhere else have stuck around.”

“Necessity is the mother of invention, so let's do our best, Geneveva. I was looking for you so that we could set up the PCR that Ambrosio has designed using your results. We have nothing to lose and, if it works, we'll take the credit, and incidentally we'll get Ambrosio to relax — he's so anxious about ‘the mandarins’. Since you said there are plenty of clinical samples, let's get down to it.”

FOUR HOURS LATER, CAROLINA AND GENOVEVA ARE STARING AT THE computer screen in utter disbelief. All the samples from the recent patients with respiratory infection are positive, and the controls are all negative. The new PCR technique works like a charm.

“Geneveva, not a word of this to anyone. Let's repeat it with a new batch of samples and, if the result is identical, we'll report it tomorrow. But today, mum's the word.”

“I missed you so much, Carolina. Please, give me a hug. I'm so glad you're back.”

“Here's your hug, Geneveva, but remember, I'm taken...”

MEANWHILE, SOMEWHERE ELSE, SAC HE HAS ALREADY ACCESSED THE entire Reference Laboratories computer and security system, and he thinks: “This Carolina is something else. She has spotted the error, but she just doesn't care, she has corrected it and set up the PCR without a problem. Hmm! we need to watch her very closely, she's too good. Just as I thought, Ambrosio acts like he knows everything, but he needs to exploit others to achieve his ends. He always gets his way, no matter what it takes. I'll keep my eyes open, but, for now, everything is going as planned...”

Wednesday, April 7, 3520. Day +6

“Did you sleep well, Carolina? I guess all this pressure has kept you awake.”

“Actually, you're wrong, Ambrosio, I slept like a baby. I've changed a lot. The pressure I'm under at the Observatory makes me strong.

But you wouldn't know much about pressure yourself, other than what the barometer in your office indicates. Don't worry, you'll feel it from now on, and you're going to love it. The surprised face it makes you pull eliminates expression lines and is much cheaper than hyaluronic acid. I'll summarize yesterday afternoon for you. You'll see that your request that I return to the lab has been a real success. We already know what it is — it's a Spicavirus, but an infection in humans has never been described before. It does have relatives, rather distant though, that affect mustelids and also certain rodents, such as hamsters. I'm sure it affects other species too, but there is no evidence of that.”

“Then we'll have to investigate mink farms, to see if that's where all the cases come from.”

“I don't think so, Ambrosio, we would already know. Animals there are crowded together, an epidemic on a farm wouldn't have gone unnoticed. Although we do need to manage this crisis, and you know whose responsibility that is. But the best news of all is that your creation, the PCR, works like an atomic clock.”

“You don't say! Did you actually trust me and set it up, Carolina?”

“I have, without wishing to set a precedent. But there's a catch, Ambrosio, and you know it. It's impossible to design such an efficient PCR with the data that Genoveva gave you. I know you're not going to tell me, and I'd rather not know, but if you have more data from undetermined sources that could help solve the mystery, you should share them. I know you have complete sequences of the virus, otherwise you couldn't have designed the PCR, so when the phylogeny database is ready, please share your information so that we know where it comes from. I don't really want more evidence on this subject, but I just need to tell you that, even though I don't know what is going on, there's something fishy in what you're doing, although I guess that's not new in your life. Just make sure your intrigues don't lead me to make decisions that may put us all at risk.”

“You're so distrustful, Carolina, I have nothing to hide, the problem is you're jealous because they chose me to stay, and you had to go.”

“If you say so... Anyway, you can tell ‘the mandarins’ the good

news. I'll get back to my tasks, I have plenty to do. We need to figure out how to lessen the number of samples that are coming in, we can't deal with all of them. We need to transfer our techniques to hospitals, right now, and look for a company that will market your PCR as soon as possible. Also, we need faster diagnostic techniques, so let's see if there's someone who's capable of designing them. Antigen detection is a priority, but antibody detection should not be neglected. We need to know the patients' recovery dynamics, as well as the immune response they produce against the Spicavirus, which means you have to rouse all the immunologists at the Centre out of their lethargy and set them to work, day and night, because this doesn't look good. We have no time, Ambrosio, the epidemic has started in Magrit and, judging by the speed it's going, it'll become a pandemic, which means that, shortly, we'll have all the eyes of the planet on us. Given the interest that 'the mandarins' have placed in the prevention and control of this type of situation, our chances to contain the disaster that is upon us would basically be a miracle that really would make me reconcile with the existence of a merciful God committed to our species. Right now, what's most urgent is to sequence the viruses to detect the variants that are circulating. It is bound to mutate quickly, and that's going to give us endless problems to control it, but we can't wait any longer to transfer the PCR. We can't diagnose patients as if we were a hospital because we're not! By the way, who's running the Public Health Office? I need to talk to the person in charge, right away. We need to coordinate our approach."

"It's Margarita Bombón, don't you know her?"

"I like her, and she's competent. Tell her I'm going to call her. Do your part, Ambrosio. Act fast, and effectively."

"Angelineees!"

"Yes, Dr. Etoile? What's with all the yelling, you startled me."

"Call the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food at once, find out whether they've had epidemics in the mink farms and, if they have, locate the person in charge and put me through with them."

"Right away, Dr. Etoile."

"Let me know when you find something."

. . .

SOME TIME LATER.

“They say no, Dr. Etoile, everything is fine and uneventful in their sector. They said we shouldn't overthink it, let alone try to involve them — they are sure the epidemic has nothing to do with them. People in the Directorate General for Animal Health got really tense.”

“Thank you, Angelines. That direction is closed, then. Call Dr. Bombón's assistant saying that Dr. Aile is going to phone her — she just rejoined us after being an expat, maybe Doctor Bombón doesn't remember her.”

YOU'RE EXULTANT WITH JOY, YOU'RE THE BEST, AMBROSIO, WHAT A comeback! Your trained eye is still unbeatable, your mastery in handling unknown threats will make jaws drop. I'll start with the publicity. I'll call Cándido so he tells the Government the good news, and they see that we are way ahead. Then I'll address my personal matters, which have been neglected.

TWO HOURS LATER, THE DAMANIAN PUBLIC HEALTH OFFICE ISSUES A statement.

On Saturday, April 3, several cases of an unknown respiratory infection were reported to this unit. The Damanian health system has been able to identify its cause, a virus that belongs to the Spicavirus family never before been related to the human infection. The complete genome of the virus has been sequenced in the Reference Laboratories for Infectious Diseases, and the results will be sent to the Global Health Observatory for distribution to the institutions they deem appropriate. The number of cases continues to increase relentlessly, and today there are fifty-five thousand five hundred and fifty-four people affected. The diagnostic test to detect this virus is in its final phase of validation and will be available tomorrow, so the case definition is provisional by analyzing the symptoms, signs, and imaging tests from patients. Once the confir-

matory diagnosis is available the situation will be more accurately understood. Furthermore, an International Public Health alert has been sent out. Currently, no cases have been detected outside of Damania, but there is no doubt that the virus will spread.



MEANWHILE, AMBROSIO IS KEEPING HIS PROMISE TO ADDRESS HIS personal matters. “First of all, I’ll send AISS a message to become their new disciple.”

From: Doctor Etoile

Re: Unknown respiratory disease

To: Sac Cerev

Dear Mr. Cerev, thank you for the message you sent. Your proposal is more than interesting. I have started the chain of actions required to carry it out. You will receive a more elaborate response in the next forty-eight hours. Keep in touch.

Kind greetings,

Ambrosio Etoile

Head

Reference Laboratories for Infectious Diseases



AND SECOND, LOCATE AITOR MENTA. WHERE’S HIS PHONE NUMBER? This kid’s evolution has been so disappointing. He seemed so brilliant when I directed his magnificent thesis, which earned him the highest grade, ‘cum laude’. Then we set up Molecular Solutions and everything seemed to be working in our favor. But as soon as they realized I was the one who was meant to steer the ship, he lost the helm and his course, and my sleepless nights’ compensation and my Lignum Bank account both started gathering cobwebs. This unexpected opportunity may give it a golden splendor.

Here's his cell phone number: Aitor Menta, head of Molecular Solutions. I knew I'd kept it in a safe place. I'll send him an SMS, that WhatsApp thing is for snobs.

“Hello, Aitor, we need to meet. I'll see you at two-thirty, at The Happy Duchess. It's an extremely important matter, and it must be dealt with face to face. Bring your laptop. I need to share a protected file with you. This is the chance we've been waiting for! Hugs, Ambrosio.”



AND IMMEDIATELY AITOR'S CELL PHONE MAKES THAT SOUND THAT IS sometimes loved and sometimes hated. Beep!

Ugh, the horror! It's a message from Ambrosio. He wants to meet me at the Happy Duchess, and I had promised Marta I would be home for lunch — that's another fight coming up! She'll be alone with the three kids. I hope he's not just bored and intends to give me one of his usual lectures. Everything is always very important, then it turns out to be nothing, and so Molecular Solutions goes.

BEEP! AND NOW THAT I WAS ON MY WAY OUT, AN EMAIL.

*From: Sac Cerev
Re: Unknown respiratory disease
To: Aitor Menta*

Dear Mr. Menta, let me introduce myself: I am the Head of External Relations of the Artificial Intelligence Specific Solutions (AISS) company, located in Graphene Valley, Plurinational State of Califia. I understand you have a meeting with Dr. Etoile at two-thirty in the afternoon at the Happy Duchess, and I would like to give you a background on the proposal he is going to make you. I anticipate that it will be such an advantageous deal for your company that it will allow you to get out of the hole where you are now. It is a method to diagnose the unknown respiratory

infection that has appeared this last weekend. It is already known that it is a virus, and its complete sequence has been sent to the Global Health Observatory, so the competition you will face will be of such dimensions that either you accept our disinterested help, or you will never achieve the objective that Dr. Etoile will propose. We know the company's situation. We know you won't be able to develop a commercial kit in one year's time, and you know that, in order to stand a chance, it should be available in a month, at the most. I have attached three files. The first one is a description of the material that is necessary to produce the diagnostic kits, or rather the information necessary to justify your activity, since the kits will be manufactured at our facilities. In principle, you would take care of the distribution and would receive thirty percent of the final profits. In the second file you will find all the data requested by the Dodona and Califia Drug Administrations. The study is exhaustive and, whenever Molecular Solutions presents it, it will be approved without a problem. The third file contains a confidential copy of the contract that you should sign tomorrow at Tundra Street 101, 10th floor, at the Notary Public of Mr. Ildefonso Rendueles. In this file, our commitment is detailed. You will not see anyone, and no one will see you, except for the robot that acts as a receptionist. It will indicate the room where you will sign after entering the number 55zH37Xp49 on the keyboard. In case the situation does not follow the expected channels, that contract will remain in our power. If you do not appear, all documents will disappear without a trace, and you will not hear from us again. As for the file that Dr. Etoile will give you at The Happy Duchess, you may just get rid of it; although it seems like the same method, it has an error that you would surely identify, but it is not worth wasting your time. Do not try to contact us, the data you can find on the internet are real, but you would never be able to locate the offices where these decisions are made. We will contact you again when it's necessary. I can assure you that the intelligence in AISS is real, even if it is 'artificial'. Finally, you neither know us nor have you ever heard of our existence. Unfortunately, any indiscretion on your part would imme-

diately paralyze our relationship which, if maintained, will more than reward your secrecy.

Sincerely,

Sac Cerev

Head of External Relations

Artificial Intelligence Specific Solutions (AISS)



THIS MESSAGE IS SO INTRIGUING, WHO WOULD HAVE GIVEN MY information to this Sac Cerev and told him of the catastrophic situation the company is facing? It must have been Ambrosio. He is such a schemer, he's just capable of anything, but since the message says he has been given false information, he can't be the brains behind this deal. I'll see if what he's about to tell me sheds some light on the situation and helps me make up my mind, although, given the dire state of Molecular Solutions, I don't have much doubt.

What time is it? It's so late! I have to run to the Happy Duchess...

AITOR HAS DECIDED TO SIT AT A QUIET TABLE IN A CORNER. HE HAS ordered sparkling water with ice and lemon. He wants to be done with this as soon as possible. He needs to make up his mind whether he'll go to the Notary tomorrow and sign. At twenty to three, Dr. Etoile makes his entrance wearing one of his famous outfits: brown checked jacket, green handkerchief in pocket, purple V-neck sweater, brown and yellow striped shirt, orange corduroy trousers, black shoes and a little black hat with a feather, to compensate for the loss of heat caused by the absence of hair. As he approaches, Aitor suppresses a cry of horror, for he hadn't seen the yellow tie with bright green flowers among which some butterflies flutter—an element of color as unexpected as it is deeply disheartening.

“How are you, Aitor? What are you drinking? Sparkling water? You're so boring. You already were, as an intern, and with age you've gotten worse. Although I still haven't eaten anything, I think I'll going

to have a glass of red wine, but a good one, not the kind you usually drink. I'm elated, and I'm going to tell you why. You already know about my intellectual capacity, I don't have to explain it to you, I have directed your thesis and without me you wouldn't have gotten anywhere. It's a pity I still have to act as your supervisor, and that despite my advice you still won't learn, so I have to guide your way. But I'm beating around the bush — that's what I do every time I see you with that aura of failure you tote along everywhere — let's get down to business. I've developed a technique to diagnose that damn virus that has just broken out, and it's already working, but since I care about your future, I'm going to share it with you. You already know what you have to do, so do it quickly, otherwise someone else will take my idea and we'll be back to square one. Someone has to make Molecular Solutions profitable and that's going to be me — if it would just be you the business wouldn't go anywhere. You haven't forgotten your laptop, have you? Here, take this *pen drive*, download the file “Etoile's Viral Technique” and go back to Molecular Solutions as fast as you can. Concentrate on working on this, and nothing else. Keep me updated through the usual channels, and you can start calculating how much you're going to wire into my forlorn Lignum account, I have my needs. As you know, we haven't seen each other, and this meeting didn't take place. I'm out. Oh! And on your way out, pay the bill, you've been so tight lately.”

“Goodbye, Ambrosio.”

IT'S FOUR P.M. AND AMBROSIO WALKS EXULTANTLY TOWARDS CÁNDIDO Albino's office, who has summoned him to hear the details of this latest success directly from the horse's mouth. Overflowing with joy, he enters Cándido's domains...

“Ambrosio, I expected no less from you. You're a star, like your name. I know, it's an easy joke, but it is what it is. Honestly, I didn't think you were smart enough to hunt down the intruder and also have a diagnostic method ready in such a short time. I think you can start celebrating by throwing away that tie you're wearing, it's creepy. You know I'm talking here as a friend, but as long as you continue to

dress like this, you will never become a minister, which is what you aspire to. What else do you want to tell me?"

"Not much, except I don't know what's wrong with this tie, Cándido. I bought it at Gómez Apparel, and it is most elegant, natural silk and seven layers. But you wouldn't know, you only wear grey or navy-blue ties..."

"Without a doubt, Ambrosio, those are seven diabolical layers of natural silk."

"Be that as it may, the PCR is already working, but the number of patients is staggering, we can't cope with this workload. We've only started, and the results are already lagging behind. In addition to the health problem, the minister will bug us again and with his poetic mastery will call us incompetent, inept, incapable, useless, slow, mediocre and clumsy, and will say that if this had happened in Califia it would already be solved, and that he's going to get fired because of us. Typical of this sort of situation, in the end they take the credit, and we take the blows. It has already been leaked that the results will be available in an hour, and with diagnostic platforms nowadays thousands of samples are processed at the same time, but you know, they never pay attention to us. There are no infectious diseases anymore! You guys belong to the past! All we care about today is cancer, neurodegenerative and chronic diseases! And yes, of course those are important matters, very important indeed, but so is what we're dealing with, they're not mutually exclusive. They were already warned that sooner or later, and it happened to be sooner, another epidemic would appear and turn the world upside down. In six days, we've seen more than fifty thousand infected patients, and they've started to have some cases in other countries too. This is going to be a huge mess. And we don't have the equipment, not to mention the staff, to handle the flood of samples that are coming in each day. We are overwhelmed. Don't tell me it's time for us to request a special budget to buy equipment and hire staff, you know how quick the administration is to react. By the time the first contracts are made, the epidemic will have wiped out humanity. Furthermore, a modern country can't centralize the samples in the Reference Laboratories, the diagnosis has to be at the patient's bedside. We've been through

this thousands of times. I've been thinking about it, and I'm going to share my thoughts with you, but this conversation can't leave this room, or it'll cost me my job. You know my rotten luck, and it's not because of my tie — there are many who want my head. We need to find a diagnostics company in Damania which will market the diagnostic technique. That way, we'll kill two birds with one stone. We'll get rid of those thousands of samples coming in, so we don't have to work non-stop, and we generate wealth in the country. Hopefully, and if we do it quickly enough, we can even export diagnostic kits. This looks like it will end up as a pandemic, you've seen it — too many cases in too little time. Think about it. If we don't do this, others will, and I can assure you, the method I've designed works like a charm. As you know, I'm willing to sacrifice myself for the good of the institution and the country, so I'll give it away. I suggest you talk to Molecular Solutions, I'm sure they'll say yes. They are efficient, they have experience, and they won't let us down. I leave it in your hands. If you need help, let me know. You know I'm here for you. I'm headed back to the lab, if I don't supervise the drones nothing comes out right. Think about it and let me know what you decide, but don't waste time that we really don't have if we want to win this battle and then the war.”

“I'll think about it, Ambrosio.”

A WHILE LATER...

From: Cándido Albino

Subject: Meeting with Molecular Solutions, Ltd.

To: Ambrosio Etoile

Dear Ambrosio, I'd like to see you tomorrow at ten a.m. in a meeting with Aitor Menta, head of Molecular Solutions, Ltd. to discuss an issue of maximum interest.

With warm affection,

Cándido Albino
Head
Institute for Disease Control



I KNEW IT, I HAVE NO RIVAL WHEN IT COMES TO SWEET-TALKING PEOPLE, but I can't forgive Cándido about the tie. Anger overcame me and I tossed it into a smelly trash can. It cost me thirty dodones, a bundle. I was about to go back for it, I used to find it really nice and elegant, but I had already walked quite a distance. Now I have to plan tomorrow's meeting with Aitor. I'll send him an SMS, which I know he doesn't like, and I'll tell him to meet me at the Happy Duchess. No, better at Cardinal Ricolieu, the evening calls for a vodka with tonic, and they serve potato chips and peanuts for appetizers.

“Hello, Aitor, today is about meetings. I'm picturing your face and I don't like the way it looks. Tell Marta to be a darling and watch her TV shows or read her ‘Goodbye’ magazine once she's done doing homework with the triplets. Artificial insemination was a great idea indeed! It's not even your sperm and you have triplets. When I think about it, I just crack up. Ok, I'm getting distracted, as I always do when I talk to you, I'll get to the point. I know Cándido Albino has contacted you about meeting tomorrow. I don't want you to mess it up, as you always do, so, I'll see you at half past ten at the Ricolieu, and bring your good credit card with you, I'm always the one to pay.”



NOT AMBROSIO AGAIN! THIS IS THE SECOND TIME HE SENT ME A TEXT. I don't know if I can bear this. Luckily, I'm in a better mood now. Sac is a next-generation antidepressant.

FORTUNATELY, THEY HAVE VALET PARKING AT THE RICOLIEU, MAGRIT IS

impossible these days. They even monitor the bus lane. I get it, they won't let people with cheap Cinanian cars park there, but a top-notch CNX, like mine, should be protected and allowed to park freely, especially if it's owned by an opinion leader, like me. Okay, matter solved, although this'll cost me a nice tip. I hope they won't scratch it, it's spotless.

“Good evening, Mister Ambrosio. Long-time no see, should I get you your usual?”

“Yes, Antonio, and be generous with the potato chips and peanuts, I haven't eaten all day. Can I also get one of those great sirloins of yours, but don't burn it, I want it “au point”, as they say in Lutecium.”

“Right away, Sir.”

“Hey, Aitor, you're late, you know I don't like waiting. By the way, I didn't mention it earlier today but look at your outfit... come one, why don't you take my example, I'm the embodiment of elegance. You're clueless. But let's get to the matter at hand. Don't screw up tomorrow and say yes to everything they suggest. We'll figure out a way to get the kit on the market as soon as possible. Our priority now is for the main Drug Administrations in Dodona and Califia to authorize their use — after that we will make a killing. Well, you'll make a killing, and will compensate me the usual way. I would love to be involved in your affairs, but I've decided to serve my country and honor it by being a civil servant. I hope the time will come soon for me to display each and every one of my capabilities. Many times, I have been a candidate for responsibilities that you just can't imagine, but I've always been passed over for political reasons, although I have a feeling that my opportunity is just around the corner. Humanity can't just miss someone like me. And don't forget, finding someone who'll make the kits is our main priority now, so you know what to do — as soon as you get home, start thinking and sending emails left, right and center. So, forget about watching that TV show with Marta, the one that seems to be especially made for mindless beings like you. Okay then, off you go now, they must be missing you at home. And take care of this, will you? I left my wallet in the office. And keep me updated, unlike you usually do — I'm sick of chasing you.”

“By the way, Ambrosio, what did you do with the tie you were wearing this morning? It was really interesting. You haven't lost it, have you?”

“No, no, Cándido begged me to give it to him. Maybe he'll be wearing it tomorrow.”

THIS JUST CAN'T BE POSSIBLE. I CAN'T BELIEVE IT, HAVE I BEEN JINXED? Someone's running the show, for sure. I'd like to meet them and exchange impressions, but I have a feeling they would end up being violent. This whole thing of running into Ambrosio and making the serious mistake of actually listening to him, there has to be an explanation for this, although I know it would surely leave me even more traumatized. Aitor, you're a hopeless fool, always living up to your name. As Marta always says, you just won't learn.

Thursday, April 8, 3520. Day +7

Margarita Bombón is still unhinged, and so is the entire Public Health Office. Survival is only possible by staying hidden, disconnected, and avoiding hallways. It's blunder after blunder. Your position doesn't matter, and your status is not respected. Margarita distributes all the workload in the board of directors meeting, and then it cascades down uncontrollably. Despite all the activity undertaken, the situation continues to worsen, cases are constantly increasing, and the mortality rate keeps skyrocketing, while phones, emails, text messages and databases are about to blow, like a nuclear bomb. Margarita is musing while writing a statement for the media, thinking: “I may be pro-animals, but even if this subject has the name of a protected noble feline, I'm going to hunt the 'Lynx' down. I won't let him go! I'll face the consequences and pay for it without remorse, but Bombón rhymes with Sermón. Apart from being a sneak and a liar, he has stirred the media into a frenzy. Every day he'll say something different, and in the meantime the poor patients are in hospitals, kicking the bucket without even knowing where they caught the virus. Margarita, even if it's the last thing you do, you're going to make

the Lynx go back to the forest it came from”. And now, I’ll write about the sad reality of Damania for the media, so that they give us what we deserve right away. Let’s see what I’ll tell them.

MARGARITA HAS LEFT THE COMPUTER RADIO ON, SO SHE DOESN’T MISS the broadcast of her press release or the next news bulletin from the SOR Radio Station:

Breaking News: seven players and twenty members of the Real Magrit board of directors have contracted the mysterious respiratory disease. Most of them remain isolated in their homes. Among those affected is Esmeraldo. Five members of the board of directors have been admitted to the hospital. The entire Lutecium team and those traveling with them are in quarantine and under observation for an indefinite period of time.



I DON’T EVEN KNOW WHY I BOTHER WRITING INFORMATIVE NOTES, I already know where the last one ended up. The only thing that matters in Damania is soccer, — Margarita thinks to herself.

SIMULTANEOUSLY, AT THE HEAD OF THE INSTITUTE FOR DISEASE Control office, the change that Margarita is relentlessly pursuing begins to take shape. Cándido receives Aitor’s visit, as suggested by Ambrosio.

“Aitor, come in and have a seat next to Ambrosio. We were just talking about the Real Magrit infections, such a disgrace with Esmeraldo infected, it’s the worst that could happen at this point in the League, such a shame.”

“I know, I heard about it on my way here, but it doesn’t upset me much, I actually support ‘Gymnastic de Magrit’.”

“That’s a really bad choice, Aitor, but let’s get down to business. We’ve summoned you to help us solve this problem, we don’t know

how this could happen. Ambrosio, tell him the details, you do it very well. I have another meeting at eleven o'clock and we're already short of time."

"Sure thing, Cándido. Okay, Aitor, you have to dedicate yourself body and soul to what I'm going to explain to you now. We won't take no for an answer. With a yes, which is what you're going to say, we'll transfer the PCR that we have developed for free to you. The Institute's lawyers are already working on the contract, and they can meet with yours this very afternoon. We need you to make a kit in the shortest time possible. One week at the most. Put all your people to work and get a prototype ready in twenty-four hours. Also, talk to your usual manufacturers and tell them to get their act together. We've already spoken with our contact at the Drug Administration, and they will approve it in twenty-four hours. We'll send you the validation data that the Viral Respiratory Infections Laboratory has gathered, and then you will include them in the dossier that you'll prepare today. It's a windfall. The level of demand will be extremely high, and you're going to make an awful lot of money. Is everything clear, Aitor? Is there anything you want to add?"

"This is quite the ambush, and you know it. Nobody anywhere on the planet has done what you're asking of me in such a short time. The terms of the contract will have to be very advantageous. My condition is that the patent has to be under the name of Molecular Solutions. As soon as I get it submitted, the Dodona Patent Office must approve it. I know it's not easy to patent diagnostic methods based on a PCR, but you'll figure out how to justify it, it's not like you're not part of the Government and the main stakeholders. I want the patent to have worldwide coverage — you already know how the Cinanians can be, they'll plagiarize it in the blink of an eye. I'll get moving at the speed of light, but if this isn't ready in twenty-four hours I'll pull out."

"Damn, Aitor. We weren't counting on that. We thought you would be more collaborative. I've got to warn you, you have a lot of competition. We can give all this to another company. Should I pick up the phone?"

"Be my guest, make that call, Ambrosio. You know better than

anyone else what's good for you. But if you've summoned me, it's because you have no one else, I'm your only chance! And Cándido, you're very quiet and, as the maximum authority here, you should give your opinion. Should Ambrosio pick up the phone, or should we end this meeting so you're not late for your eleven o'clock?"

"Easy, Aitor, I was just kidding, — Ambrosio lies. We'll do whatever's in our power to meet your demands. I'm going to call the Patent Office right now and demand an urgent meeting with the director. I'll honor the meaning of my last name and tomorrow you'll have that stamp you want so much: 'Patent Pending, Registration Number: XXXXXX'. Let's close the deal with a handshake and get to work."

"Don't be an ass, Ambrosio, we still don't know the disease's transmission mechanism, and hands are a common vehicle of transmission. No handshake. We're gentlemen, are we not? Our word is enough. Besides, you seem congested, and that's one of the symptoms. If I were you, I would get a PCR done — you may have caught it in one of those weird places you go to. Alright, I'm headed off to work. I'll keep you updated. See you soon."

"Cándido, can you believe what a pain Aitor is? He used to be way more manageable. Hopefully he'll stick to his end of the bargain. We need to put it all out there, especially you, being the big boss, so do the what's needed to get the patent. I was just bluffing; I don't know anyone at the Patent Office."

"I'll take care of the patent, and you make sure Aitor does his part. If we can't make this happen, I'll make sure you end your illustrious career has a most magnificent end scanning routine documents, a most creative and exciting task. Goodbye, Ambrosio, and don't get smug, thinking that your last name shines among the stars and can magically solve everything."

AND ON HIS WAY BACK TO THE MODEST HEADQUARTERS OF MOLECULAR Solutions, Ltd., Aitor thinks: Ambrosio is unbelievable; he didn't even flinch when I mentioned the patent, knowing that it's a gift from AISS. He's so cocky, he's going to try to use it for his own benefit. Clearly AISS is not giving Ambrosio all the information, and he

doesn't know that they are already manufacturing the kit. Thank goodness they had warned me, otherwise he would've fooled me again. I'm done with him. My luck changed the moment Sac made his appearance. I have to get rid of Ambrosio, even if that makes me a slave to AISS, just to stop hearing his exhausting talk about how great he is and how stupid I am would surely change my life.

AT THE SAME TIME, THE WHEEL IN AMBROSIO'S BRAIN IS ALSO SPINNING: Aitor was so cocky just now! He's going to pay for this. To begin with, I'll raise the emoluments to fifteen percent. If it wasn't for me, he'd still be some loser in a random lab.

SOMEWHERE ELSE, QUITE FAR FROM MAGRIT, THE GLOBAL HEALTH Observatory has decided that the looming disaster must be acknowledged, and they release the following statement:

The three Plurinational States, Califia, Cinania and Dodona, have reported cases to our epidemic control office. Today, Thursday, April 8, 3520, we are declaring a global pandemic and urge governments to implement an exhaustive procedure to manage the situation. This epidemic is spreading at an unusual speed, and measures must be instituted immediately to reduce the number of cases. Global health systems are on the brink of collapse.



AND SAC, WHO'S CLOSELY WATCHING, REFLECTS: "SOME WILL BE RUINED, others will weather the storm, and others will get rich. One man's meat is another man's poison, but there's always meat for someone to feast on." Let me thank Aitor for signing the contract:

*From: Sac Cerev
Re: Document Signature
To: Aitor Menta*

Good morning, Mr. Menta, you're such an early riser, thank goodness the notary's office opens at nine. We are glad you have already signed the document. We are now in a position to continue moving forward. Since we trusted you, we had already prepared the PCR authorization forms, and we will submit them to the Dodona and Califia Drug Administrations before noon. All the documents appear under your name and, therefore, you will be the one to receive the official response, which will be positive, undoubtedly. In keeping with the name of your company, we have decided to call the subsidiary that manufactures the kits 'Diagnostic Solutions, Ltd.' A messenger will deliver all the documentation for the new company tomorrow, which has already started to make one million kits. As soon as we get the go ahead, they will be rapidly distributed. We are also eager to share with you the name we have chosen for the kit, 'Spicaplus20 PCR'. We hope you like it. Finally, we have contacted the main hospitals in Damania and have already signed the contracts. The estimated price per kit, without VAT, is one thousand dodones, so you can start calculating the benefits. We are also designing the logistics to export them, since we know there will be a very high level of demand. What is more, our facilities are already prepared to manufacture three million kits per week and increasing production will not be a problem.

Surely you must be wondering how we have been able to make this progress in such short time, and the answer is simple: our algorithms are well designed and have a specific motivation that they always adhere to very strictly. Keep collaborating with us and you will discover the surprises that lie in store for you. However, we must remind you that, as far as you're concerned, AISS does not exist.

Sincerely,

Sac Cerev

Head of External Relations

Artificial Intelligence Specific Solutions (AISS)



AMBROSIO IS BACK TO HIS OFFICE AND WORK IS PILING UP FOR HIM.

He can't neglect his emails; in times of crisis, they are an absolute priority. Let's see what we have: ten messages from Margarita Bombón — surely, she's whining, let her tell Sermón, they get along great! And three from Carolina, I'll read those later. I have other priorities right now. Let's see... Here it is, Sac. Let's see what he has to say.

From: Sac Cerev

Subject: Origin of the pandemic

To: Doctor Etoile

Dear Ambrosio, allow me to call you dear and be familiar with you, since we already consider you a member of the AISS family. We're following your magnificent juggling games very closely, and we know that you have hundreds of plates spinning at once, with no broken china to pick up. We admire you, and in order to prove that we are not just sweet-talking you, I am sharing with you confidential information from our epidemic analysis department. Our search engines — we call them that, so no one panics but, between you and me, it is pure hacking — have managed to decipher how the virus moves around, and you are the first one to know. This establishes the difference between the ease with which we achieve whatever we set our minds to in AISS and the incapability that our competition shows. An elegant and inadvertent intervention on the cell phones of all those infected has revealed the movements that their owners made in the previous fourteen days. We have only been able to reach a coverage of ninety-two percent — eight percent had archaic devices — but the results of our research are unquestionable. Those poor patients, we know everything — where they live, who they live with, the size of their houses, their job positions, their income, their hobbies, how they travel, how big their offices are, who they interact with, their lovers, their unspeakable vices, their troubles with banks and the Ministries of Treasury or Justice, their medical history and, above all, the trail of miseries they have

left behind. We know it all! Everything! We have crossed all the possible variables in a compartmental model, a little more complex than the ones that the Public Health Office and your Epidemiology department have, and... you want to know where it has led us, am I right? Well, just open the attached file and scroll down the lines of the incredible come true. The data in the report leave no doubt as to the accuracy of the results. You will understand when you read it. Use it and, if you are as smart as we think, you will be the next minister.

Kind regards,

Sac Cerev

Head of External Relations

Artificial Intelligence Specific Solutions (AISS)

PS: If you want my advice, I would exercise a little, those peanuts are unforgiving and you have to be in good shape for the responsibilities that await you.



WHAT A MORON, THIS SAC IS. I'D LIKE TO MEET HIM IN PERSON AND knock him out. He wouldn't last five minutes. It's nothing but empty talk. I'm in great shape. A bit of a muffin top, but I can get rid of that in a couple of workout sessions. I'm known for my great skills in many sports, like basketball, paddle ball and lately golf. I don't train very often, but my drives are known for the huge distances they reach, even if Androlo always gives me his catchphrase: "nice swing, bad aim." He's a moron too!

Let's see what the damn report says. Here it is. What a pretentious name: *'AISS and the unraveling of the inscrutable crossroads of Spicaviruses'*. Hmm, they have thoroughly analyzed the movements of all infected patients fourteen days before their admissions to hospital, that's impressive! What sort of analysis could they have run in order to draw these conclusions? There are millions of crossed itineraries and thousands of variables. The more I know about what AISS is doing,

the creepier it gets. It's too advanced, way ahead of the rest, but there's very little information available on them. They say the Kruses are the *index case*. Let's see. So, their household comprises three people — well, two, since the father died of Spicavirus — an adopted dog and a hamster. The only thing they don't know is how they were infected, but they have no doubt it was in that house that the epidemic started. What's more, everything indicates that Cryp Krus, the son, was the origin of the epidemic, but where did he get infected? Apart from that, there's an exhaustive map that illustrates where the contacts between the Kruses took place, their contagions and how these, in turn, spread the cases until it became an epidemic, I've never seen anything like this before! I can only tip my hat. I have no other choice than to believe it without a doubt. From this they deduce that the infection's incubation period is under seven days, and this is important to establish the duration of the contacts' quarantines. Also, its basic reproduction number⁸ ranges between nine and eleven, which explains the high number of patients in hospitals right now. I'm reading, reading, and see... Well, ha, ha, ha! I'll keep this conclusion to myself, see if I can use it for my own benefit: Cryp infected the players and managers of Real Magrit in the locker room after their victory in the Federation Cup. While they were celebrating, singing and hugging, Cryp was spreading the virus. If fans find out that Esmeraldo has been infected... But sooner or later all of them would have gotten it, they are so hedonistic, they're always where the great curves are, viruses' favorites. Sac seems to pull a recommendation out of his sleeve to do a thorough epidemiological investigation in the Kruses' place, this I must plan well. I need to figure out how to explain that I know the Kruses are the origin of the pandemic. Wow, this part is truly important. It's so annoying that these AISS people are the ones to find out everything! It turns out that the transmission mechanism is by aerosols and, to a lesser extent, by contact with secretions. Okay then, masks for everyone, and from now on we'll use our elbows to open doors. Wow! No, this just can't be! This will be the end of hanging out bars — but we love our beer, our shouting, and being squished together! All the analyses and maps indicate that crowded places are where most infections occur. And the report

ends by highlighting the obvious, that middle and low incomes are more susceptible, because of their difficulties in maintaining distances where they go. Small and crowded houses, poorly ventilated bars, public transport at rush hours, and so on, these AISS people are such smart cookies. Personally, I know I'm exposed to practically no risks, since Servando drives me from one place to another in my official car, plus I live alone and I don't use the public transport, so I don't think I'll catch it and, in case I would have bad luck, I'm young and strong.

I have to figure out how to organize this huge mess. This Sac is such a pain. Sometimes not knowing brings tranquility, but when you find yourself surrounded by savants, apart from proving you have no freaking idea what you're doing, they start telling you what you need to solve and how to do it, so you mistrust your own brain, the system, the institutions, and you end up wondering whether it wouldn't be better to yield your power to Sac and let him continue bothering you with his messages all the time that also solve all your problems. This is so tiresome! I don't like being surrounded by people who are smarter than me. It's actually hard to find them, although they do exist, but it's so unfortunate they have to be around me, and not under my orders. Maybe putting my feet up on the table will inspire me. This Morocco leather armchair I ordered from that loser in the purchasing department when I was appointed director comes very handy for this sort of things.

ANOTHER EMAIL, AND IT'S SAC AGAIN:

From: Sac Cerev

Subject: control measures

To: Doctor Etoile

Dear Ambrosio, am I correct if I say that Report No. 3 has left you stunned, but its ideas won't reach that privileged brain of yours? Another push from our immeasurable generosity and I can already envision how you work through my strategy, the puzzle becomes

undone, you make my idea yours, and you let it guide you towards the achievement of the set objective.

The index case should be discovered by the Public Health Office. Talk to Margarita Bombón, your friend. Certainly, her last name doesn't exactly describe her physique, but she's charming, indeed. I would marry her if I could, but I am committed to Science. You seem to have forgotten she let you snuggle with her to soften the pain caused by your wife's hasty flight with that colleague of hers — such an Adonis, with such long hair and, if that were not enough, a surfing champion. Margarita has already forgiven you for that episode of yours with Ramona, that older woman with whom you were so infatuated, but who also ended up losing interest in you. Arrange a meeting with Margarita, inform her about the cross reference from infected patients with their addresses, the onset of symptoms, and the date of their diagnoses, indicate that the Krus family is key to understanding the epidemic. Tell her that you have to carry out an investigation in their apartment and take samples exhaustively. You will have more than enough evidence to prove that the Krus family is the index case. If you end up being appointed minister, just make her undersecretary, that should do the trick. At the same time, convince Cándido to get a hearing with the Situation Committee of the National Security Council, in the Presidency of the Government. Margarita Bombón must report her responsibilities, but you have to present the measures to contain the epidemic, which I suggest below: (i) Mandatory use of masks. We will tell you which ones to use; (ii) An antibody detection technique (see Report No. 4, attached here); (iii) A rapid virus detection technique (see Report No. 5); (iv) Do some research, damn it! You're always relying on other people's research. Now that your country is leading the world in terms of number of cases, you need to implement a robust investigation program that will shed some light on this matter, although with the critical mass in your country, comprised mainly of poorly paid civil servants, I doubt being in the front line will be of any use to you. You may suggest doing research on new diagnostic techniques — although it will be difficult to beat ours, — to look for new antivirals and monoclonal antibodies, drugs

which are already in use but that could be useful against Spicavirus and, why not, a boatload of possible vaccines. I'm telling you all this so that you can shine, but given the situation, you wouldn't shine even if I covered you in sequins. Although, I must say, you would look terribly handsome like that, presenting the program in that guise before the mandarins, what a sight. Don't be offended, Ambrosio, I need to use these innocent ironies as a way to relax. Deep down I know you like my wicked proposition.

Now get to work, Ambrosio, time goes by, and you seem spellbound reading our reports.

Hugs,

Sac Cerev

Head of External Relations

Artificial Intelligence Specific Solutions (AISS)



THIS SAC GUY, HE'S SO TIRESOME AND IMPERTINENT. LECTURING Ambrosio comes with a price. When we finally meet, he will discover who Dr. Etoile really is. It's so late already and I'm still here, reading reports, let's see if they're interesting or just empty words. Report No. 4, let's see if this number lifts my spirit. Damn, now they're talking about nanochips, tiny things that play around and do the same thing as the big ones without leaving no scars. They're placed inside a capsule, which you swallow with a sip of water, and when it reaches your stomach, the capsule disintegrates and the nanochip takes over, crosses the intestinal wall, and moves around in search of immune cells and their antibodies until it finds them and checks whether those are the ones that are going after the Spicavirus. If they are, it confirms that the patient has already had the disease and is protected. Then, it continues to send information until it's passed in urine. And on top of that, the nanochip leaves a genetic fingerprint of the host, an unmistakable ID. Now comes Report No.5 — let's see about this one. As soon as I'm done with it, I'll run to Cardinal Ricolieu and eat up all the peanuts they have. This one is about

antigen self-tests, yet another capsule swallowed with water that releases a different nanochip that also passes through the intestinal wall and travels through the body detecting Spicavirus proteins⁹. If there are proteins present, the patient has an active case of the disease. In short, in a matter of three minutes you'll know whether the subject has ever been exposed to the virus, is infected or is cured.

Wow, wow, wow, AISS does have crazy surprises! How've they managed to develop this technology in such short time? Who would be able to manufacture nanochips in Damania? Aitor is out of the question. If I can't find a manufacturer as soon as possible, there's no becoming a minister and leaving everyone astonished with my *savoir-faire* anymore.

"Dr. Etoile, may I come in? It's Angelines."

"Come in, come in, Angelines, what is it? I'm so busy with this damn pandemic that's threatening us all. You know if it wasn't for me the situation would get much worse in no time flat."

"Well, this package just came in for you, and the courier said I should give it to you right away."

"Thanks, leave it there, on the table, who's sending it?"

"There's no return address, Dr. Etoile, and the courier didn't leave a copy to acknowledge receipt either."

"Wow, I hope it's not a bomb! I've gained quite a few admirers already. People are very vindictive, and they twist my intentions which, as you know, are most altruistic. And another email! You may go, Angelines. I'll take care of this, otherwise it'll be midnight before I leave the office, as usual. I only live to work and serve my country."

From: Sac Cerev

Subject: nanochips

To: Doctor Etoile

Hello, Ambrosio. You won't stop indoctrinating others, will you? The package you just got is not a bomb, although sometimes I think you would deserve one. I know you've liked the reports and that now you're wondering who will make the nanochips for you. Open the package and you will find one thousand antibodies and one

thousand antigens nanochips, already encapsulated, some strawberry and some mint flavor, a true technological marvel! This time, validation is not on us. It's Dr. Aile's turn, she'll be thrilled. Today she has a basketball game scheduled with her old colleagues, then they'll go for some beers and, to round out the night, they'll have dinner at Barrera, but I'm afraid she won't make it. She has just come back and that love she used to feel for you has been reborn. And control your surprised face — even if it makes your expression lines disappear, as Carolina said. You know that we have entered the computer system with an analytical algorithm that selects whatever information that may be of our interest, so don't try to do anything crazy, because it would detect it before you even thought about it, although I know you don't want to betray us, and that you aspire to become a minister and dazzle the world. Stay strong, Ambrosio,

Sac Cerev

Head of External Relations

Artificial Intelligence Specific Solutions (AISS)



THESE PEOPLE IN GRAPHENE VALLEY KNOW IT ALL. THEY REALLY HAVE good and effective companies over there. Here, however, all that matters are the lives of Esmeraldo Megusto and Gambeteo Tossi. I believe Sac has contacted me because I am an exception and, although I like Esmeraldo, and Real Magrit even more, in AISS they know that, without me, this crisis will not be solved. I'm going to give my best, like Esmeraldo does on the field. I see no other way to glory.

“Angelineeees, Angelineeeesss.”

“Dr. Etoile, what can I do for you?”

“Locate Dr. Aile and get her here immediately!”

CAROLINA IS TAKING SO LONG, TWENTY MINUTES AND SHE STILL HASN'T shown up, I can't wait any longer.

“Come in, Carolina. You took so long to come over, I see you learned some bad habits in the Global Health Observatory. Do you keep your boss waiting for so long when she calls you?”

“Ambrosio, unlike here, they respect our time working at the Observatory, and meetings are planned in advance. However, all you care about is having some bootlickers coming in and out of your office non-stop.”

“Goodness, what a reply! I knew you wouldn’t change your manners. But this isn’t what I wanted to discuss. I’ve had another of my brilliant ideas and had some nanochips manufactured in record time. The nanochip is inside the capsule. The green ones are for antibodies and the red ones for antigens. Wait! or... was it the other way around? Take a look at the information attached, it’s all in there. I’m always confused by such little details. I want you to check whether these work with patient samples.”

“Come on, Ambrosio, that’s two thousand chips and I had plans for this afternoon. Let Genoveva do it!”

“I don’t trust her, Carolina. We’ve gone incredible lengths to get you that level thirty contract which, by now, you seem to have rejected, but your duty is to coordinate and supervise, and that’s what you’re going to do. You know that the country needs you, and your plans for the day have just been changed. Get Genoveva’s people working at full speed, enough of playing sudokus for them. And send me an SMS when you’re done, you know that the WhatsApp thing is for techies — I’m more of a glamorous classic.”

“Okay then, Ambrosio, I’m off to the laboratory, to get your little request processed...”

“SO, THE CLASSIC ‘ETOILE BUMMER HAS ALREADY STARTED. I’D ALMOST forgotten about it. Where on Earth did he get those nanochips from?” Carolina wonders. That idea can’t be his either. Actually, this must be the first time he’s heard of nanotechnology. But then who’s behind all this? I make a proposal and then all of a sudden, a prototype comes up. The first one has already ended up in Aitor Menta’s hands, Ambrosio’s old PhD student, who owns that company called Molec-

ular Solutions. Let's see where this ends up. I'm going to save some chips for myself, just in case. I don't want to be involved in this matter, clearly this is some business taking advantage of the situation and the ups and downs of related companies. If this actually works out, the amount of zeros in their account will be endless. I'll open one of these capsules, take out its nanochip, and take a look at it under the microscope — maybe it'll have some sort of production mark. There is something here. An A, an I, an S and an S. "AISS". I have no idea what this can be, what does AISS stand for?

"Genovevaaaaaa! Genovevaaaaaa!"

"What's all this yelling, Carolina, you've startled me! What's the matter?"

"Come in, come in... It seems you won't get Ambrosio off your back. One of his last minute bummers. You better get working."

Friday, April 9, 3520. Day +8

Ambrosio is enjoying a wonderful dream at the opening session of the World Conference on Infectious Diseases. He is up on the platform, while a thousand people are silent and contemplating him, listening in awe to his intriguing speech in perfect Califian. Sophisticated female professionals are seated in the first rows. They are looking at him like he's a yummy treat while thinking "he has such poise! Such elegance! And that pronunciation! This is sublime science!" Ambrosio receives the ovation, everyone's standing on their feet, and just when the thunderous applause sounds like it's going to burst his eardrums...

The damn cell phone rings. Why did I leave it on the bedside table? I was going straight into a wet dream, why did this freaking phone have to beep? The way that blonde in the front row was looking at me, with that miniskirt she was wearing, and those pink lace panties, it was driving me crazy. Who can it be? An SMS from Carolina, but what time is it? It's three a.m.! I hope this is important...

The results are extraordinary! This is magic, Ambrosio. You have to tell me where you got this from. Apart from placing the nanochips

in tubes with the samples and observing what happened next, Genoveva and I have actually taken the capsules, and we got the results on our phones in less than three minutes. Both antigen tests came up negative but, wait for it, we have tons of antibodies. We must have been infected with the thousands of samples we've handled, but we haven't had one single symptom. We are fresh as daisies — unlike you, getting an SMS at this hour must have ruffled you. We are considering suing the Institute for not having adequate facilities and leaving us unprotected, so put on your big boy pants. Anyway, this means there must be thousands of asymptomatic people spreading the virus in all directions, and without us having a clue. This is going to be a huge mess. Sleep tight, and don't come looking for me before eleven, I'm still at the lab!



RESTLESSLY, SAC'S WATCHFUL EYES SCRUTINIZE AMBROSIO'S DOMAIN AS he thinks to himself: "Well, well, reading Ambrosio's SMSes is no waste of time. So, Carolina and Genoveva have dared try the nanochips. Good! Now we'll know what they're doing. Ambrosio reads everything he gets, but all he cares about is whether it serves his own purposes. Whether there are other consequences or not, he doesn't even care. The report says that the antibody nanochip is passed in urine, but the antigen nanochip remains in your body. The GPS will go on working and everyone who swallows the chips will be locatable. I'll take a look at the giant hologram of K2-18b, where we will follow all the inhabitants on the planet. Let's see, here are Carolina and Genoveva, with their two green genetic codes, each of them going back home. The whole pandemic is at my feet, and Ambrosio is playing the master of ceremonies. This is fantastic! I must keep an eye on Carolina — her taking the capsules was not planned. I don't like going off script, not even a tiny bit."

And now, an unexpected surprise for Ambrosio. I'm going to play my anthem, see if he gets the message:



Please allow me to introduce myself
I'm a man of wealth and taste
I've been around for a long, long year
Stole many a man's soul and faith
Pleased to meet you
Hope you guess my name
But what's puzzling you
Is the nature of my game



— SYMPATHY FOR THE DEVIL. THE ROLLING
STONES.

What is that sound? — Ambrosio thinks —. Where is that song in Califian coming from? It's a popular one, but I don't understand what it says. Such a bad accent, I'm sure the singer's from around here. Is this some neighbor, throwing a party? It doesn't seem like it, I think it's coming out of my speakers. Very weird things are happening ever since I connected them to the Wi-Fi. Oh! Now it's done. That's weird! I'll have to call the person who installed the speakers, these 'professionals' are so incompetent... I hope I can sleep a bit longer...

WHAT AN UNFORGIVABLE DISTRACTION, IT'S NOT LIKE YOU, — THINKS Sac. The new developments must be shared quickly with Aitor, in order to rule out any surprises Ambrosio might try to pull out of his sleeve.

From: Sac Cerev
Subject: nanochips
To: Aitor Menta

Good morning, Aitor, I am writing to inform you that we have sent some nanochips to Dr. Etoile that can detect antibodies and antigens, and they work wonderfully. I imagine he will contact you to

continue with this personal business venture. This news is convenient for you, isn't it? We have already manufactured enough of them for Molecular Solutions to go on making money in Damania. We are producing more, in order to export them, so that your account can make it to that desired figure with nine zeros. There's a small but necessary drawback, it's time for you to start manufacturing yourselves. I'll tell you how.

*Best regards,
SC*



THE DAWN HAS ARRIVED, AND THE LIGHT OUTLINES THE VISIBLE, THE respectable, and the everyday things. The night has not fulfilled its restorative function for Ambrosio, but he has no choice but to assume that these are times of a pandemic... and although he is hurt since he still hasn't heard any applause, he begins his journey.

I'm so tired! Carolina's SMS ruined my night, and that damn song was the icing on the cake. I'll call Margarita Bombón.

"Angelineesssss, please bring me some coffee, and put me through to Dr. Bombón."

"Margarita, how are you? This damn virus, where the hell did it come from? Surely some illegal immigrant from those southern countries has brought it over."

"I'm fine, Ambrosio, and cut that xenophobic crap. That kind of joke isn't funny at all."

"What a sense of humor, Margarita! I'll get to the point; I see you're not in the mood. I have inside information and I'm going to share it with you, so you can show off with the mandarins. We have been crossing data and we believe that we have identified the 'index cases'. We have to go to their place, search it, and see if there are traces of the virus. It's been a while, but we could still get lucky, what do you think?"

"I hope you're not wrong Ambrosio, because I don't trust you. You've already played tricks on me too many times! Let's meet with

Cándido and get his authorization. Don't organize this on your own, or else it'll show up in the 'Goodbye' magazine. Let the National Intelligence Center take care of the plan with its usual paraphernalia. Call Cándido, I'll see you at his office."

A COUPLE OF HOURS LATER...

"Good morning, Margarita and Ambrosio. Come in, and sorry for keeping you waiting, the ministry keeps calling, constantly requesting things. On top of that, the poet does nothing but dedicate me belligerent sonnets. It's driving me crazy. By the way, how nice to see the two of you together, how can I help?"

"Haven't you told him yet, Ambrosio? Whatever, I'll do it. Cándido, Ambrosio claims he knows where the *index case took place*. Although I don't trust this much, I do think we should carry out an epidemiological investigation. This has to be a covert operation — otherwise we'll end up in the press making a fool of ourselves. Talk to the National Intelligence Center and have them do all the prep work. The address is: Krus Family, Number 5, Apartment 11B, Forever Friends Street, 1206, Magrit. The mother and son, Cryp, live there; the father passed away from Spicavirus. It will be necessary to go in when they're not there."

"I'll call the National Intelligence Center right away, but... are you sure, Ambrosio? Don't make me look like a fool, you know what's in for you."

"Yes, Cándido, I'm completely sure. You know that there are never any loose ends when I'm in charge of the analyses. The Krus family has been the origin of this whole disaster and we must go over there and confirm it."

"Okay, Ambrosio, I'll get on with 'Operation Pickup' immediately."

Saturday, April 10, 3520. Day +9

'Operation Pickup' begins. Cryp Krus is focused on Real Magrit, who have a league match against a modest Barcinone FC. Mrs. Krus has

gone grocery shopping. The supermarket is crowded, and it will take at least a couple of hours. Just in case, a National Intelligence Center agent is monitoring her every move.

An unmarked truck is parked in the loading and unloading area across from number 5 in Forever Friends Street. Five subjects emerge from the truck wearing 'Parcelonia' overalls and carrying a large crate. They open the building door and silently sneak in. The crate won't fit in the elevator. They have no other choice than to climb up to the eleventh floor.

"Who the hell analyzed the blueprint and logistics?" —asks Torcuato.

"I think it was Arsenio's team," answers Teodoro.

"Definitely a great team, Arsenio's guys. Great planners, the best logistics."

TWENTY-FIVE MINUTES LATER SWEATY, EXHAUSTED AND OUT OF BREATH, they open the door and enter the apartment, when Byron rushes out to greet them.

"Boss, there's a huge dog coming towards us. Why can't they tell us about these things? Luckily it's wagging its tail. Torcuato, you have dogs, do something! I hate dogs."

"Hi, cutie, I'll give Arsenio your regards, what are you doing here, all alone? Come here, I have a little something you'll like. Look at this! Delicious chocolate..."

FIVE MINUTES LATER, BYRON IS PEACEFULLY ASLEEP.

MARGARITA BOMBÓN AND HER TWO ASSISTANTS EMERGE FROM THE HUGE crate.

"Ugh, damn it. Give me your name."

"Torcuato, doctor."

"You could've pulled us out sooner. We were suffocating in there. And have you been playing with the dog? You didn't kill it, did you?"

“No, doctor, it's just asleep, will be awake in one hour.”

“Good, 'cause I'm pro-animals and I could destroy you. Pedro and Pablo, take samples like your jobs depend on it, and make an inventory of everything. I don't want any mess. I'll look around, see what I can find.”

“Pedro, come over here. Look at what I've found.”

“What is it, doctor?”

“It's an empty cage.”

“And?”

“Did you read the phylogeny study report?”

“Yes, doctor.”

“What did it say?”

“I don't remember, doctor.”

“How can you be so useless, Pedro? The report said the Spicavirus affects hamsters, and what is this cage for?”

“I don't know, doctor, I'm not a fan of cages, I only collect reproductions of vintage cars, I have two hundred.”

“A hamster, Pedro, a hamster, get with the program. I'm positive it's dead. Bag up the cage. I don't care if the family notices it's gone. This means Ambrosio is right and I'm going to owe him. Damn it!”

“Why do you think it was a hamster and not a mouse, Doctor?” — asks Pablo.

“Because I say so. This is a hamster cage, it smells like hamster, and there used to be a hamster in it — that's it.”

AFTER A WHILE, TEODORO WARNS:

“Let's get out of here, Mrs. Krus is coming back.”

They hastily leave the apartment, leaving the walls of the stairway marked with traces of the huge crate. They manage to leave the building without raising too much suspicion and Teodoro exclaims:

“Where's the van? It was parked right here, wasn't it?”

Behind him a voice says:

“If you're looking for a white van, it just got towed. The City Council is very strict these days with this loading and unloading area,

they use it for the Health Center at number 7. There's no leaving a car parked there for over half an hour.”

“I can't believe Arsenio, he's going to get a mouthful on this one... He didn't even notify the Local Police that we were on a special operation... There's no fixing stupidity. Teodoro, call the headquarters and have them come pick us up. Tell them we'll wait for them at the bar across the street, it makes no sense we wait here, anyway. Since the crate is so huge, no one will take it. We can just leave it here.”

“As for us, we're out, we can't waste any time, “ — says Margarita. “Taxi!”

“They're so much more efficient than us,” — Margarita thinks to herself, and competent!

ONE HOUR LATER BYRON WAKES UP, BUT THERE'S NO ONE THERE — although the olfactory trail of eight visitors remains.

AFTER A WHILE, THE SAMPLES TAKEN IN THE ‘OPERATION PICKUP’ ARE delivered to Carolina...

“Hey, Genoveva.”

“What is it, Carolina?”

“Pedro and Pablo, Dr. Bombón's henchmen, have just brought us this cage and samples, collected from the home where the alleged index cases live. Put all your people to work processing them to see if they have any Spicavirus. It's urgent. Process each sample separately, and check that they are all properly labeled, we can't trust those two! And make a database with all of them. If there are Spicaviruses we have to sequence them and transfer them to the phylogenetic analysis database. As soon as this is ready, call me, if Ambrosio doesn't call us first. If only he would leave us alone for a little while.”

LATE IN THE AFTERNOON ON SATURDAY, AND AFTER SEVERAL threatening calls, Carolina heads down to Ambrosio's office.

“Come in, Carolina, and don't complain about me nagging you, I

can already see it in your face. You're here to solve problems, and in the middle of a pandemic they pop up non-stop."

"You don't say, Ambrosio! You're my hero."

"Carolina, be respectful, don't talk to me like that, or else I'll send you back to the Observatory. I think Genoveva would be ready by now to replace you."

"I could leave tomorrow, actually. Alberto said he liked Genava's orchestra much better. He says there's too much goofing around here, so you don't have to send me away — I'll be happy to leave."

"Stop talking nonsense, Carolina. Cándido took pains to place Alberto in the orchestra, so you should be grateful that you have a job back home and can enjoy our unique bar culture. Have a seat and tell me about the results."

"There were traces of the virus' RNA everywhere. However, the dog is fresh as a rose. If it ever had the virus, it doesn't anymore. They took samples from its throat while it was asleep. However, the PCR detects tons of Spicavirus in the hamster cage. I don't think we can fully sequence what was in the cage, it's been too long. The PCR is positive but getting a good sequence out of what we have is quite improbable. We would need patient zero's body — the hamster that used to live there. Besides, it could shed some light as to how the hell the virus got there, because I have no clue. If it was a wild hamster, okay, but inside a cage! Right now, the only explanation is that one of the Kruses infected it, and not the other way around. But these are only guesses until we have the virus of each of the Kruses and the hamster's sequenced, so we can compare them. I'm afraid we won't find the hamster that there won't be any clinical samples kept from the Kruses in the hospital either, so say *adios* to finding out who the source of this catastrophe was."

"Unbelievable, Carolina! My whole theory in tatters! Good thing there were viruses in the cage."

"Your theory? Someone has tipped you off, Ambrosio. You can't have done anything with the available data. My conversations with Margarita confirm that the Public Health Office has made such a mess of their patients' database that it's impossible to find out anything. The reports sent by the confederations don't match those of

the central database. The patient numbers don't match. Anyway, nothing new. I don't know who came up with the idea of transferring Public Health to the confederations, but they're no genius. Now there are seventeen different computer systems, all of them incompatible. Yes, Ambrosio, all incompatible. The confederations hired a company run by some big boss's brother-in-law to develop the public health information system, so there's no unifying them now. They already tried to make an integrating module, and it was more expensive than making a new program from scratch. So, I don't know where you got that information from, but don't tell me you crossed variables from the Institute's database, because nobody who's in the loop will buy it. I don't understand how Margarita has given you anything. She's under so much pressure she's grasping at straws, Ambrosio ... I have to go, but there's two things you need to solve right now. The first one is to look for the Kruses' clinical samples, and the second one is to convince the police to question them, see if there's any chance, we could recover that damn hamster I've told you about."

"We'll have to find out what hospital they were in and talk to Microbiology. That should take a while," — says Ambrosio.

"Well, then get to it. Have fun and see you on Monday."

CAROLINA IS RIGHT, WE HAVE TO TAKE OUR CHANCES, SEE IF WE CAN GET the hamster back. What a mess, how can I get the Kruses interrogated at this hour? I'll have to call Cándido.

"Ambrosio, may I remind you that I'm a civil servant and today is Saturday."

"And may I remind you we're in the middle of a pandemic and there are no schedules anymore, Cándido. We owe it to the country. You have to call the Home Office and have the Kruses questioned tonight. It's a long story and there's no time for explanations. Just do as I say and tell them to call me as soon as you have the authorization — I'll tell them what we need."

BEEP! AN SMS FROM SAC — HE'S SO UNTIMELY. I'M SOLVING STATE

matters and he just keeps interrupting me. He must be very lonely and bored. Let's see what it says:

Hello Ambrosio, the Kruses were treated in the Emergency Room of the Magrit University Hospital. Cryp was seen by Dr. Campanella on Thursday, April 1, and his parents by Dr. Oryz on Saturday, April 3. However, I think you should contact Dr. Altés, he was the one who kept everyone's samples just in case. That doctor is very far-sighted, he has a great future ahead. I even think he will end up being the Head of Service and an opinion leader. This is his cell phone number: 649 495 049.



THAT CEREV IS QUITE COCKY, BUT I MUST ADMIT HE IS MOST HELPFUL. I wonder how he manages to know everything. As long as he helps me achieve my ambitions, I'd rather not know. I'll call Genoveva right now, see if we get lucky and manage to solve this matter quickly.

“Genoveva, I'm your boss. I see you haven't saved my number, that's not good at all. A boss's number must always be stored in the VIP area.”

“Hi, Ambrosio, I don't get along very well with cell phones, and I don't have a proper address book. Plus, it's the first time you've called me since we've met, and it's been a few years now.”

“I need you to talk to Dr. Altés, do you know him?”

“Of course, Ambrosio. He is a resident in the University Hospital Microbiology Service. He's very smart, what has he done?”

“Nothing, as far as I know. You need to call him and ask him if he's kept samples from the Krus family, and if so, he needs to send them to us. Do you have his phone number?”

“No, I don't.”

“Lucky for you, your boss has you covered. Write this down: 649 495 049. I don't know what you guys would do without me. Call him right now and report to me *ipso facto*.”

“Okay, Ambrosio.”

. . .

FIVE MINUTES LATER:

“Genoveva, what's up?”

“Good news, Ambrosio. He's on call and says he has samples from all the Kruses in the Biobank. He says we can pick them up whenever we want.”

“Well, then, go over to the hospital, make sure you get them, and take them to the lab straight away. If my suspicions are correct, you're going to have to work overnight, so stay there until you hear from me, or I show up.”

“Ambrosio, it's Saturday night.”

“I couldn't care less if it was your wedding day. Do as I say and do it now. Goodbye, Genoveva.”

“Goodbye, Ambrosio.”

INSTANTLY...

“Dr. Etoile speaking.”

“Good evening, Dr. Etoile, this is Superintendent Sillarejo, from the Magrit National Police headquarters. A patrol is on its way to the Kruses' house to bring them over for questioning. We've been told you would provide us with background information on how to proceed with this matter.”

“That's right, Superintendent Sillarejo, it is essential for you to...
...Actually, I'm on my way there. Dr. Margarita Bombón, the head of the Public Health Office, will also attend the interrogation.”

“Got it, I'll see you then.”

A TAXI DROPS AMBROSIO AT THE NATIONAL POLICE HEADQUARTERS, where they kindly tell him where to find Superintendent Sillarejo's office.

“Good evening. Superintendent Sillarejo?”

“That's right. How can I help you?”

“I'm Dr. Etoile.”

“Please to meet you, doctor, please come with me to the adjoining

room, where you can watch the interrogations without being seen. Doctor Bombón is already here and is waiting for us. Mrs. Krus is still very affected by her husband's death and has been crying ever since the officers told her the reason for the investigation. Cryp, her son, has little schooling, and his whole world revolves around Esmeraldo, his idol. I don't know if we will get anything out of this whole matter. Sergeant Maravillas is questioning them at the moment, he's very skilled in this kind of thing.”

“Hello, Margarita.”

“Shhh! Ambrosio, they're getting to the heart of this matter, I can't lose track now.”

Sergeant: “What happened to Klaus?”

Margarita: “Klaus is the hamster's name.”

Cryp: “He died, suddenly.”

Sergeant: “And what did you do with him?”

Cryp: “I took him to the vet to have him cremated.”

Sergeant: “What vet?”

Cryp: “I don't remember. I was very nervous and shaken up, I loved Klaus very much.”

Sergeant: “Tell us the truth, Cryp, you're lying. It's very obvious, you're a bad liar.”

Mrs. Krus: “it's true what the officer is saying, Cryp. Whenever you lie, both of your ears turn red.”

Cryp: “Mom! You're unbelievable, you talk such nonsense, I'm already thirty-five! Okay then, I have no choice, I'll confess. I considered taking him to the vet, but Byron convinced me that cremation was not a good idea — he gave me this sad face and stopped his tail from wagging. So, we decided that Klaus would be happier if he could enjoy Real Magrit games. We decided to put him inside a box with his name and bury him in the south corner of Barnavu, but I haven't been able to do this yet, 'cause there's too much hustle in that area, and I worried that getting caught digging a hole in the field would get me fired. Klaus is at home, inside the freezer, but you have to understand that I didn't do anything wrong. He was one of my friends; the only other one is Byron; I have no other friends. I thought my dear Klaus deserved a tribute and, what's better than resting at

peace in the Real Magrit stadium, instead of being burned and turned to ashes.”

Mrs. Krus: “So, there's a corpse inside my freezer? You're going to pay for this, Cryp. It's full of food, but now I'm going to have to clean it with bleach and throw away everything in there. You know where your wages are going this month.”

Ambrosio: “There we have it, Margarita. Let's go get the hamster at once, see if we can recover the Spicavirus. I'll text Carolina telling her to head back to the laboratory and have everything ready. Let's go get Klaus.”

Margarita: “Cryp shouldn't suffer any consequences for this. Since he froze it, we have a chance to find out how this whole thing started. We should give him a medal, and so you know, Ambrosio, I think we should write a report and have the minister honor Cryp and raise his salary.”

Ambrosio: “Will do, Margarita. I'll text Carolina right now.”

AND ON PONZONIA STREET, ON THE INTERSECTION WITH ATASCAL, Jesús del Puerto and his followers sell draught beer, shellfish, cold meats and canned goods of all kinds. Carolina is beaming, her first beer in a long time.

“This lager is so delicious, and this anchovy, yummy! Alberto, tell Julio to stop shouting and put on his mask, if that idiot has the Spicavirus he'll infect the whole bar.”

“Julioooo, shut up and put your muzzle on!”

“You're such an asshole, Alberto, always doing what this obnoxious woman tells you to. Do you mean my mask?”

“Yes, Julio, that's right, but remember to take it off before drinking, your shirt is such a mess!”

BEEP! OH, THE HORROR! AN SMS! IT CAN ONLY BE FROM AMBROSIO, he's the only person on the planet who doesn't use WhatsApp. It must be the ten p.m. bummer. So instead of the moon finding me naked tonight, it'll be the dawn catching me working, I'm sure.

Hello, Carolina, you're not going to believe this, Cryp Krus, the son, has frozen the hamster in his fridge. How lucky are we? He must be quite retarded to have done that, but it's been very convenient for us — if he had buried or cremated it, that would be the end of my theory. Also, there are samples from all of the Kruses, and we have already located them. Genoveva has gone to pick them up from the hospital. Go back to the lab and contact the people you need to do the PCR and the sequencing. I want to know whether they had the virus before the night is over.



I KNEW IT, BYE-BYE SECOND BEER, AND BACK TO WORK. THERE'S NO choice — me and my big mouth! — Alberto, I'm so sorry, but I have to go. An epidemic emergency. Say goodbye to everyone for me. Don't drink too much, I'll want to snuggle up later tell you how it went. Muah!

Sunday, April 11, 3520 Day +10

Early Sunday morning. Ambrosio welcomes Carolina at the door to his office.

“Come in, Carolina. I've made coffee, do you want some?”

“So nice of you, Ambrosio, I didn't know you knew how to make coffee, you always said that in your family it was the service who was in charge of doing everything, but no, I don't want any, coffee, thanks, it keeps me awake. The hamster died of Spicavirus. Its lungs, heart, liver, kidneys, bladder, and bowels were collapsed. There are tons of viral RNA. We already have evidence that hamsters are intermediate hosts for this Spicavirus and that it infects and kills them. The Kruses too, the samples that Genoveva brought are all positive. I wonder how you managed to find out they existed and where they were in such a short time. I'll choose not to ask, together with many other questions that I have and about which, I have a feeling, I'll never know the answer. We've sent away

the samples to have their complete genome sequencing done, so we'll know if it's one of the first viruses involved in human infection, but there must be other similar ones, so I don't think we can assert it was the first one. What we'll never know is how the virus got into that cage. In Sergeant Maravillas's report, it says the hamster was two years old and had never left the house, so something or someone infected it. It may have been one of the Kruses when cleaning the cage or playing with it, and not the other way around. If that was the case, there's no way we can ever identify the index case. By Monday afternoon, at the latest, we'll know something. I'm going home now."

THE NEXT MORNING...

Ambrosio, you've slept so little and didn't even get any good rest. This pace is killing me. I'm going to compensate my aching body and make myself a premium breakfast: coffee, some croissants from the bakery downstairs, an orange juice and a glass of good sparkling wine. Like when I used to go to Barcinone. You're such a gourmet, Ambrosio. We must start celebrating, so many things happened this week, and all of them have been solved brilliantly thanks to your broad cross-disciplinary formation. After breakfast I'll make a compilation of my performances, I'll swing by my office and then I'll give myself a Sunday treat, with a sumptuous lunch at the Loggerhead Turtle, my favorite restaurant. Alfredo, the owner, treats me like a king — that is, precisely what I am — and it's inexpensive, these are bad times to splurge. I go to the expensive restaurants with Aitor, because he's making a lot of money thanks to me, and I'm a consecrated opinion guru and he looks up to me. After lunch I'll listen to a Gagner opera on my extraordinary stereo, it makes me so euphoric. Then I'll watch the Real Magrit match against Barcino, wearing my Esmeraldo shirt and my autographed scarf. I still haven't had a chance to watch that match, and it's been a while already.

While I finish breakfast, I'll make a list summarizing where we are after ten days of this damn pandemic that's upon us:

1. We know it is a Spicavirus that is transmitted mainly by aerosols.
2. It had never affected humans before.
3. Phylogenetically it is related to viruses that affect mustelids and rodents.
4. It produces an infection of the respiratory tract that can evolve into severe pneumonia with an immune reaction that usually requires admission to the ICU.
5. The mortality rate is not excessively high and is mainly related to age and also to other risk factors such as hypertension, obesity, etc.
6. There are asymptomatic patients who transmit the infection, and we should call them “asymptomatic carriers.”
7. There is a diagnostic method based on the detection of virus RNA with a sensitivity and specificity rate over ninety-eight percent. The result is obtained within an hour. The method has already been transferred to the Molecular Solutions company, and regulatory agencies have given their authorization through an emergency procedure. Diagnostic kits are already being distributed in hospitals.
8. There are two new, faster diagnostic methods that will help control the epidemic, but kits are not available yet. Next Monday, the resolution of the regulatory agencies is expected, and as soon as the authorization is received, Molecular Solutions will distribute them. I will try to get them subsidized by the Government of Damania. No paying, at least for the moment.
9. Cases have increased exponentially, and it's been estimated that they will reach half a million in ten days. Mortality is concentrated in the oldest segment. The only person who must be happy is the Minister of Social Security — at the rate this epidemic is going, it'll get rid of pensioners and there will be a surplus in his first year in the post. Of course, he's an old man himself, so he should

take care to not join his fellow citizens who are the same age.

10. The index case may be the Krus family, although we don't know how the damn virus got to the caged hamster. The most plausible hypothesis is that a member of the Krus family got infected, and then infected the hamster. We may never know.
11. Hospitals are on the brink of collapse and, as they do not have a sufficient number of personal protective equipment, there are many casualties among health personnel due to the infection.
12. The Ministry of Health and the Government are paralyzed. They have not taken any effective measures yet, but the poet minister won't stop attacking us with atomic sonnets.

Well, we're not faring too badly. We've been through worse. I think we'll survive.

LET'S SEE WHO THIS SMS IS FROM. FROM SAC CEREV. LET'S SEE WHAT this jerk says. I'd like to meet him in person, he must be a chubby smart-ass, without a muscle, as bald as I am, but much shorter and poorly dressed. Just picturing him makes me laugh.

Hello, Ambrosio, good summary of the situation. I'm proud of you. Just so you see we keep your wishes in mind and that our support to you is unconditional, we're going to make them come true, what do you think? Aren't you a bit horny right now? After 'The Loggerhead Turtle' make yourself a vodka and tonic, turn on your amazing stereo and listen to 'The Malkyries Vigil'. Surely, you'll have a dream about how you are promoted, you're given the ministerial portfolio, you enter your office triumphantly, and you end this pandemic. And about you being a Real Magrit fan, we can discuss that matter some other time.



HE IS DEFINITELY A JERK, BUT... HOW ON EARTH DOES HE KNOW everything? He reads my mind. This AISS is getting really creepy. I need the National Intelligence Center to scan my apartment, I'm sure it's full of spy gadgets. But if Sac's predictions come true, he may as well put a camera up my... well, better not — he can do that to my friend Martel, I'm sure he would enjoy it. And what is that sound now? The Wi-Fi is playing tricks again with my speakers. Another Damanian singing in Califian, it makes no sense. I really have to call the technician before the week ends.



I am the eye in the sky, looking at you
I can read your mind
I am the maker of rules, dealing with fools
I can cheat you blind



— EYE IN THE SKY. THE ALAN PARSONS PROJECT.

Oh! It's over now. I'll go over to the Loggerhead Turtle, it's about time...

HERE WE GO, I HAVEN'T EVEN HAD THE TIME TO TAKE OFF MY ELEGANT cashmere coat, which I bought at Gómez Apparel, and I already have an SMS from Carolina, what does she even want on a Sunday?

Hello, Ambrosio, I'm sending you an SMS because you don't normally check your email during the weekend. Your putting on the pressure must have paid off, because Genoveva called me saying that Bioinformatics had contacted her. They said the analysis of the 'Operation Pickup' sequences are ready. Klaus is confirmed to be the origin of everything. Cryp's strain is a later one, and so are the parents', but they are closely related. There is no doubt that the

pandemic began in that apartment. Furthermore, Sergeant Maravillas' report says the following: 'Cryp had no social relationships. He would stay home for days and would not leave the house. The morning his symptoms began, he went to work, but had been isolated for ten days. His parents were on vacation in Benidream with the SINVERSO retiree program. His mother confirmed this fact and confessed that Cryp had had a telephone confrontation with his father, may he rest in peace, because a neighbor had sent them a message saying that, while walking his dog, he would see Byron wandering the neighborhood on his own, and that he feared he would get lost or kidnapped by one of those mob gangs that organize dogfights. Cryp admitted in his conversation with his father that he was sad, that he didn't want to go out, and that he had no friends — he was just as lonely outside as he was inside, and that is why he would stay home. Byron gets on fine by himself, and no incidents ever happen to him because he doesn't normally go close to anyone. Likewise, the Public Relations department of Real Magrit confirms that Cryp was on vacation on those dates. In summary, there's no chance Cryp was infected outside his home by an unknown person. There is not a single case of disease with an incubation period over seven days, and Cryp was by himself and didn't leave the house for ten days. How did the virus get to Klaus? Let's see if that Sunday vodka with tonic inspires you. Take care.



WELL, HOW THE VIRUS GOT TO THE HAMSTER CAN WAIT FOR NOW. I'M afraid it will be like the quantum computer, which can simultaneously have a status of 0 and 1, without anyone making sense of it.

A COUPLE OF HOURS LATER...

Wow, that was a serious nap. And now I have a headache. The Peach Baron I had with lunch lives up to its name. I'll have a sibuprofen and then a vodka and tonic while watching the game.

Beep! Now what? Please, leave me alone! I'm not going to be able

to watch the game. Let's see who this is. It's an SMS from Cándido. Such good timing.

Hello, Ambrosio, don't you check your email on Sundays or what? We have been summoned tomorrow at ten a.m. to the Office of the President in order to explain what's going on to the National Security Council Situation Committee. People in the government are very nervous because the epidemic has gotten out of hand. The Ministry of Health is making mistake after mistake. For the moment, only you and the hospitals have done something useful — patients won't stop coming in! Take a look at the email I've sent you with the invitation to the meeting and, if you have any questions, call me. And please start using WhatsApp, this SMS thing is a nightmare. You're a computer dinosaur.



WELL, SEEMS LIKE I OVERLOOKED THAT EMAIL. THERE'S NO WATCHING the game for me today either. I'll never get to see it. Esmeraldo will retire and I still won't know how he played that day.

*From: Cándido Albino
Subject: National Security Council Situation Committee Meeting,
Office of the President.
To: Ambrosio Etoile*

Dear Ambrosio, I'll see you tomorrow at ten a.m. at the Office of the President. In the attached file you will find the invitation, the attendees and the agenda.

Cándido

**National Security Council Situation Committee Meeting.
Government of Damania**

Office of the President Pavilion 4. Room 4C. Time: 10 a.m.

Invitees:

- Doctor Cándido Albino. Head of the Institute for Disease Control
- Doctor Margarita Bombón. Head of the Public Health Office
- Doctor Ambrosio Etoile. Head of the Reference Laboratories

Items in the agenda:

- Introduction to the Meeting: Vice President of the Government of Damania.
- Public Health Office Report.
- Reference Laboratories Report.
- Discussion of potential measures to contain the epidemic.
- Questions and answers.



GOOD THING THAT I SUMMARIZED THE SITUATION TODAY, IT WILL BE handy for my participation tomorrow.

This virus is attacking us so fiercely. It has turned the Confed-eracy upside down.

I still have time to watch the game before going to sleep.

CHAPTER 3

PROMOTION

Monday, April 12, 3520. Day +11

“DR. ALBINO, I SUGGEST YOU GET IN THE CAR, AND WE HEAD TO THE Office of the President. Traffic’s very heavy at this hour, and if you don’t hurry up, we won’t get there on time”.

“Ambrosio and Margarita, did you hear Arnaldo? You can continue your conversation in the car. Come on, come on...”

“Margarita, I can tell you’re nervous, but I’m not, I’ve got great poise and I’m not afraid to speak in public. All of my brilliant scientific career I’ve been invited to share my research in numerous conferences because it is of such good quality, not the typical nonsense others do. Since I’m fluent in several languages, I can handle myself perfectly. You can admire my extensive résumé on Lokedan. For me, this is a mere formality. What I don’t quite understand is the Ministry of Health. They seem so lost. They keep appointing their own friends and giving them positions of responsibility, without them having a good CV to back them up, that’s no good. No one has contacted me. I know they reached out to Cándido, they wanted to know basic information about the virus. How about you? Have they contacted you, Margarita?”

“The Public Health Director General calls me from time to time.

Conversations with Sermón Lynx are not very fluid, but I prefer to keep my distance. Between us, I want to get him out of the way, and I need your help. Every day he goes back on what he said the day before, and then comes up with some new nonsense, which he just spews out without reflection and starts the whole thing again. I believe his fondness for hot-air-balloon rides has ended up affecting his neurons, you get such little oxygen up there. But some say that it's all managed by one of the President's advisers, who loves improvisation and chaos as working methods. They call it 'creative chess'. They must consider themselves as Kings and have chosen Sermón as their consort, but I've become the Queen of the Deck and I still have to win this game. I hope he's not there at the Situation Committee, the last thing we need is more chaos. Let's go through the security check, quickly now, we're running late."

"Good morning, Dr. Etoile," — says Concha Graciosa, "I'm the Vice President's secretary. I've known Margarita and Cándido for a while. This way please. In the room there's coffee, tea, water, soft drinks and rolls. As you haven't sent me any presentation, you'll only be able to use notes you may have brought with you. After some guests' computers infected the system with several viruses, the Office of the President's IT department has become very strict. Between us, they're quite hopeless, they took at least fifteen days to resolve the issue. Confidential emails were sent at random and the only one not getting them was the actual recipient. You can't imagine the amount of secrets that were leaked to the media, but the funny thing is that only personal affairs were published in the tabloids, but not even one of the Government's secret projects leaked. I guess since they haven't gotten anything right for decades, all they care about is gossip, which on the other hand is what sells today. There were a good number of dismissals but no resignations, by the way. Utter nonsense, so either we have the file three days in advance, or you sing the report like the old town criers, as you are going to do."

"But you summoned us yesterday, how were we supposed to send it three days in advance? Please, Conchita, I'm nothing without my computer!"

"Well, forget about it, Margarita, it's strictly forbidden, and the

Vice-President is very nasty-tempered. Here's we are. They're waiting for you.”

THE ROOM IS DOMINATED BY A LARGE C-SHAPED TABLE WITH A considerable space at the front where a large lectern rests for speakers to present. Upon entering the threshold, the audible whispering of the audience is interrupted, and a most intimidating atmosphere permeates the room. Margarita, Cándido and Ambrosio glimpse their seats, identified by their respective names and, in a steely silence, they occupy them. The intimidating stares are still fixed on them when the Situation Committee meeting finally begins.

“Good morning, doctors, I am Máximo Ordenado, the secretary of this Committee. Since you all know me, I'll skip further introductions. I thank you for your presence here today, given the urgency of the call. We hope that you will provide us with valuable information that will allow us to counteract the crisis that the epidemic has unleashed. We will follow the items in the agenda. Would the Vice President like to say anything before we begin?”

“No, Máximo, we may start.”

“Dr. Albino has the floor.”

“Thank you very much. Actually, I think it would be more practical to start directly with Dr. Bombón's presentation. The expert should explain the situation. I will ask for the floor, if I deem it necessary.”

“Very well, Dr. Albino, then we'll have Dr. Bombón illuminate us with her report.”

All eyes turn to Dr. Bombón as she gets up and approaches the lectern.

“Good morning, members of the Committee. I'm sorry to start by saying that the situation is terribly complicated. The available data indicate a geometric progression of the epidemic. There are already more than five hundred thousand cases confirmed. However, I must point out that the communication between the seventeen confederations and the Central Office is not as good as it should be. The exis-

tence of different computer systems makes it extremely difficult to centralize the registration of cases. Data come in late and very fragmented, and the incompatibility of the programs forces us to review them one by one and, in many cases, to reintroduce them, paradoxically. In short, we have some doubts as to the complete accuracy of what I am about to present.”



A SOFT MURMUR OF DISAPPROVAL FILLS THE ROOM.

“AHEM!” MARGARITA CLEARS HER THROAT TRYING TO ESCAPE THE bureaucratic maze of hard stares. Criticizing the responsibilities transferred to the confederations is synonymous with problems, but she continues and warns: “This issue should be solved urgently.”

THE MURMURS GET LOUDER AND LOUDER.

DESPITE THE BACKGROUND NOISE, MARGARITA GOES ON WITH HER presentation with apparent calm.

“On the other hand, hospitals are collapsed, and in addition to the epidemic’s mortality rate, we are also facing collateral damage. This is especially true for patients with chronic pathologies, cancer patients who are not diagnosed in due time or who need urgent treatment, as well as in the impossibility of performing solid organ transplants and many standard medical procedures that have already been partially or totally interrupted. We have compared mortality from all causes, with the average over the last five years. The comparative graph you can see on this page shows, as a whole, a statistically significant increase in mortality — and may I remind you that only eleven days have passed since the first epidemic cases were detected.

Sticking to the epidemic, we have evidence that transmission is from person to person, by aerosols, and that the reproduction number is very high and currently estimated at twelve point two, which means that each case transmits the virus to another twelve people. Some mental calculations will help you estimate the seriousness of the matter we are facing. Twenty percent of patients need hospital care, and out of that twenty percent, five percent are admitted to the ICU in a very serious condition. There are many asymptomatic patients, but we do not know how we can identify them, which makes it extremely difficult for us to control the epidemic. In short, we face bleak situation right now. Finally, we think that we have found the index case, although we still need to do some final tests, which Dr. Etoile will describe. The virus has likely jumped from an animal to a human, a phenomenon which is known as zoonosis, and the intermediate host may have been a hamster. I give the floor to Dr. Etoile. Thank you very much for your attention.”



ALL EYES TURN TO AMBROSIO, WHO MAKES NO MOVE TO GET UP FROM his seat.

“Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Please, allow me to use the latest technology to explain the situation, so you can verify the excellence of the Reference Laboratories, a product of our scientific solvency and permanent collaboration with the best research institutes on the planet.”



WITH A FLOURISH, AMBROSIO TAKES A BIC PEN OUT OF HIS INSIDE jacket pocket, removes the cap, and places it on the table. A beam of bluish light is directed to the lectern and forms a virtual Ambrosio, an exact reproduction of the original that is still seated, smiling with satisfaction. Purple jacket, shirt, black pants and shoes with green socks that glow against the darkness of his outfit, with a matching tie

decorated with a yellow background and green Disney characters who seem to dance to the sound of the virtual Ambrosio.

The Vice-President takes her sunglasses out of her bag and discreetly puts them on, while a murmur of admiration, or horror, fills the room.

The virtual Ambrosio moves the back of his right hand horizontally in front of his eyes and, at the same time, a huge three-dimensional image invades the center of the room, placing itself at the level of the committee members. The image shows how a swab emerging from a patient's nostril is gradually amplified until the microbiota¹ is glimpsed in mucus attached to the swab's tip, a soup of nasopharyngeal cells surrounded by a multitude of bacteria; some rounded, some elongated, some expectant and static, others in motion, driven by their elegant and elongated flagella. Red Spicaviruses emerge from one of the human cells and, maliciously, they head towards other cells. Before contact occurs, a bluish spray floods the image and human cells, bacteria and Spicaviruses dissolve, leaving that soup full of molecules in which nucleic acids of different colors float happily. Immediately after that, another aerosol of multicolored fragments floods the soup. Each colored fragment embraces its compatible nucleic acid and begins to spin in a devilish dance that produces millions of clones that saturate the soup of rainbow molecules. A virtual Ambrosio moves the back of his left hand horizontally in front of his eyes and each colored fragment turns into a little soldier. Another manual pass and they stand in perfect rainbow military formation. Someone in the room cries out, "It's like a Pledge of Allegiance!" At the same time, in the presentation a multi-colored crowd surrounds the little soldiers. Another voice in the room says "There's an audience! There's an audience!" The audience is searching, but no one recognizes their own cherished family recruit. After several months of military training, the recruits have changed, and it is difficult to know who is who. Virtual Ambrosio exclaims: "Break ranks" and the recruits and their families meet, grandparents, fathers, mothers, brothers, children, grandchildren, cousins and nephews are linked in concentric circles. Then a huge phylogenetic tree starts rising with the different families of microorganisms. But the group of

red recruits is isolated. “This is horrible! They have no family!” The rest of the pathogenic lines look at them in disbelief, nobody knows them, where do they come from? “Ah!” — says one, “they are distant cousins of those Spicaviruses who are so keen on making poor minks’ lives miserable. And now they have turned their attention to humans.”

There is a laugh in the room, followed by a collective “sorry.”

Virtual Ambrosio explains, in a lilting voice, that this is called metagenomics: “Dear members of the council, the technique that elegantly classifies and identifies all the microorganisms in the microbiota of the analyzed sample. Thus, we have discovered that what causes the infection is a Spicavirus, which, as you can see in the enlargement of the phylogenetic tree, is genetically related, but quite distant, from other Spicaviruses that affect mustelids and rodents, as Dr. Bombón has previously said.”

A new murmur of admiration fills the room.

Virtual Ambrosio continues declaiming: “Once the Spicavirus has been identified, the diagnosis of the infection is theoretically feasible.”

Now, a huge red Spicavirus appears in the center of the room rotating on its axis to end up splitting itself in a sagittal plane discovering its secrets. The center is occupied by a ribonucleic acid (RNA) molecule surrounded by its viral envelope, where the proteins that communicate with the target cells are anchored. The Spicavirus snaps shut. It has just caught a glimpse of a human cell and is quickly heading towards it. It finds the door, opens the lock and goes inside. Suddenly, a molecular clamp appears and takes the cell, full of viral particles, and places it in a tube. An aerosol dissolves the cell with its Spicaviruses and leaves a molecular soup behind. Another aerosol drops some fragments which hug the viral RNA, begin to spin, and produce millions of clones. A counter records the number of clones, and within seconds a positive result appears. The image zooms out, the professionals from the Viral Respiratory Infections Reference Laboratory appear and, in a final frame, Carolina and Genoveva are seen smiling with their thumbs up. Virtual Ambrosio demands applause for the professionals of the Reference Laboratories, who are

capable of handling at will these microscopic beings which, at the slightest lapse in concentration, could knock us into oblivion.

The members of the Situation Committee stand up in excitement, as if Damania had won the Football World Cup, another dream.

Virtual Ambrosio asks for calm; he has only explained how the PCR technique works, allowing them to diagnose, in less than an hour, an infected patient. There are more surprises yet to come. They must save their energy, and he adds that the Institute for Disease Control has reached an agreement with a company, one hundred percent national, that has developed a prototype, already approved by regulatory agencies, which has developed into a commercial kit that is already being distributed in the hospitals in Damania. In just eleven days, the public-private collaboration has managed for Damania to have 'Spicaplus20', a rapid diagnosis test for the infection that is killing so many. Virtual Ambrosio proudly announces: "The whole planet looks up to us, and exporting 'Spicaplus20' will be like manna falling from heaven and will mitigate the costs of this epidemic. We are in the global scientific elite and this, my dear friends, is only the beginning."

New murmurs of admiration fill the room at so many promises.

Another hand movement and the room is illuminated again by the appearance of a three-dimensional image of the red Spicavirus rotating on its axis with a label on the right of the image that indicates day zero. Virtual Ambrosio says: "and to finish my speech I am going to explain how the virus has spread across the planet."

The red Spicavirus begins to divide itself, and the virions are launched like alien comets towards K2-18b, which has appeared on the screen. The camera follows the virions as they make their way to a Magrit apartment block, sneak into an apartment, and hover around until they find their victim, a happy hamster roaming quietly on its cage wheel. Several red Spicaviruses, wearing evil smiles, descend at full speed towards their objective and, taking advantage of the fact that the hamster takes a deep breath from the effort made while walking, they enter its mouth and nose, open the receptors and drop into the inside of the cells. They scrutinize and locate the cellular copy machine. The Spicavirus sheds its protective covering,

the RNA attaches itself to the copier, and the show begins. A few seconds later, the photocopied clones of the viral RNA wait in single file to get into new viral envelopes that the cell has already manufactured, following the Spicavirus's instructions. Assembly occurs and mature virions burst the cell, shooting out to hunt for more cells. On day +4, Klaus feels tired, and his coat is no longer brown, but red. It has been difficult for him to do his usual exercise, and he is very thirsty, his throat is drier than usual, and he starts coughing non-stop. He sucks on his strawberry-flavored water bottle, which his friend Cryp has given him, and drinks it up. He feels exhausted and lies back in the corner of the cage, panting and coughing. After a while the bottle has taken effect, and the chips covering the cage get red stains with Klaus's urine. The image changes, with Cryp and Byron approaching, ready to clean the cage. Cryp takes Klaus out of the cage and lets him play with Byron. He collects the dirty chips and the organic matter in the cage and puts them in a bag he leaves on the floor. He feels an inconvenient itch and his right hand, already stained red, mercilessly rubs his nose, at the same time that thousands of Spicaviruses slide, with evil smiles, into his nostrils. They open the locks, jump inside the cells, and get cloned. Cryp gradually fades into red, giving way to another image labeled day + 10, in which Cryp nosily clears his throat and cannot smell Byron's loud and fetid farts, but gets back to work — it's about time! "It's been so long since I've been out!" you hear him say. He continues with his daily chores as a utility worker at Real Magrit, going back and forth by subway, all the while leaving behind a string of red characters in his wake. On day +12 of the Cryp sequence, he coughs relentlessly and has a fever, and decides to stay home and not go to work. He says to himself, "there's no training today, so they don't need me." His parents have just returned from vacation with SINVERSO, and he has lunch with them. It is cold and the three of them huddle on the couch to watch the news and their favorite TV shows. When they wake up from their nap, Mr. and Mrs. Krus are flushed. The next day, Cryp feels worse and goes to the hospital, while his father, who feels a certain discomfort and is already coughing, goes to the pharmacy to get a remedy. In the elevator he meets his neighbor from the ninth floor. Their hands

brush up against one another and his neighbor's hand turns red. They greet the doorman and go about their chores. Cryp's red mother goes to the market and meets two couples she knows, one of them also looking red, with whom she chats for a while, and when the informal meeting is over, five red units go to as many places. You see an overhead image of the market, where red dots intermingle with white dots and, when interrelated, the white dots turn red. The image slowly zooms out, and you can see how some red dots go to the subway, the bus, the train, the plane, and now Magrit is a red dot, from where red lines extend to other cities, and from those cities to others, and so on. And then, the planet floats in the middle of an immense screen surrounded by thousands of red itineraries that connect red dots, but you can no longer tell where they come from or where they are going. The entire planet is infected.

“I’d like to end by saying,” — says virtual Ambrosio, “that we have consolidated the public-private initiative with the company Molecular Solutions, in order to quickly develop new latest-generation diagnostic techniques that will allow us to control the epidemic. The studies are well on their way, and we expect to have results in a very short time.”



VIRTUAL AMBROSIO HAS FINISHED HIS WORK. HE BOWS, HIS DAZZLING tie comes off his jacket, and Trap Mouse and Monnie, hugging each other, occupy the foreground of the final scene. The image fades away.

The lights come on and all faces turn to Ambrosio Etoile. The noise of applause fills the room as all the attendees rise to their feet.

The murmur of voices grows and there is an endless sequence of comments, of thanks and questions from all the members of the Committee except for Dr. Lynx, representative of the Ministry of Health.

At one point, the Vice President apologizes and leaves the room to go to an adjoining office where she picks up the phone, dials a

number and demands that they immediately put her through to the President.

“Hello, Amparo, I was in an important meeting, I hope you've interrupted me for a good reason.”

“Yes, madam President, a very good one indeed. The Situation Committee meeting just ended and Dr. Etoile is our man. He's brilliant and knows what needs to be done to control this damn pandemic. He explained it all in less than forty minutes, and we've all stood up to applaud.”

“Okay, okay, Amparo, you're talking way too fast. Come to my office at one p.m., we'll discuss it calmly, I want more information. We can't make decisions fast and loose. The Ministry of Health is in the eye of the hurricane, and so are we.”

MEANWHILE, CONCHA DISMISSES THEM AT THE DOOR, AND THE OFFICIAL car returns them to the nest.

“Ambrosio, you're the man, where did you get that device? That presentation was fantastic. Even the Vice President loved it, although I don't know why she was wearing sunglasses, there must be something wrong with her eyes.”

“You know, Cándido, we are at the forefront of knowledge, but no one values us as much as we deserve. What do you think, Margarita?”

“What can I say, you're such a bastard! You could've warned me. I supported my presentation with a handout of three printed pages, and then you come with this crazy technological display! Although I admit, I'm still gaping in amazement. My masseter muscles are tetanized, how did you do it? It was so impressive!”

“I told you, we are very advanced.”

“However, Ambrosio, we're giving you a B+, we just can't give you an A, ha, ha, ha! Cándido and I have been whispering throughout the whole presentation, where did you get that tie? Surely you bought it in one of those conferences you organize in a Pisney park. You probably fell for the saleswoman, and she made you buy, among other things, a collection of ties.”

Ambrosio looks at his tie and thinks: “Well, yes, I bought half a

dozen ties in a Pisney park, but there was no conference, nor did the saleswoman make the slightest gesture to me, I was on vacation!”

AMPARO PIERNAS, THE VICE PRESIDENT, IS NERVOUS AND WAITING IN the presidential lobby. She wants to recruit Ambrosio as soon as possible and get the credit. Her popularity is declining at the same speed as world stock markets. The government coalition is breaking down and she may lose control of the ‘We are worthy’ party, which she and her partner, Aníbal Rijoso, steadfastly lead together.

“Come in, Amparo, and forgive my abruptness on the phone. I was in a very tense meeting of the Plurinational State. They are hopping mad at us for the mess we’ve made with the epidemic. As if we had asked for the virus to break out in Magrit. Had it been up to me, I would have placed it in Berlinone, to see that Schäfer manage the situation, being so smart and efficient. Tell me, Amparo, what are you up to? You know that changing ministers right after the beginning of the legislature is a very sensitive issue. I agree that they are clueless, but the replacement needs to be a leader who's capable of ending the epidemic. So, tell me about this Dr. Etoile, the alleged prodigy.”

“I'm not going to tell you; I secretly recorded the meeting on my cell phone. Turn on that widescreen television of yours, we'll watch it now. Judge for yourself. But I warn you, don't look directly at his tie, it's hypnotic!”

One hour later...

“Amparo, I can't believe it, you were right. We need him now. I'll appoint him Minister of Health tomorrow. The only thing that worries me about Dr. Etoile is that we must get him an image consultant — if he dresses like that it could be the end of us. I leave everything in your hands, Amparo. Summon him tomorrow at ten, meanwhile we'll get his appointment ready for the Official State Proclamation. I'll see you later, Amparo, and thank you for your keen eye.”

. . .

AMBROSIO ENTERS HIS OFFICE TRIUMPHANTLY SINGING: HOME, SWEET home! I sweated so much; my shirt is drenched. I didn't see this one coming, ha, ha, ha! Those faces were priceless if they only knew! I'll text Sac to thank him.

Hello, Sac. My deepest thanks for sending me the presentation on that device. I'm sure everyone's jaws dropped. If it wasn't for you, I would've made a fool of myself. You should come for a visit; we could treat our taste buds together. It's about time we meet. Now it's me sending you hugs.



Hello, Ambrosio, I'm glad you have succeeded. My search engines say the pictures of your tie are going viral. I suggested that you wear a frilly dress, but it was a joke, I didn't know you were going to take it literally. There are more than one hundred thousand comments. Look at them if you want, but I would think twice. Just so you don't get low, I'll tell you, they're going to call you from the Office of the President. The rest I'll leave up to your imagination. Take care.



YES, I CAN IMAGINE IT. AMBROSIO IS THE NEXT MINISTER! AMBROSIO IS the next minister! Ambrosio is the next minister!

“Knock! Knock!”

“What now, Angelines?”

“Nothing, Dr. Etoile, I just heard you scream, and I got worried. Excuse me, the phone's ringing. Hello? Hold on, please. Doctor Etoile?”

“Yes, Angelines?”

“From the Office of the President, they want to talk to you.”

“Put them through”, Angelines. “Dr. Etoile speaking, with whom do I have the pleasure?”

“Good afternoon, Dr. Etoile, Concha Graciosa speaking, the secre-

tary of the Vice President, Amparo Piernas. She and the President expect you tomorrow at ten a.m. Have a good afternoon, goodbye, goodbye.”

Could it be true, Ambrosio? Buy they're not calling me about the tie, right? Did it really cause such a fuss?

Tuesday, April 13, 3520. Day +12

In the shower, thinking about his imminent future, Ambrosio carefully soaps all the corners of his body, paying extreme attention to his muffin top. Lalala, Lalala, Lalala, what a beautiful tenor voice you have, Ambrosio! If the call of Science had not been so powerful you would have chosen Bel Canto to be even better than Taparotti. Remember what the music teacher used to say at school. If you had listened to him, you would have performed in all the opera houses in the world. Don't overthink it, Ambrosio, you're going to be a minister, and on your own merits. But you must choose your outfit carefully today — that Pisney tie has left some bruises. People don't get you, it's the others who have bad taste. They always go for gray or navy. However, you, with your unique style and your athletic body, can afford to be bold. The only problem is this little flab that has sprouted inadvertently, nobody knows how, but you will eliminate it in a jiffy. You have already been told that the Minister of Health gets a private gym with a personal trainer...

After a thorough drying and shaving...

Let's see, what can I wear? I'd better hurry. I'm wearing a suit today, that's what the President deserves. Let's see... not the purple one, not the green one, the black one is for funerals, this one with the blue and red pinstripes is more for summer, huff! This is so complicated! I know, I'll wear the gray one with the stars pattern, which I bought in my friend Toni's boutique in Salsira. I remember distinctly, he said, “take this unique suit, it's called firmament” and he added, “I've seen that Gambeteo Tossi has a similar one, but with subpar tailoring. Look it up on HoHoo, you'll see. He wore it for some gala, for one of those awards they usually give him.” I'll add a purple shirt and no tie, like Acornwood actors do. Matching socks and these

Calcio & Pepe shoes — with ‘Calcio’ on the right instep and ‘Pepe’ on the left, so that the President can recognize at first glance the dandy in me. Off we go, it's already nine a.m., I'm sure there will be traffic jams and Servando always gets caught in them.

AFTER DODGING THE CHAOTIC MAGRIT TRAFFIC FOR A WHILE...

THE PRESIDENT'S WAITING ROOM IS REALLY NICE, BUT IT'S SO HOT IN here. I can't touch the radiator, it's burning hot, and there're no windows to open. We're in April and they still have the heating on full blast, I'm not surprised by local and global warming. This suit is too small for me, I can't even sit down, the wrinkles are hiding the stars, at this rate the black hole will end up devouring them all. Sac is right about my muffin top. It's growing. I can't wait to meet my personal trainer and get in shape in the dignified area of the ministry. I think my pants button is going to pop any minute. I'll take off my jacket. Oh, no! Look at these sweat rings on my shirt! I can't take my jacket off; I'd rather keep sweating. I hope they call me in soon, or else it'll seem that I've come running. I don't want them to guess I'm so excited about the position. Luckily, I've sprayed myself with Álvarez Gómez cologne and I smell like paradise. The little hair I have left is sticking to my bald head. Take a deep breath, Ambrosio, calm down, you know how: Ohm! Ohm! Ohm!

“Dr. Etoile, the President and Vice President are waiting for you.”

“Excellent. May I leave my raincoat here?”

“Of course. Follow me please. Knock, knock! Madam President, Dr. Etoile.”

“Come in, come in, Ambrosio, I really want to meet you. You're kind of a big deal. I'll tell you something — it wasn't me, ok? Ha, ha, ha! Someone recorded your presentation with their cell phone and posted it on social networks. It's a *trending topic*. I got the statistics today and you have reached more than a million views in a single day, it's impressive! Everybody is talking about your tie — apart from the technology you used, of course. I would just throw that tie away. And

now, Amparo and I will say in unison: “Ambrosio, we want you on the team. We want you to be our Minister of Health, what do you say?”

“President and Vice-President, Vice-President and President, that’s a huge responsibility. I don’t know if I’m worthy of such an honor, especially with this epidemic crisis that we’re immersed in. Are you sure I have the profile you need? Am I the right person?”

“Yes, Ambrosio, we know you’re going to solve the epidemic. Thanks to you we’ll win the next election. Everything is ready for your appointment and watch me while I click here and send it off to the Official State Proclamation office. There’s no going back.”

“Madam President, thank you. It is a great honor to serve my country, I have no words to thank you for the trust you have placed in my humble person, a servile civil servant; excuse me, I’m so nervous, a helpful civil servant, dedicated to the greatness of Damania.”

“I’m so happy, Ambrosio, we knew you wouldn’t disappoint us, please sign here and here and here to finish the appointment. You are now the Minister of Health. The official ceremony will be held tomorrow, the Press will be there, you will take some smiling photos and you will present some empty and predictable speeches. Then your mandate in the Ministry of Health will begin, and I must warn you, if you don’t solve the damn epidemic that is ruining us in less than fifteen days, I will personally make sure that your next destination is one you truly deserve. Another warning: members of the Government are not allowed to advertise for any company. If it is covert advertising, it is more or less tolerated, but the Calcio & Pepe that you’re wearing in your shoes is totally forbidden, so now you know. I’m sorry, Ambrosio, but I have to run, I have a teleconference with the President of the Plurinational State and I’m late. She’s in her last months in power and she’s panicking over this problem. Oh! I shouldn’t forget, Amparo and I want you to give us that gadget you used the other day. We don’t need to know where it came from, we just want to have one for each of us. Now you’re on our team, Ambrosio! Don’t forget!”

“HERE’S YOUR RAINCOAT, DR. ETOILE, AND YOUR HAT. YOU KNOW YOUR

way out, don't you? Until next time. We will surely see you again soon. Take care.”

WHY DOES EVERYBODY HAVE SOMETHING TO SAY ABOUT MY OUTFITS? Yesterday it was the tie, today it's the shoes, what will it be tomorrow? But my self-esteem'll never bottom out what with this high-ranking responsibility that's been entrusted to me. I can't be the patsy for baseless comments from people who only wear gray. Dandies have always been misunderstood. Just read what happened to Roscar Wilde and Beau Brammele. Ambrosio, you finally are Minister of Health. Mom will be so proud of you, and Dad, may he rest in peace, will support you unconditionally from heaven.

“Hello, Servando, let's head back to the nest. Don't drive too fast, I have messages to write on the way, and if you drive the way you usually do, I'll have to retype them a hundred times before I get them right.”

“At your service, Dr. Etoile. Coasting it is!”

Let's see, first I'll send SMS messages to Sac, Cándido, Aitor, and then I'll call Angelines to summon Carolina. The rest of them can hear it from the press, it'll have that wow factor, and that way everyone who envies me will realize I don't give a damn about them.

“WOW, CAROLINA, IT'S YOU WHO'S WAITING FOR ME, THIS ONCE — IT'S normally the other way around. Well, come in, have a seat. I'll be right with you. I need to have a word with Angelines, it'll just be a minute.

“Angelines, pack your stuff, and mine — we're moving to the Ministry of Health. You're looking at the new minister.”

“Oh, that's such great news, Doctor Etoile. You're moving to the ministry!”

“And so are you, Angelines, we're a team.”

“I'm afraid that won't be possible, Dr. Etoile. I have my parents living at home with me, my mother is disabled. My children won't study at all if I don't force them, and I have to sit with them every

afternoon. My husband's never home before ten p.m. and commuting to the ministry would take me at least two hours by public transport, so it will not be possible, Dr. Etoile.”

“But Angelines, I was counting on you, although I see your situation is not the greatest. I will really miss you. If you change your mind, just call me.”

“Thank you so much, Dr. Etoile, I will.”

“I have to go now, Dr. Aile is waiting for me.”

“Go, go, and thank you for counting on me.”

So, Dr. Etoile is a minister now. That was close, Angelines! You thought he would catch you, but after five years working for him, your suspicions were well founded. You have no children, you have been an orphan since you were six years old, Aunt Consuelo raised you, may she rest in peace, and you're still single and carefree. Dr. Etoile is just so empathetic!

“CAROLINA, YOU LOOK SO GOOD, YOU'RE GLOWING.”

“Ambrosio, what is it with you these days? Ever since I came back you've been giving me these paternal talks non-stop, peppered with censoring comments, and today I'm also glowing. I'm starting to worry about you. Have you stopped taking your meds?”

“Ha, ha, ha! You're so funny, you know I'm the definition of balance. I have great news. I am the new Minister of Health and I'd like you to help me in this new position. What do you say?”

“Well, I say you're a dimwit, Ambrosio. This virus is turning the world upside down and you just fell into the eye of the hurricane. Don't even think about dragging me into those power games of yours. I'm going back to the Observatory as soon as this is over. The labs are beyond abandoned. There are no words to describe your backlog. There's no fixing you people. You think that the competition is in Damania, and you don't realize that investing in Science, in addition to being one of the world's greatest businesses, produces local benefits of all kinds.”

“I don't want you to be an expat again, Carolina. I want you to take my place.”

“No freaking way, Ambrosio. I like what I do in Public Health, and this is nothing but a headache. I spend my days hearing all the laboratory heads whining and only caring about themselves, and as soon as a problem comes up, they just disappear. I have the right person for this position and now you get along very well with her, unlike at the beginning.”

“And who would that sweet daisy be, Carolina?”

“Well, Genoveva, who else? She’s single and bored and she likes bossing everyone around, or even better, believing that she’s the boss, because here there isn’t much we can decide, is there... It would be as if you were still here. She won’t do anything you don’t tell her to do first.”

“Hmm, not a bad idea. I no longer dislike her, and this way she’ll be forever grateful. Okay then, Genoveva it is. I’ll let her know tomorrow, and you hold your tongue until it’s official.”

“Goodbye, Ambrosio, and congratulations.”

I'M GOING TO THE LOGGERHEAD TURTLE TO CELEBRATE. I'LL EAT TRIPE and lamb, and I'll smoke a cigar. The occasion calls for it! Ambrosio's ascent to the celebrity stardom has begun.

CHAPTER 4

CONFIRMATION

Wednesday, April 14, 3520. Day +13

THE VOICE OF TAPAROTTI'S SUCCESSOR INVADES THE APARTMENT.



This is so reckless
Etoile is the bestest
an incredibly Ministerial Mandarin
changing everything
with Spicavirus trembling
Science he's reinventing



— AMBROSIO ETOILE

WHAT SHOULD I WEAR FOR TODAY'S INAUGURATION? I'M SO CONFUSED these days, so much responsibility. Let's keep it simple today, the

press will be there, and I'll be all over the news — navy blue suit, black shirt and brown tie. Even dark socks and shoes, nothing fancy. I'm so nervous.

“Good morning, Servando; after such a long time, today is our last day together. I'll miss you, although you're lucky — my substitute is less demanding than I am.”

“Good morning, Dr. Etoile; I'll miss you too. Where're we headed?”

“To the Ministry of Health, Servando.”

THE ROOM IS PACKED WITH EXPECTANT JOURNALISTS, WAITING FOR THE outgoing and incoming ministers. The epidemic continues to devastate the planet and there is a lot of interest in meeting, in person, the fool who has accepted such responsibility in the midst of this debacle. The bets on his duration in office are going to make a lot of people rich. Leaks indicate that he's a brilliant doctor, speaks several languages, and has an excellent résumé. Hundreds of publications in prestigious journals and countless conferences in national and international congresses support it. For the first time there will be a doctor at the head of the ministry, and on top of that he's a specialist in infectious diseases. It was about time! There've been ministers with all types of profiles and backgrounds — the last one was a poet. Crowds are full of anticipation.

AMADEO SANCTIMONIO TRISTÓN HAS JUST ARRIVED AND CHATS HAPPILY with Dr. Lynx, Dr. Albino and Dr. Bombón. His face shows relief and calm. For the first time, ever since this nightmare began, he has no dark circles under his eyes. All heads turn to see Ambrosio Etoile enter, sporting a big smile from ear to ear. Ambrosio and Amadeo embrace. Doctor Bombón looks quite serious and thinks: “Look at these two geniuses! We're in the middle of a pandemic caused by a virus that's transmitted through the air and they're hugging each other.”

. . .

THE CEREMONY BEGINS, BUT WE'LL SKIP EVERYONE'S SPEECHES BECAUSE we already know what they're going to say, right? Let's hear the promises that the new minister is about to make.

“Good morning,” blah, blah, blah, and suddenly:

“I announce that, today, we will establish a series of measures on which we will give specific information this afternoon. I will be accompanied by the President, who will be the one to communicate them. I'll take care of the technical clarifications. Therefore, I deem it appropriate that we end this ceremony at this juncture. There is work I need to do. Exchanging two ministers will not magically end this epidemic. Good day.”



PEOPLE GATHER IN SMALL, EXCITED CROWDS, SAYING: “HOW IS IT possible? The appointment was announced yesterday afternoon, and he already has a plan of action? This is totally unprecedented: ‘Reality is stranger than fiction’.”

BEFORE LEAVING THE ROOM, AMBROSIO GLIMPSES A MAN, IN HIS FIFTIES, beardless, graying hair combed back, about six feet tall, and not a trace of fat in his body. However, what's most striking is the simplicity of his elegance. He's wearing a navy-blue suit, a double-breasted jacket with ivory buttons, a white shirt, a pale orange plaid tie, trousers with a cuff a bit wider than usual and which reach, but do not touch, a pair of brown double-buckle Cordovan shoes. His gaze is intense and penetrating, and Ambrosio has the feeling that he has given him a slight signal. Just then, Cándido approaches Ambrosio, congratulates him, and when they're done the solitary man is by his side and whispers: “Doctor Etoile, so pleased to meet you in person, I am Sac Cerev.” Ambrosio is paralyzed, overwhelmed with doubt and amazement. His imagination has played a trick on him again: he is

neither chubby nor short nor ragged. Sac looks so powerful and seductive!

“Ah, yes, sure, Mr. Cerev, I'm sorry I seemed a bit confused, but honestly I was expecting you to look different somehow.”

“Don't worry, Dr. Etoile, I get that all the time. I'm more than used to it. We should meet before the press conference you've just announced.”

“Oh! I'm afraid that won't be possible, I have other urgent matters to attend to.”

“Dr. Etoile, I think you should postpone them. I can assure you that what I have to tell you is more urgent than your highest priority.”

“Always so convincing, Mr. Cerev. I'll see what I can do. Give me a minute and I'll be right with you.”

“Thank you very much. I'll wait for you over here, but I think we should be on a first-name basis. After all, we've already been communicating informally for a few days now...”

“Okay, I'm ready. First name it is, then. I have a few minutes. Let's go to my office. Come with me. Here it is. Come in, please, have a seat. Let's see, what is this imperative matter we need to discuss? We don't have many — or any — pending matters, that I know of. This is where our paths begin to separate.”

“What a curious response, Ambrosio, one of the deepest gratitude moving toward complete divergence. Being a minister may be synonymous with strength and power, but you seem to have forgotten who put you there, you're so forgetful! May I show you the messages we exchanged? Here they are, *voilà*, right here, on my phone. Just one click and they'll end up in that newspaper which holds your government in such high esteem, and tomorrow the adventures of the new Minister of Health will appear on the front page, in five columns above the fold. I'll rain on your parade and make sure you go back to the sewer you came from. Then I'll choose your substitute with great pleasure, how many do you imagine can replace you? Dozens, hundreds? What difference does it make, it doesn't matter, but you — I'll make sure you are eliminated. You're like the ant that has found some succulent crumbs, and just when the dreaming of feast is about

to begin, a shadow appears and squashes it flat. The executing finger is then carefully cleaned, and with another sip of champagne resumes the — briefly — interrupted appetizer. No one has witnessed how the miserable ant perished reaching for that crumb that meant its entire happiness. Because that is what you've achieved, minister, a miserable crumb. Your imagination does not understand the exact meaning of the word power when it is actually displayed. You're already an accident and whoever I choose will relieve you immediately. The click you just heard has interrupted the distribution of the material that was going to start in five minutes, not even! A mere second. Forget about the press conference and the plan you were going to announce this afternoon. No one will have nanochips tomorrow. Wake up, Ambrosio, Molecular Solutions does not manufacture anything, it's just a shell corporation, I'm the one calling the shots. Change that incredulous face and call Aitor. I can't stand fake embraces and being forced to fly all night to attend your inauguration, only to have this puppet say that I'm no longer needed. Good-bye, minister. Divergence comes with a price, and you'll soon experience how much it costs."

A disturbing smile fills Sac's face, who gets up, pushes his chair back, places it in its original place with great care, slowly buttons up his jacket and, without taking his eyes off Ambrosio, quietly leaves the office.

OH GOD, AMBROSIO! THIS SAC IS QUITE A MENACE. I HAVE THE feeling I've just screwed up big time. Aitor has played me. He never told me he was in conversations with AISS. I'm going to call Aitor right away.

"Ambrosio, what the hell have you done? Sac just called me and is heading over here now."

"And how do you know, Sac?"

"Me? Judging by your tone, I think you already know. We're in business together."

"And why didn't you tell me, Aitor?"

"Because Sac wouldn't let me, that simple."

“So, you've always been one step ahead, you knew everything beforehand, didn't you?”

“Well, yeah, that's right, Ambrosio.”

“Is that what loyalty means to you, Aitor?”

“What do you want me to say, I think it means the same to both of us. I have no other way out. Molecular Solutions was bankrupt and thanks to Sac we have recovered and stabilized. When we first started, I had some help from you, but it's been a long time now since you last contributed anything. I think it's pretty easy to understand. From what Sac told me, in the short conversation we just had, you're in quite a bit of trouble. He doesn't like jokes or people who won't keep their word, and he really hates ungratefulness.”

“And what do I have to be grateful for?”

“That's so typical of you, Ambrosio, who are you kidding? I know your deal. You've been taking advantage of everyone around you, your whole life, and so far, it's worked for you, but Sac is different. He won't just give in and let you appropriate his contributions and pretend they were your ideas and your achievements. You thought you could use him until you were appointed minister, and then pretend you never knew him but, I'm afraid that, this time, it's not going to be that easy for you. Not that easy at all.”

“I don't buy it, Sac's too cocky. He can't just stop distributing the material and lose all that money. Long before the press conference begins, he will be eating out of my hand, I can assure you.”

“You're so wrong, Ambrosio. It's not distribution that he stopped, it's the actual manufacturing, and there is nothing here. All the material has been taken away. It all happened in the blink of an eye, and you're going to look like a liar in front of everyone.”

“What do you mean there's nothing, Aitor? That's impossible. Distribution began today, how can that be?”

“Well, it's like I'm telling you, Ambrosio. Some robotic drones brought over some sort of nanorobots that make anything. AISS is in a different galaxy, Ambrosio. I won't break with them, even if you pour boiling water on me. They've been manufacturing until just a moment ago, when they stopped and immediately began to recycle everything they had made so far. The drones returned, they picked

up the nanorobots and they disappeared. So, there's nothing you can show anyone. Well, yes, there is a huge empty industrial building. You can't even tell the President you've experienced some problems and that delivery is going to be delayed, because Molecular Solutions has nothing to send. If you don't fix this quickly, you're done for. I have to go now, Sac's here and he doesn't look happy at all."

SO THAT CLICK THING WAS NOT BRAVADO OR A BLUFF, IT WAS ACTUALLY true! I'm going over to Molecular Solutions right now. I'll have to get down on my knees! I can't go in the official car, so I'll take a taxi. I hope they don't miss me here.

"Taxi! To Crazy Goldfinch, number 27. It is in the Lost Birds industrial park. And hurry, please, I'm late."

"Very well, sir, let's cage that Crazy Goldfinch at once, any particular station you'd like to hear? Would you like a bottle of water? Candies, chocolates? Newspapers? Magazines?"

"No, thank you very much, please, let's get moving."

"DR. MENTA, DR ETOILE'S HERE. SHOULD I LET HIM IN?"

"Come in, Ambrosio. You know Sac. We were just talking about you. Have a seat. What is it?"

"I'm here to apologize. I don't know what happened, I got confused, as I sometimes do, but it wasn't my intention to ruin our relationship because of a word which, by the way, doesn't suit me in the least. I am a convergent person, not divergent at all. I'm sorry, Sac. I hope you accept my apologies so we can start all over again."

"It's not that simple, Ambrosio, an apology won't be enough, and I'll tell you why. Your attitude in your brand-new minister's office is typical of servile and uncontrollable sociopaths. Before becoming a minister, you were all flattery. How many messages have you sent me thanking me for my generosity and expressing that you wanted to meet me in person? How many?"

"Well, ahem, a few, I guess, Sac."

"But as soon as you achieved the power you wanted, Ambrosio,

your main priority was to get rid of those who helped you to get there. You think that plan will hide your actual nature. As soon as you knew you would become a minister, your gratitude lasted about the amount of time it took you to write and send a text message to proceed with your extermination plan, immediately after your swearing in. You use false manners and lies to climb, rung after rung, your stairway to heaven. You're a thief of ideas. Those who supply them, voluntarily or involuntarily, end up being eliminated when you reach a new circle of power. You can't leave anything to chance, mixing old and new colleagues could derail your trickster plans. When people listen to you, and then flatter you, you think that you're the chosen one, that without you the world would not shine. Those sensations are more addictive than any other drug, and you just can't give it up, you look for it all the time. You don't consider the withdrawal syndrome; you know you wouldn't live through it. You're sick. And that is what you tried to do today, and that is precisely why it will be very difficult for our collaboration to continue. If we help you climb, you'll do the same over and over again. We must let you fall. It's too risky to let you reach the pinnacle of the elite. As I said, one click and I destroy you. All the media would echo the fact that your proposals are not actually yours nor your collaborators', that you've practiced industrial espionage to get them, that you've had a bank account in a tax haven for a long time, and that you've abused the trust of a former PhD student who now runs a company that you forced him to set up to earn even more money. In short, that you are a sham. Are you capable of refuting my arguments?"

"Listen, Sac, you're being a bit extreme and cruel. Do you really think I am all those things you're saying? I told you it was just an outburst. The office got into me, and I wasn't myself, I'll admit it. I really don't understand what happened to me. I know my words won't convince you and that my apologies will be useless. The only thing I can assure you is that, if our relationship continues, you will be leaders in the sector, because you're going to win all the ministry's contracts. Also, if other departments of other Ministries announce contracts and you apply for them, I will try to use the Council of

Ministers and my personal relationships to grant them to you. What do you think, Sac?"

"Well, you should already know that AISS, and by extension Molecular Solutions, don't ever bid on public contracts, so you'll have to get everything granted to us directly. Those are my conditions."

"I accept them, although that's not easy, Sac. You've already won the battle at the Ministry of Health, and with the advanced products you develop it will be easy for us to accept whatever you apply for."

"Now you're starting to find the right apologies, Ambrosio, but that's not enough. You have to put it in writing, spoken words are gone with the wind, and in your case it's a hurricane that's blowing."

"Come on, Sac, how can I sign a document acknowledging that I'm planning on committing malfeasance, bribery and what not? It wouldn't be very smart of me, would it?"

"Ambrosio, we already have more than enough on you, a few more crimes wouldn't add much to your excellent résumé. It is all recorded. We have documentary evidence of each and every one of your movements and operations, and what was missing was supplied by your friend, right, Aitor?"

"This is uncomfortable, Ambrosio, but I had no other way out. When you were offered to the position as Director of Reference Laboratories, you left me in the lurch. You were going to work in senior management. From that moment on, all the plans that we had carefully designed for Molecular Solutions vanished overnight. All those wonderful diagnostics, based on our high-level scientific activity, which we were going to invent, develop, patent, and commercialize, it all came to nothing. I've been living on a thousand-dodones salary for eight years, and I have triplets. Marta can't work. Her parents help us, but we don't have enough income for someone to take care of the children. She has already said that either I find a solution or else she'll leave me, that she isn't too old, and that she won't wait for the great Ambrosio Etoile to save her life. And I'm in love with Marta and I love the triplets, even if the sperm is from someone else and you find that very funny. Because of you, Ambrosio, I've lived in a vicious cycle that Sac has broken. You already know which side I'm on, don't you, Ambrosio? Sac has all the details of all

the transfers that Molecular Solutions has made to your account at Lignum Bank and, as you know, there are quite a few. Besides, if this whole thing goes public — the fact that you were fleecing a family with triplets by giving them a thousand dodones while you pocketed the rest, without paying taxes — your expatriation will be the lesser evil. It seems to me that you have no escape, Ambrosio. You'll have to sign.”

“Wow, the situation's serious! I need something to drink and make it strong. This is very hard to digest. What can you pour me, Aitor?”

“Given our financial situation, I can offer you a Lirios with tonic. That's the best I can do.”

“Well then, Lirios with tonic it is. I will be reminded of my teenage years. I admit I am trapped and that I haven't behaved as I should have, so I agree to sign the document, but I promise that you will never have to use it. From now on my loyalty will be unwavering.”

“Certainly, it will be unwavering, but thanks for signing the document. It's ready, Ambrosio, we knew you would accept any conditions we gave you; you really have no escape. Your penchant for heights will end up knocking you down one day. Sign at the bottom and on every page and write the date and time, Wednesday, April 14, 3520, 13:25. A Day that we will all remember forever.”

“There it is, my signature on each and every page.”

“AND NOW, AMBROSIO, WE'RE GOING TO SHARE WITH YOU THE TOOLS for glory. I'll start with something that you already partially know, the device you used at the Situation Committee. It already has a name, it is called “BICShow” and we plan on releasing it but are still discussing what applications the commercial model will carry. It's the control center for our systems in the cloud. Our systems communicate through natural language processing, only a little more advanced than the existent ones. The interrelation is at the human level and in any language. I'll show you the whole prototype. The first thing we're going to do is create your avatar.”

Sac produces the BICShow from the inside pocket in his jacket. It's not just a regular BIC pen, it makes him the master of ceremonies.

"BIC, make an avatar for Ambrosio and show it to us."

"Sure thing, Sac. Ambrosio, please stand up so I can take a proper look. Please turn around slowly, and now a little walk. There, I have got it, do you want to see it? Bear in mind he is naked."

"Why is he naked, BIC?"

"Well, ahem! The color palettes that Ambrosio normally chooses for his outfits are not included in the algorithm, so it gets stuck. We need to introduce the new data so that it can select the *Etoile style*. If you don't want to see him naked, I can dress him in a normal outfit but, I warn you, it will not be Ambrosio Etoile."

"Ha, ha, ha! This is too funny, Ambrosio, too funny, you've managed to confuse the algorithm and make it dizzy, you're one of a kind. Nobody had ever done that before. Dress him in a conventional outfit, BIC, and project the image."

"Okay, Sac. Here goes."

A three-dimensional image, certainly difficult to distinguish from the real Ambrosio, materializes about two meters from Sac and Aitor.

"You look so elegant, Ambrosio. BIC has good taste. I would make your avatar my butler. It reproduces your movements. You can record in advance, and have it projected wherever you want, or you can do it live."

"The truth is that the other day I was so nervous I didn't pay this much attention, — says Ambrosio. There was a lot at stake for me!"

"When you used it at the Situation Committee it was all pre-programmed, but it's actually more versatile. You can organize meetings, as long as all the invitees have a BICShow. You just tell your BIC to go online, and the other avatar will show up next to you. You can chat over a drink or do whatever your imagination fancies. No option for hanky panky for now, but we'll work on it, so you can all kiss STDs goodbye. It is useful, business costs will decrease while you get virtually real-life contact. You don't just talk to a screen where you can only see people's faces but with a full-size avatar that reflects exactly what the other person is doing thousands of miles away. No more wearing a jacket and tie with pajama pants and flip-flops for

online meetings. If you forget to disconnect the video and you get up the show is on full display. Now I'm going to present the BICShow manufacturing control module. We don't have a warehouse, so our goods are never immobilized — everything is manufactured on the spot. As of now, nobody else has this technology, and copying it will be extremely complicated. It all started with synthetic biology and new materials, such as graphene, which has allowed us to develop, by means of artificial intelligence, what I'm about to show you. We have it protected with patents and laser machine guns. I'll stop talking now, an informative silence. See it and you will believe. The manner by which we have achieved this belongs to the kingdom of the god Ingenuity. Let's see how Aitor has transformed the old warehouses into a modular factory adapted to market demands.”

The three of them go to the old Molecular Solutions warehouses, now turned into a state-of-the-art factory of utmost simplicity. In the center of the warehouse there are two tanks from which thousands of pipes come out ending in a series of empty shelves, going from floor to ceiling.

“Hey, BIC,” — says Sac. “Tell the drones to bring some material over.”

“Okay, Sac.”

“Let's go outside and watch them arrive,” — says Sac.

The silhouettes of hundreds of drones appear against the sky, heading towards Molecular Solutions. They land in an orderly fashion in the yard, fold their propellers, and turn into quadruped robots walking toward the industrial building. From the robots' central compartments emerge six black boxes measuring 20x20x10 cm, which they place on a shelf. Successively, more robots arrive until each shelf has its own box. The robots assemble the pipes labeled IN / OUT coming from the tanks to the IN / OUT connections of the boxes.

“And where do the drones come from?” — asks Ambrosio.

“We have a carrier mothership flying over Damania. We developed them with the Califian Army for other purposes and, due to the epidemic, one of them is located here. They're electric, solar-powered, and only land for check-ups or when something goes

wrong. They are unmanned, everything is automated. It's simply a giant base where drones constantly go in and back out once they've been charged. They also repair each other. Another successful public-private initiative."

"You keep lying to me, Sac, nothing of what you're telling me can be true."

"BIC, let the scheduled manufacturing process begin."

"Right away, Sac."

All the boxes open at the same time and, as if by magic, different products appear gradually. Nanochips appear on some of the shelves, bracelets on others and, not far away, there are other shelves holding jars filled with a transparent liquid.

Ambrosio can't believe what he's seeing.

"You guys slipped something in my Lirios and tonic, some SDL, or something worse. I'm hallucinating. Where does all this come from? I was just looking at an open box attached to some pipes and an empty shelf and, all of a sudden, things materialized out of nowhere."

"You never listen to me, I told you when you called me," — Aitor says.

"It's not magic, Ambrosio, it's artificial intelligence," — Sac says.

"BIC, zoom into the image so that Ambrosio can see how we manufacture."

BIC projects a three-dimensional image, in which millions of ant nanorobots appear attached to the black box by means of a nanowire, and thus the different products emerge.

"BIC, show us the recycling process now."

BIC projects another three-dimensional image showing how the same nanorobots devour, in seconds, one of the bracelets.

"A very efficient process, isn't it, Ambrosio? The tanks store compartments with the necessary compounds to manufacture each of the products. One of the tanks has the prime materials for the manufacturing process and the other receives the waste products. Inside it there are thousands and thousands of nanorobots that finish recycling the waste compounds and prepare them for reuse. The actual material waste is less than five percent. A very efficient process. Nanobots make anything, any size. Each of them knows

what they have to do. The fact that each of these ants is a nanocomputer is an actual technological wonder — they can perform different activities depending on the instructions they receive. You must be wondering what those nanopipes are for, aren't you, Ambrosio?"

"I'm wondering so many things right now. I don't have enough gray matter to take it all in."

"Hahaha! The pipe is not there to keep the robot from escaping. Each nanopipe has two sections. They receive the material to be assembled through one of them, and they eliminate the waste material through the other. When they recycle, they use both, and the process is almost instant. You have already seen how we process our products, now we're going to explain to you what each of them is for, although some of them you already know. We have decided to make a kit to prevent contagion and self-diagnose the infection. What's the name going to be, Ambrosio?"

"Spica self-test?"

"You haven't guessed correctly this time. We have decided to call it "SpicaKit." It contains a protective mask, a bracelet and two capsules, the red one to detect the antigen, that is, if you're infected, and the green one to detect antibodies, in case you've already had the infection and are protected. We'll begin with the protective mask. Take this bottle and this mirror, point at your face and spray several times until a blue film covers the area of your mouth and nose."

"You're not going to poison me and split the business between the two of you, now that I've signed the document, are you?"

"No, Ambrosio. You're a key person in this whole story. Without you, we would never achieve our final goal, so don't worry and spray away."

"Okay, but this is scary!" after spraying. "That's it. I see the blue film slowly dissolving and disappearing. I don't feel any different."

"That's what it's about, Ambrosio. You have to be protected against viruses that are transmitted by aerosols in a simple and effective way. You see the color at the beginning to verify that it has been applied correctly. You can also use it on your hands, to prevent contagion by fomites that you touch. In addition, the polymer has a deter-

gent that is activated when the aerosols land on its surface: Artificial Intelligence, Ambrosio, it's all artificial.”

“You must be kidding me. This is beyond science fiction.”

“You're going to see it live with BICShow, look at this.

“BIC, show Ambrosio how “StopCold” works.”

A beam of bluish light emerges from the tip of the BICShow, which forms the three-dimensional face of a smiling young woman who says: “My name is Beatrix and I'm on my way to work, but first I'll apply Stop-Cold.” She takes a spray bottle out of her bag, like the one Ambrosio just used, and tsss, tsss, tsss. She goes out into the street, meets her friend Eleanor and they walk towards the subway together. They get into a crowded car and, unfortunately, they are stuck with a man with flushed nose who's sneezing and coughing non-stop. The aerosols come out of the man's mouth and nose and land on the carefree young women's faces. A zoom into the aerosol droplets show the evil Spicavirus, dancing inside. Some droplets are caught by Eleanor's breath, they reach the inside of her nose, and the Spicaviruses go on dancing while they sodomize her contemplative cells. Now, the image focuses on Beatrix's face, where you can see how the same aerosol droplets are trapped in the molecular structure of the polymer she just applied before leaving for work. The image zooms in to show how the merry dance of the evil Spicaviruses comes to an end — they fade, their coatings are diluted, the nucleic acid is denatured, and the viral particle disappears. Beatrix smiles and says: “Tomorrow's Friday and we'll go out for a drink, but Eleanor won't be coming, since she will be ill” — and the image fades.

“Anything else, Sac?”

“No, BIC, you can rest now. What do you think, Ambrosio?”

“What can I say? This is revolutionary! How long does it last?”

“One application in the morning and another after eating or drinking. The polymer is very elastic and adheres very well to skin and lips. The air circulates better than under conventional fabric. It doesn't billow out on the sides, top or bottom, as is normally the case with the masks we currently use.”

“But, you know, the mouth and nose are difficult to cover. There's no way it provides one hundred percent protection.”

“You're right, Ambrosio. The polymer gets deconstructed more easily in those areas and, if the subject receives aerosols loaded with viruses, some could get through. We still haven't conducted real-life efficacy studies. In the laboratory, the biopolymer film behaves like a mask that filters out at least ninety-five percent of the particles. It will not prevent contagion in one hundred percent of cases, but it will drastically decrease the number of people affected. Before analyzing costs, you forget about the waste generated by millions of masks. You already know where they're going to end up, all over the seabed, where collecting them is more than problematic. This polymer is biodegradable, and the spray bottle can be recycled. The mask is not visible and so avoids personal discrimination. People with speech or hearing impairment will not be stigmatized and their communication will not be compromised. It's such a successful product, Ambrosio!

And now we continue with the smart bracelet which provides early detection of possibly infected individuals. It's a band, one centimeter wide, called ‘SpicaTag’, and it's available in different colors and textures. You wear it on your wrist, connect it to your cell phone, and it monitors your sleep pattern, fever, heart rate, oxygen saturation, and sense of smell. We have developed an algorithm and validated it with ten thousand patients with Spicavirus, ten thousand with influenza, ten thousand with other viral respiratory infections, ten thousand with bacterial infections, and ten thousand who are healthy, and can you guess what the algorithm has found? Well, it is capable of predicting that the individual will become ill between forty-eight and seventy-two hours before the first symptoms appear, and it is ninety-nine percent reliable. Then there's the nanochips, ‘SpicAc and SpicAg’, which you already know, so I won't tell you about them again — I don't feel like it. You know, you take the capsules and in three minutes you discover whether you're infected, protected, or still a Spicavirus virgin.”

“That I already know, and I know they work, Sac.”

“And finally, the chatbot, which is called...?”

“‘SpicaBot’, right?”

“Very good, Ambrosio! You’re shaping up. You have as much imagination as we do, ha, ha, ha!”

SpicaBot is a specific chatbot for the Spicavirus disease. You scan the QR code on the kit and that’s it. It’s the disease control center. It sends all the results and triages each infected person allowing the health services to give priority to the most serious cases. I’ll start with those who have not yet been infected and are wearing the bracelet. SpicaBot connects to the bracelet and monitors the data it transmits. As soon as it detects something wrong, SpicaBot orders an antigen test that arrives by courier, thus preventing the person or their family from going out and interacting with other individuals. If the test is positive, the contact tracing process begins immediately. SpicaBot logs all cell phones that have been within three meters of the patient and contacts users to notify them that they must get tested and remain in quarantine. It also interviews the patient, just in case any contact has been overlooked. All data are sent to the Tracking Office, so they finish verifying the process. With the bracelet and SpicaBot, the incubation time of the disease will be substantially reduced. Every hour we are ahead of the Spicavirus decreases the number of infections. In addition, the SpicaBot monitors the disease and keeps the patient at home, unless it detects symptoms that require hospital care. It follows up with periodic antigen and antibody determinations until the patient is discharged. It has a module for psychological assistance while the patient remains isolated. For those patients for whom the antigen self-test comes out positive, meaning they are infected, the process is identical: Constant monitoring, no unnecessary trips to the hospital, and a stable psychological condition, all of which lead to the final stage of the process and a return to normal life. SpicaBot is also useful for monitoring any late complications that arise during convalescence or persistent symptoms. For those who have already improved, it will keep records of when the test was done, showing that, for the time being, they are protected.”

And that’s everything. They have already finished making enough equipment for drones to start distributing them in drugstores.

“BIC, let the transportation begin.”

“Right away, Sac.”

The robots collect the goods, gather them in their central compartment and leave for their destination.

“Before all the drugstores close, Damania will have their SpicaKits. Tomorrow they will start distributing them and, just so you don’t have any lingering doubts, we’re going to see that happen in real time. All drones have cameras, and, for security reasons, they record everything. They are connected to our particular storm cloud, and we know where they are and what they are doing at all times.

“BIC, show us how a drone delivers SpicaKits to a drugstore” — says Sac.

BIC activates the beam, and the image of a drone landing at the door of a drugstore appears. It goes inside, delivers several packages, exits, and lifts off again. The image zooms out, showing a three-dimensional map of Damania where miniature drones are fulfilling their missions. When they finish, their colors change to a calm green, and the drones return to the carrier.

“They’ll be done in a couple of hours. All that the drugstore staff need to do is record the personal information of whoever requests the SpicaKit. Finally, we’re going to show you a simulation of the database where all the results are collected and evaluated” — says Sac.

“BIC, show it to us.”

“Right away, Sac.”

BIC projects a simulated database where the patient lists appear with a box next to each of the names. Inside of each box there is a circle in white, red or green, indicating a susceptible, infected or protected person.

“This is overwhelming, so many inventions, and they’ve been developed so fast!”

“I told you, Ambrosio, the artificial intelligence in AISS is real intelligence, even if its origin is artificial.”

“I see.”

“That’s it for now,” — Sac says. “I’m glad we’ve reached an agreement and I hope from now on we will behave as a true team. Honestly, if we don’t work together, we will not achieve the goals

we've set for ourselves, which are altruistic and only pursue the good of all Humanity and of the planet.”

“Very well said, Sac. I'm headed off now,” — Ambrosio says. “I'd like you two to come to the ministry tonight, so I can introduce you to the President. I'll make sure your names are on the list.”

“See you later, Ambrosio,” Sac and Aitor say in unison.

“That was close! Just for a moment I thought I would be the shortest-serving minister in history, and I've only been appointed by a miracle,” Ambrosio thinks.

CHAPTER 5

SIEGE

Wednesday, April 14, 3520. Day +13

IN THE PRESS ROOM OF THE MINISTRY OF HEALTH, THE PRESIDENT, THE Vice President, the shiny new Minister of Health — Ambrosio Etoile — Margarita Bombón, Cándido Albino, Sermón Lynx and other members of the Government are waiting until eight p.m. to communicate to the people of Damania the radical plan they have designed in order to manage the pandemic. The accredited media are expectant and eager to hear about the plan announced this same morning. A mobile unit is on standby to send the announcement by video signal to all the planetary television networks.

And the clock struck so the show began... The confederate television announces the stellar intervention and the beginning of the end that the nightmare no one had seen coming.

“GOOD EVENING FROM THE HEADQUARTERS OF THE MINISTRY OF Health. Our President, Amada Dísima, addresses the people of Damania to communicate the decisions of the Government in relation to the pandemic caused by the Spicavirus.”

“Dear fellow citizens: we are devastated as we witness the unstoppable spread of the Spicavirus throughout the planet. Our efforts to contain it and minimize the ravages it has caused are not having the desired effects. The number of people affected continues in a geometric progression. Our health system is on the brink of collapse and the number of deceased compatriots is alarming, especially the passing of our elders who, having served the Confederation with dignity and dedication, see their life expectancy threatened by an invisible enemy against which we have limited tools to fight back. We cannot remain impassive, given this situation. It requires drastic but balanced measures, as well as the response of a temperate professional who is able to dissect the problem and its multiple facets and immediately apply the appropriate corrective measures. This situation demands a leader whose pulse will not tremble in these moments of anxiety. It calls for the mettle of an experienced helmsman who avoids the dangers that the dark waters hide, and takes us to a safe port, where we disembark without fear of being attacked by unknown threats. And I am glad to announce that we have found such a leader. Despite his humility, his achievements have reached the ears of the Government, and we have unanimously implored him to take command of the decisive task of defeating the virus, the most complex mission that the Damanian Confederation has ever had to undertake in this century. It is with great pleasure that I introduce you to this descendant of the legendary conquerors from Damania, who made our Confederation famous by subjugating those enemies who wanted to crush the freedom that all peoples have to choose their own destinies. Let me introduce you to the new Minister of Health, Ambrosio Etoile, who will now explain in detail the measures that will be implemented beginning at midnight.”



“Thank you very much, Madam President, and good afternoon, dear fellow citizens: if we are not able to control this situation, the humanitarian catastrophe that will arise will have unforeseeable

consequences. I am going to speak to you clearly, openly, without grandstanding or deceit. I am going to address you as what you are, adults committed to the future of Damania. I have not accepted this responsibility to launch a career, since I already have one — I love my profession and I want to go back to it as soon as I have fulfilled my mission. You must forgive me, but being a scientist, I must let you know the seriousness of the epidemic in which we are immersed. Spicavirus is a plague like those from the Middle Ages. It is transmitted from person to person, there is no curative medicine, we can only mitigate the consequences that the virus produces in the body and trust the patient's strength to pull through. The only way to prevent contagion is isolation — being alone, not seeing anyone, not touching anyone, — but prolonged loneliness is neither feasible nor desirable for a social species.

The Spicavirus preys on the elderly, but there are also young people who get sick, so there are reasons to commit to not becoming the messengers of death. They must protect themselves to safeguard the rest. Fear of the afterlife does not fade over the years but only becomes more present. Accepting that one has more past than future leads to savoring every second that one dodges the inevitable, with an intensity unknown to those who still have a long time to go. We know that at least one hundred thousand people are infected, and it has happened in just thirteen days. No health system can support such an influx of patients. The only diagnostic test available is not easy to perform — it requires advanced technology and specialized personnel. It cannot be done just anywhere. The result is obtained at a normally acceptable speed, but in this case, it is too slow for a devastating epidemic. The time that elapses from the collection of the sample until the negative result arrives is too long to guarantee that the patient has not been infected during the wait time. Therefore, all individuals without traces of the virus must be tested again and again, constantly, so that we have a chance to control the epidemic. For logistical reasons this is not feasible. A massive use of PCR will not prevent the spread of the virus and the permanent escalation of cases to a global contagion.

So, with these assessments of the situation, we must choose what

Damania will do. One option is the 'Cage Plan', which means we all lock ourselves up for an indefinite period of time until the number of cases decreases, and hospitals are in a position to take care of the sick in an acceptable way. If we apply that plan and confine Damania, economic activity will cease, and you know what that means: company bankruptcy, loss of jobs, economic recession, lack of leisure and exercise, and the consequent appearance of hunger and misery. But the 'Etoile Plan' can be applied instead, which exchanges the cage's bars for scientific and technological developments. I have created a 'Spicavirus Kit', which will be available beginning tomorrow. Its cost is zero dodones, since it is subsidized by the Confederal State of Damania, but in return we ask for the collaboration of all citizens. All Damanians must pick up and use a Spicavirus kit. No coercive measures will be taken, so it does not matter whether they are legal or illegal residents or just passing through. We want to know the number of infected people in order to stop this nightmare. If all of you collaborate, we will know in less than a week. I'll show you now, what the Spicavirus kit contains. Here it is, in my hand, in this bag I'm holding. The kit includes four components and a QR code, which must be scanned in order for 'SpicaBot', a chatbot, to be installed on your cell phone. The first component is a spray bottle to apply an invisible mask that reduces the risk of contagion, with a reliability similar or superior to approved conventional masks. The second one is a bracelet that contains a device which monitors your sleep pattern, heart rate, oxygen saturation, fever, and sense of smell. The third one is a red capsule containing a diagnostic device that is used to detect whether the virus is already circulating in your body, and the fourth component is a green capsule, with another diagnostic device, which can detect whether you have already cleared the infection and are now protected against the virus.

Wearing a mask is mandatory. Although doing it in relative isolation and in the open air makes little sense, people's general tendency to indiscipline forces the imposition of its use. It's quite unfortunate, the fact that we have to be so drastic in Damania, but that is a different discussion, because right now this invisible and impercep-

tible mask invalidates such a dilemma. Once applied it leaves no trace and, since it must be used at all times, the State security forces have a reader device which can detect its presence. Likewise, the multiple surveillance cameras which are installed at many locations are being reprogrammed to check whether people are wearing masks. I advise you to apply it — fines for failing to do so will be substantial. It protects you and others, and since you will forget you are wearing it, SpicaBot will notify you when to reapply it.

The response time for the capsules — the third and fourth components of the kit — is about three minutes. If both results are negative, you neither have Spicavirus nor have you ever had it. In this case, the use of the second component, the bracelet, is critical, since it will monitor these essential parameters, the alteration of which will make SpicaBot advise to quickly repeat the antigen detection test to confirm or rule out that you are infected. Patients with a positive result will receive precise medical instructions, and SpicaBot will provide a 24/7 hotline with a physician and psychologist. If the doctor considers it appropriate, there will be an ambulance sent to your home to take you to the nearest hospital for a more precise evaluation.

I know you are wondering: what if I don't have a cell phone? Although this is rare today, multiple profiles can be configured in SpicaBot. It doesn't matter if SpicaBot isn't physically close. The bracelet will send the data anyway, and when an antigen test has to be run, due to the alteration of some parameter, the bracelet will turn red. This last function is especially useful with children. And with this I'll finish my presentation and leave you to your decision. Think it over, dear fellow citizens: either you lock yourselves up and hide the key until further notice, or you choose SpicaKit and continue with an almost normal life. Tomorrow we will know what you have decided. Good evening.”



THE PRESIDENT AND HER COHORT APPROACH AMBROSIO TO congratulate him.

“What a wonderful speech, Ambrosio! Your ideas were so clear! You expressed yourself so well, step by step. We've made such a great decision, haven't we, Amparo?”

“Absolutely, Madame President, I am dazzled. I want you to know, Ambrosio, that everybody at the Office of the Vice-President is at your entire disposal to help you with this colossal task that we're dealing with.”

“Thank you very much. I would like to introduce you to the Head of Molecular Solutions and the Head of External Relations of Artificial Intelligence Specific Solutions, with whom we have established a public-private partnership. Without them we would not have all the diagnostic equipment that we need. They are key in this process, so we must treat them well. They will be the architects of our salvation. We must give their products priority and exclusive treatment.”

“Of course, Ambrosio, we are at your service.”

“Aitor, Sac, please, the President and Vice President would like to meet you.”

“Good evening,” they both say in unison.

“Aitor Menta, head of Molecular Solutions.”

“Sac Cerev, head of External Relations in Artificial Intelligence Specific Solutions.”

At that same moment, Orfila Orejuela Aguda, the ministry's press officer, approaches Ambrosio's group and says:

“You had more of an audience than the National Team when it won the World Cup. This is unheard of, Minister! The whole Confederation listened to you! Now let's see if they collaborate. I've already reserved one kit at my drugstore. The bag is very cute and is reusable, don't you think?”

“I think it's great for the beach. We need a matching sarong,” Amada and Amparo comment.

“What a great idea!” they all respond in unison.

“I'll have to make my exit,” — Ambrosio says. “I have yet to finish setting up my equipment. We can't stop, we need to win this battle! Aitor and Sac, do you have a moment? There's something I'd like to discuss.”

“Yes, of course, we always have time for you.”

“Let's go to my office, then. President, Vice President, Orfila. Good evening.”

AFTER A FEW MINUTES WALKING THROUGH CORRIDORS AND GOING UP floors towards the medical Olympus...

“Come in, have a seat. It'll just be five minutes. I just wanted to thank you for your help, especially Sac, in writing the speech. Your advice to avoid locking down the country has been masterful. It avoids innumerable economic problems for us, and the population's support will be more pronounced, as long as they don't consider their salary to be in danger. It was also a very successful idea not to distinguish between legal and illegal individuals, or permanent or incidental, as well as to have the Government assume the full cost of the diagnostic campaign during this first stage. People who fear for their money and who have no other choice than to work and earn their wages are an important source of transmission because they won't stay home, even if they're sick. They have to survive. There's no one protecting them, but we will flush the Spicavirus out from its hiding places by knowing who is or is not infected. I'm sure that the response is going to be massive and that we're going to experience supply problems, how is that going?”

“Everything is under control,” — Aitor says. “We have a guaranteed supply of kits, and we can even export them now. You've seen how fast those nanobots work. Warehouses are full and drones can assure urgent distribution. The only thing that makes us uneasy is that there will be lines at the drugstores, so there will be infections. We need to find alternative ways to distribute the kits. We have already reached an agreement with Parcelonia and orders can be placed as of tonight. They will begin distribution tomorrow. Cara has offered to distribute them in their retail chains and on their website, but we need to look for other channels. We have to analyze, slowly but surely, what is happening and proceed accordingly. The only thing that worries us, quite a bit I might add, is the question of when we're going to get paid, Ambrosio. We already know how well and fast the Government pays and we're supplying everything in advance,

saving your life and hoisting you into the firmament of power, so we hope you will start paying this week. If you don't, we'll stop everything.”

“Ambrosio Etoile is a man of his word. I will personally make sure you get paid by going through an emergency channel. There's something else I wanted to ask you, it's about the team. I've been thinking about it, and I have serious doubts. Who should be on it?”

“Aitor and I have been discussing this while you were delivering that magnificent speech to the people of Damania. You must simplify the organizational chart. All skills have been transferred, your place in Damania's Health Systems is as insignificant as the coach's in the future of Real Magrit, so the fewer the people the better, and the cheaper. Investors will appreciate it if you make an organizational chart that can fit on a single screen on the ministry website. Right now, there are more open-ended positions than bars in Magrit. We think you should surround yourself with prestigious people, with résumés that justify their position, but before we tell you who our candidates are, let's inspect the minister's cabinet and find out whether his chief of staff will keep his position or be thrown to the wolves this very night. Orlando Sumiso is a safe bet. He has just assumed this role after being elected number one in the opposition party, and he is most efficient. Let's begin with the gym — being the Minister of Health you have to set an example. Say goodbye to your muffin top. Karen Lebroq will melt you down with core training. The sauna is on and ready for you to sweat over the best nominations. Clean towels for the shower. Sportswear in your size. Karen's phone in a visible place, in case you have to stretch urgently. Water, isotonic drinks, energy drinks, other soft drinks and, of course, your favorite vodka and tonic brands. Some kind of new-age whiplash so your guests won't stay for too long. Playlists with your favorite music. Sumiso never fails. Ambrosio, you have a new fan. Apart from making sure your schedule is perfectly organized, he will make you happy with his ingrained willingness to please. Orlando will stick with the winning team. Now, the rest of collaborators: we think Cándido Albino would be a great undersecretary and Margarita Bombón would not lag behind as Health State Secretary. You have to

unify the Public Health Office with the Office for the Control and Monitoring of Epidemics, and the head should be... ta-dah! Carolina Aile. You can do whatever you want with the rest but get rid of all the open-ended positions. Use the civil servants, that's what they are for. They have a great advantage — they keep their pants on and they lie much less than the people chosen by the Mandarin on duty who only seeks applause and submission. Do not make the mistake of seeing yourself mirrored in a lynx in sheep's clothing who parrots your ideas ad nauseum, just to keep the trough full of your slop indefinitely.

“Look at the two of you. You've already arranged the entire ministry for me. Everything seems fine to me, except for Carolina Aile. I wanted her to take my old position as head of Reference Laboratories.”

“You offered her the job and she said no way, that she would rather go back to the Observatory than have to deal with that lot. Our spy algorithms, sorry, our search engines, know everything. With the brilliant negative selection system that you have implemented, it is only logical that outstanding people don't want anything to do with the position.”

“She won't accept, you'll see. Besides, I don't think she's fit for that position, she's not a doctor.”

“Ambrosio don't be stubborn, she's much more competent than Dr. Lynx. She has a master's degree in Public Health, she's a doctor, and she has a ton of publications. There are almost no experts in the world in diagnosing emerging viral infections, and Carolina knows everything about it. Also, she spent several years at the Global Health Observatory and has excellent relations with other countries, a factor that is essential for the effective control of the epidemic at this time. The medical part is covered by Dr. Bombón. Also, they get along and complement each other. They'll make a good team.”

“Well, you've convinced me. I want to talk to Carolina personally, so I'll send her an email summoning her first thing in the morning. As for Cándido and Margarita, I'll call them right now, although it's late. There's no rest for the servants of the country.”

“We're leaving now. Congratulations on your speech earlier.

Tomorrow there will be long lines in drugstores, which will contribute to the virus's spread."

"Good evening. Please keep me updated on the kits' distribution."

"Of course, Ambrosio, the more we sell, the more money we make..."

From: Ambrosio Etoile

Subject: Meeting at the Ministry

To: Carolina Aile

Carolina, I need to see you tomorrow at 10 a.m. in my office to discuss an important matter.

Good evening,

Ambrosio Etoile

Minister of Health

Government of Damania



WHO IS THIS NOW? AMBROSIO AGAIN. I CAN'T GET ANYTHING DONE around here. Another inconvenient meeting — at the Ministry! — and he doesn't even say what it will be about. What a way of working!

Thursday, April 15, 3520. Day +14

"Welcome to the eight o'clock news bulletin on Radio SOR. There are long lines to collect the SpicaKit. The discourse of the President and the new Minister of Health, Ambrosio Etoile, was convincing and results are beginning to show. We trust that it is all well organized and there will be no crowds. After the chaos experienced during these fourteen days since the Spicavirus outbreak, if SpicaKit works it will mean a significant change of course. Minute by minute, we will continue to keep you up to date here on the SOR radio station. This has been the eight o'clock news bulletin on Radio

SOR. And now, the political opinion show 'Mornings with SORprises'.



“THANK GOODNESS, SERVANDO! WE’RE ALREADY HERE AT THE MINISTRY, are you happy that I got you transferred?”

“I am, Dr. Etoile. It's the best thing that has happened to me in years. I've been promoted from level sixteen to eighteen. My new monthly wage is one hundred dodones higher, but since now I'm in a different personal income tax section, more money is withheld, so I earn less. Plus, I have to be available twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, so it has been one of the best deals of my life, and without even asking for it. Quite a gift, minister.”

“Come on, Servando, always thinking about the dough, underestimating the honor that comes with the task of driving Ambrosio, the Etoile of Health, around. I have to run now, I want to check how the SpicaKit situation is going, but if you really think about it, you'll see the great favor I've done for you...”

“Good day, Minister.”

“GOOD MORNING, ORLANDO. FILL ME IN.”

“It's an endless list. Have a seat, I'll bring you coffee and orange juice. I still don't know if you're vegan, like me, or whether you prefer traditional breakfast. My almost feminine intuition guided me towards churros, but if you prefer toast with tomato and olive oil, I can make a quick call and have it brought here in a jiffy. For your coffee, hot or cold milk? I do not know if it's too hot in your office, you know how high the heat is set. And just so you're more comfortable you can take off that magnificent mauve jacket that you're wearing, and I'll hang it on this special hanger I just got so that your wonderful clothes don't end up all wrinkled like a rag. I have observed that you're always very well dressed with a very daring color scheme. If it's not an impertinence, I'll ask you where you get your unique outfits. It will be difficult to emulate you, but this humble servant could use a

style rejuvenation. I'll fill you in on the news, then. As soon as you arrived, Dr. Albino and Dr. Bombón called, asking to meet with you. At ten you have another meeting with Dr. Aile, and then the usual ministry business. Throughout the morning we will begin to receive data on how the diagnosis is going with the kits. I have already called the IT technicians so that you can check on everything on your computer.”

“Very good, Orlando, congrats. It's only your first day and everything is well organized with great efficiency. The coffee is good and so are these churros. Maybe next time they should go with hot chocolate, don't you think? And now, if you don't mind, I'm going to deal with confidential matters.”

“At your service, doctor, or would you rather I called you minister?”

“I like both very much, so just alternate between them so that everyone knows that I'm a doctor in medicine and Minister of Health. See you later, then, Orlando.”

I'LL CHECK THE DATABASE, I'M SO CURIOUS. LET'S SEE THE WAY IT'S organized. Oh, well, it looks very good. It can be searched by any field. It's very simple. Patients are coming in at a good pace. It seems to be well received. Oh look, it's so cute, Carolina and Genoveva with their green traffic lights. Twenty more people have come in since I opened it. This looks fantastic. Damn, what is this? A window just opened on the screen.

“Sac, what are you doing here? For crying out loud!”

“I already told you that the IT people are hopeless, I had to protect the database. I have eliminated the possibility of trading by selling test results. Also, it is much faster than writing messages. So, whenever I need you, I'll appear on your screen and that's it. I have to leave you now; some country's President is calling.”

“Bye then.”

I CAN'T STAND IT WHEN HE RUBS HIS POWER IN MY FACE. HE'S DEALING

with another country's President, and I have a meeting with Cándido and Margarita — Ambrosio thinks, feeling jealous.

“MINISTER, DR. BOMBÓN AND DR. ALBINO ARE WAITING IN THE anteroom, are you available?”

“Yes, yes, bring them in. Good morning, Margarita, Cándido. Come in, come in and have a seat. Orlando, bring more coffee, or even better, hot chocolate, and more churros, those were delicious.”

“Right away, Minister.”

“I wanted to thank you for helping me solve this difficult situation.”

“The gratitude is mutual, Ambrosio,” — Cándido says. “We have a great responsibility. The situation looks very ugly.

“Ambrosio, can I ask you an indiscreet question?” — Margarita says.

“Yeah, sure.”

“Where did this Sac Cerev come from? He is quite remarkable, such elegance and poise!”

“Nonsense, Margarita, he's totally average. Just a northern guy, he has no eloquence or expressiveness. They are all in uniform, blue or gray, unlike the colorful, free and independent southerners, which I represent so well. Tell me what you've been doing and leave Sac alone, he has to focus on the Spicavirus.”

“As you command, Minister. Man, you're moody! My team is conducting a thorough analysis of the current situation. Let's see what we uncover. It'll be ready later today. I've asked them to analyze the data we have and compare each confederation to see whether they are similar. I'm afraid they won't be. From now on, the reports we make will always refer to the same denominators. One day only the number of counted cases was given, but the next it referred to a hundred thousand inhabitants. If it was very small digit, it was changed to ten thousand inhabitants, and in the end the media have messed up all the figures, and the public is fuming. About the PCR, the situation's quite similar. We have made thirty thousand in Magrit, and one thousand in Bollullos. Everybody in unison: “you're aban-

doning the Bollullos.” If the figures were for ten thousand inhabitants, in Bollullos there would have been nine hundred and twenty-seven PCRs made, and only one hundred and eighty-three in Magrit, so then it would be Magrit that’s abandoned. And if we discuss mortality, the mess is quite epic. Some people are claiming that “it’s only a case of Spicavirus if it’s confirmed,” but then the only fatal disease would be cardiorespiratory arrest, which is how we all end up! To some extent, all countries are trying to minimize the number of deaths reported, but we must be more honest than that. When the death toll begins to rise, someone from above, advised by some expert in concealing facts, says that only confirmed cases can be reported, and that the probable and the suspected cases are just thrown into limbo, since that is way more convenient. Our religious scholars doubt whether limbo exists, but government advisers are very convinced that it’s a mainstream and must be kept active. We can’t just argue that the definition of the Spicavirus disease is changing, and that only confirmed cases can be counted, leaving out probable and suspected ones. There is a high number of infected patients who have not had laboratory tests done in order to confirm the disease, especially at the beginning. We mustn’t make this same mistake, we must be transparent, and communicate facts to the public just as they are.

“So, from now on I suggest that we report the following: number of confirmed cases, number of probable cases, and number of suspected cases, always with denominators, not just raw data. Also, it would be reasonable to conduct a monthly study, ever since the beginning of the pandemic, comparing the historical mortality data for specific periods of time, and calculating the excess deaths. I think it would give a more realistic and precise picture of what’s happening, since the disruption of the health system results in collateral effects that must be understood. Because of the epidemic, there are many patients who are not being treated the way they would’ve been in normal conditions, and some of them have serious pathologies. If we don’t analyze these unexpected situations seriously and with determination, we will never be even moderately prepared to face those that may arise in the future. Sadly, although this is not the first

epidemic we have had, it is the most serious, and we have not learned anything from the previous ones. The mess we're in is indescribable, Ambrosio.”

“Your optimism overwhelms me, Margarita, but I have to admit you're right. “What do you think, Cándido?”

“I agree with Margarita. So far, this has been a complete mess. Thousands of press conferences, morning, afternoon, and night, and all they have done is confuse the population. The Spicavirus has a long incubation period, so the numbers keep increasing, but repeating that information every five minutes doesn't really help. What people want to hear is that the numbers are going down, and that takes time to happen. So, I think it's more than enough if we give just one daily report displaying the data we agree to share, and always presenting them the same way, as well as hold a press conference whenever the situation requires. If you think we should do this the way politicians normally do, suit yourselves, but technicians have to work hard, and they shouldn't be shamed publicly. We do not know what we are facing, it's the first time we've had a Spicavirus epidemic, so there is very little evidence and just talking does not help anything, especially if there are tons of cases in hospital. Rushing in order to pretend we know everything is useless. Saying one thing today and then backtracking one week later because evidence suggests that a certain fact wasn't true doesn't help anyone. It is much better to just say we don't know and then explain why we don't. Regarding my responsibilities, we have agreed to quickly pay the companies that are supplying equipment and material so that the wheel doesn't stop, and we will put pressure on the confederations to follow that example. Right now, the situation is quite easy to handle, since one single company, Molecular Solutions, is assuming the bulk of the action and the invoices are being paid regularly. Regarding the monitoring of the contracted services, I must say that the reports we receive are exhaustive and that the audits that we are carrying out indicate adequate compliance with the commitments.”

“It seems that everything is in motion. I'll meet with Carolina Aile in a bit to convince her to join our team as head of the Public Health and Alerts Office. It will be a new department, dependent on you,

Margarita, resulting from the merger of the Office that you used to manage with that of Dr. Lynx's. As you can see, I listened to you, and I've dismissed Sermón. He burst into tears when I told him I wouldn't keep him on my team and said that his world was permanently epidemic, that we were taking away his way of life, and that he would have to go find a new epidemic now.

"Thank you, Ambrosio. This Bombón here wanted to put an end to Sermón and taking him down personally would have been even more satisfying than a date with Sac, but the objective has been reached anyway. I guess his last name moves him to the permanent hunt for non-existent evidence to justify his fickle opinions, always for the benefit of his masters," — says Margarita.

"Okay then, let's leave it there. We'll remain in permanent contact. We're going to be quite busy. Take heart, we're going to make it. These first few days are key to proving to the public that we're true professionals."

IT'S IMPOSSIBLE TO KNOW WHERE FROM, BUT SAC IS ALWAYS ATTENTIVE to what is happening, controlling the evolution of the pandemic and the behavior of its main actors, step by step.

Ha, ha, ha! Ambrosio was jealous. Good thing he's moving in the right direction. If he convinces Carolina to join the management team, we will benefit quite a bit. There are no obstacles for her, and she will stand up to whomever gets in her way. Finally, Sermón has been removed from his pulpit. A true lynx would have never allowed himself to be imprisoned by permanently dropping his pants around his ankles, preventing any freedom of movement. He would have rather remained naked and even risked not finding a livelihood, instead maintaining his independence. In our operational scheme he would have been eliminated like a speck of dust, and those who chose him would have undergone a painful ordeal. Inept vassals, known for their depressing résumés, are unapologetically promoted by mandarins to managerial positions that they would have never reached in a competitive environment where only the brilliant survive — those that demonstrate intelligence, dedication, the

capacity for suffering and the pursuit of the common good. I'm glad they got rid of Sermón.

I'll check SpicaKit now, I'm so curious. It's been two hours since drugstores started distributing them. BICShow has assembled a three-dimensional representation of the planet and soon it will be full of colored lights moving from one place to another. Everyone using the kit will be monitored. The size of the nanochip is minuscule and, after wandering around looking for the Spicavirus, it will be trapped anywhere in the body.

"BIC, show me the map of Magrit with today's test results."

"Here it is, Sac. There are many little dots of light, right?"

"Yes, BIC, it's growing very fast. Look at all those red, green and white dots popping up constantly."

"That's amazing. Below the map of Magrit there is a table with the total results broken down by color and referring to the population census. I'll show you the map of Damania. There are many places where all the inhabitants have already done the process, but according to the census only one percent has been reached. I believe that tonight, reliably, we'll be able to make estimates of how many people are infected and confined, how many people have passed the infection, and how many people are susceptible."

"Thank you, BIC."

We'll have the situation under control in forty-eight hours, and within a week the number of positive cases will have dropped sharply. We're going to freeze contagion figures! Now, we just need the rest of the countries to do the same, and Molecular Solutions will be making an awful lot of money. We won't know how to spend all that dough. Before it's late I have to talk to Aitor to fix Molecular Solutions.

Hello, Aitor, this is going from good to better. I have been looking at the number of inhabitants that have already been tested and there are more than expected. The nanobots keep manufacturing at the speed of light, don't they? In less than seventy-two hours, the demand is going to be overwhelming, and we have to be prepared with everything perfectly organized. We must not fail. In relation to

this we have to talk about Molecular Solutions, as I already mentioned. You remember, don't you? We cannot wait any longer. Tell me when it's good for you and I'll swing by.



Hello, Sac, that is such good news. Nanorobots are working non-stop. We can't fit more goods in the warehouse. If there are no orders soon, we'll have to give them a vacation. Their effectiveness is amazing. I have a lot of trouble making sure we meet deadlines, although the drones make it easy. It's been more problematic with Parcelonia and Cara, though. In the end we reached an agreement and they're coming to collect them. They are kind of speechless when they see the robot drones load the vehicles, but it is what it is. Exporting is going to be tricky, I think. You left this second batch in my hands, but I have no experience. We are working on the permits. In Dodona it'll be easy. As for Califia, we almost have the permit, but with Cinania it is a real nightmare. I still haven't started with other countries, although I'm not sure they will place an order.

I think we should wait until we see how the strategy works. If the epidemic is controlled in Damania, the orders will come pouring in but, if not, we will have more time to analyze calmly what to do with Molecular Solutions. Besides, it would be much clearer to me where I can export and what the conditions would be. I suggest we wait a week.



Hello, Aitor: Let's wait a week, then. If you need help with exports, let me know and I'll make a few calls.



CAROLINA IS WAITING IN THE ANTEROOM OF THE MINISTER OF HEALTH'S office. This place looks so archaic, with this neo-plateresque style!

Look at the furniture! He's going to play some trick me again, I can feel it.

“Dr. Aile, what a joy it is to meet you, I'm Orlando Sumiso, the minister's chief of protocol —you know him much better than I do. You should hear the minister talk about you, I have no words to describe the praise, it would fill me with emotion if you joined our team and we could work side by side. Please come with me, the minister is waiting for you.”

“CAROLINA, I'M SO GLAD TO SEE YOU. I'VE MISSED YOU, YOU KNOW THAT? The habit makes the monk, you know.”

“Ambrosio let's get to the point. We're analyzing the variants of the virus, as there are more and more popping up, and I have no time to waste with meetings. I have a feeling you're about to bring up a huge bummer and I warn you, I'm not in the mood.”

“Tell me how things are going at the lab.”

“Ambrosio, you scare me. I feel like running away right now. Now you're also politically correct with your subordinates, what a change! This position really suits you!”

“Come one, Carolina! I really do miss you, and I've only been here for such a short time. Tell me how things are going.”

“I've already told you, Ambrosio, the variant issue is driving us crazy. We need to find out if they're more easily transmitted, if they're more or less pathogenic, if they continue to affect the same population, where they are dispersed, etcetera, etcetera. In short, we're dealing with a huge mess. The only positive thing is that no more samples are coming in to diagnose Spicavirus by PCR. I have to admit that the deal with Molecular Solutions is working. All the hospitals I've spoken with are very happy with the seriousness of the company and how well it works. I always thought that Aitor was smart and hard-working, and that your complaints were unfounded. Time has proven me right. To sum up, Genoveva has accepted the position as head, but it's been less than twenty-four hours and she's already making me sick. She won't make one single decision, so meet with her and give her some guidance, that way she'll leave me alone.”

“I’ll talk to Genoveva and clear things up for her. It’s simpler than it seems. And now I’ll tell you why I asked you here. I need you by my side, Carolina.”

“Ambrosio, I have a boyfriend. Don’t do your thing. You can’t blame me for your lame love life. ‘No means no’ is a thing now, and if you continue in that direction, you will not see one more day as ‘Minister Etoile’, as that servant of yours calls you.”

“I don’t mean that, Carolina. I mean professionally, not personally.”

“I don’t know which is worse, Ambrosio.”

“Don’t get all defensive and let me explain. I have decided to merge Margarita Bombón and Sermón Lynx’s positions, and I’m offering you the directorship of the new office. It didn’t make any sense to have to separate offices, one is enough. I need an independent person, one who knows all about emerging viruses, with international contacts, and who can withstand political pressure. That person is you, Carolina, and you know it.”

“You and your evil arts, Ambrosio. You know that I’m interested in Public Health, but I don’t want to step on a hornet’s nest, so before you say anything else you have to accept my conditions.”

“And what are those conditions? Do you want to ride a motorcycle to the ministry? We can give you a jacket as a gift, Carolina.”

“Don’t be an ass, Ambrosio. I want complete independence to organize the Office, no political meddling. You know I only drop my pants for Alberto, so I don’t want anyone telling me to soften my messages and to make things look prettier than they are, that’s not how I roll. I also don’t want us to represent ourselves as if we were the best in the world, saying we have a diagnosis for everything, that we are going to develop twenty vaccines, and that no one’s dying here. Also, I’m not going to be in the pulpit at all hours, sharing the same data in different ways just to make a huge mess, as they’ve been doing so far. I warn you, if you play the trick of saying yes to everything, I’m asking for right now and then start pushing me with phrases like “you have to soften the messages, Carolina” or “you can’t keep running your mouth like that, they’re going to lose the elections,” I’ll just go back to the Observatory — they really want me back.”

“I accept. You start tomorrow. You have enough time to see Margarita and analyze the situation with her. You don't even have to go back to the lab. I'll send someone to collect your stuff, you're staying put with us. We need you, Carolina.”

“You sound like your assistant, Ambrosio. I've never heard so much sweet talk and ass kissing in my life.”

“Let's wrap up the meeting, I have things to do.”

“Okay then, I'll see if Margarita can see me now to plan the communication strategy with the media.”

“See you later, Carolina, and welcome to the winning team.”

I'LL CHECK HOW THE DIAGNOSIS IS GOING. MIRROR, MIRROR, ON THE wall, who is the smartest and most elegant Minister of Health of them all, in the whole history of Damania?

“Well, if you keep making decisions at this slow rate, it's not going to be you, Ambrosio.”

“Holy shit, you scared me, Sac! I'm a minister, I can't have you popping up randomly on my computer. I don't want you to catch me reading the newspaper.”

“I'm sorry, Ambrosio, you've been tapped, so remember I'm watching you. And don't distract me. I was going to give you some information on that thing you were wondering about and wanted to check.”

“You really scare me, Sac! You're always several meters, if not a few kilometers, ahead. You make people so insecure; we deserve a break from time to time.”

“Well, say ‘ohm’ ten times, you seem to like that a lot, and then we'll get the point.”

“Ohm! Ohm! Ohm! Ohm! Ohm! Ohm! Ohm! Ohm! Ohm! Ohm!”

“Listen, Ambrosio. Recruitment is going well, but it needs to be accelerated. The lines at the drugstores and Cara stores are endless, and social distancing is not being respected. People are getting nervous. Parcelonia is working, but it's kind of overwhelmed. Everybody wants a SpicaKit. Tomorrow afternoon, Carolina should have enough data to hold a press conference and leave Damania stunned

and, furthermore, cause enough impact for orders from other countries to start pouring down on us. You'll become more famous than you already are, and we'll continue to fill our pockets and yours, what do you say?"

"What can I say, Sac? That's a yes! The problem is how."

"Ambrosio, don't we know each other already? It's all settled. We just need the new minister's approval, and we can get started."

"What new minister, Sac?"

"You, Ambrosio, you."

"Oh! Sure, that was silly, but hey, I want to know; how are we going to do this, Sac?"

"Ambrosio, we have manufactured a hundred million SpicaKits and talked to the large supermarket chains: Roadrunner, Buyitall and Gourmet Home — they all want to collaborate and distribute them in their stores. The Greek Taylor and the gas stations have also come to an agreement. The post offices I leave to you. To make things easier, Cara and Parcelonia, as collaborative as ever, will help us with distribution, and we also have our fleet of drones. The ministry must share this with the media, including on social networks, saying that from four p.m. on other pickup stations will be opened. There will be underhandedness, and many will stock up on SpicaKits, but relax, just think that the more they take, the fuller our pockets. We're in an emergency situation and sometimes the end justifies the means."

"OK Sac, I'll get to it right away. That is such a brilliant idea. You're always ahead, will you teach me how to do it, one day?"

"Yes, Ambrosio, that and much more. Now call your 'Submissive' assistant and let him bow a few times, but not more than necessary, and get moving. I want this on the media in ten minutes."

"Orlandooooo!"

"Minister, minister, what is it? You startled me, I thought you had fallen off your chair and broken your hip. I was about to call 911."

You're going to be the one to fall off your chair if you don't do what I'm about to tell you to right away. Notify Orfila Orejuela Aguda and make a note for all the media, and when I say all, I mean all, including social networks and what not. It has to say something like this... Take note, Orlando...

From 4 p.m. on, SpicaKit will also be available at post offices, gas stations, department stores and The Greek Taylor. We hope that this new initiative of the Damanian Ministry of Health will resolve the problem with overcrowding at pickup points.

We appreciate the responsible collaboration of the people of Damania.



“SUCH STYLE, MINISTER, SO GOOD, ORFILA WILL NOT HAVE TO EVEN correct a comma. This will come out in ten minutes. I'll see to it personally. I'm fascinated with you, Minister. Such speed in your decisions, such efficiency, such high-mindedness and generosity in your effort. A born leader, natural and unapologetic. I'm so happy to have the chance to serve you. I'll keep you promptly informed on how the matter develops.”

“See you later, Orlando. You have a good eye to identify extraordinary people. We're going to get along very well.”

NOT FAR AWAY, MARGARITA AND CAROLINA BEGIN THEIR JOURNEY.

“Come in, Carolina. It's good to see you. This means you said yes to Ambrosio. I had my doubts! Ambrosio is efficient but only thinks about his own ass. You're exactly what we needed. Everything that has been done so far is being reviewed and I think it will be ready this afternoon. The feedback I've been getting is not very flattering, but we already knew that. What they sent to us here at the Public Health Office was a real mess. Each report in a different format. Some confederations use a case definition, others some variant, some add cryptic specifications, others take them away. It's all very similar but very difficult to put together. Apart from that, Beatillo, the recently departed ex-minister, never met with all the confederation health advisers to establish minimum criteria so, of course, everyone is just letting their imagination do the job.”

“I warned Ambrosio a few days ago. I don't know who the genius

was who decided to transfer Public Health to the confederations without a coordination law that would work with precision and would allow the Damanian Public Health Office to intervene as soon as something happened that crossed the boundaries of the affected confederation. A matter as serious as this and we're stuck with 'every man for himself.'"

"You're right, Carolina. With this major type of problem, we must have one single visible lead, otherwise everything will run amok. Of course, yielding responsibilities gets the mandarins to wash their hands of the problem and, within the chaos, may give one of them the power to organize the zoo's survival without an expiration date. Right now, it's someone called Cuadrado, although the name doesn't describe his strategy. Curvado would suit him better, everything glides more smoothly over a curved surface. Hopefully the centralized database is one of the solutions to the problem and helps us to develop a rational strategy. Have you seen it?"

"Only superficially, Margarita. Ambrosio showed it to me earlier, but you know him, computers are not his thing."

"Come, take a seat here, Carolina and I'll show it to you. It is a technological marvel. I don't know how they've been able to do this in such a short time. Do you know how Ambrosio achieves these things? It was all they talked about at the Institute for Disease Control, and it's starting to become a trending topic here too. First the SpicaPlus20 PCR, then the SpicaKit with the mask and nanochips, the database, and the SpicaBot. I don't know what other aces he may have up his sleeve."

"Me neither, Margarita. I've given it a lot of thought and I have no idea. I did try to pull it out of him, but his lips are sealed. My female intuition tells me Sac is behind it all. I've searched the company on the Internet and its website is clean as a whistle and says very little. I contacted them and they told me they provide customized solutions, and that if I'm interested, I can send them a report with what we need, and they will study it and answer in less than forty-eight hours. I have not been able to find out anything else. Of course, AISS really has Spicavirus against the wall."

"Talking about Sac, Carolina, I have the hots for him. I like that

man so much, he is the embodiment of efficiency, but he is so cold. Only fourteen days have passed since the beginning of the pandemic and look at the amount of things that have happened. Sure, something's fishy, but I would like to fish for it with him, and the more hidden and the longer it takes to find it, the better.”

“I don't know what to say, Margarita. I don't know him personally, just from what Ambrosio says, but I can see he does impress people in different ways. When did you meet him?”

“Yesterday, at the President's speech. But he doesn't look at anyone, and definitely not at me. We exchanged three courtesy words and that's it. But let's talk about something else, I'm getting all hot and sweaty. Look how well recruitment is going. There are some towns in which all the inhabitants have already been analyzed. The positive cases are in quarantine. That's a relief. Wait a minute, an alarm is going off, which indicates that an urgent communication from the Ministry of Health is being broadcast for all the media. Let's see what it says:

“All the radio, television and digital press channels have just reported that new SpicaKit collection stations have been set up. You can check their locations by calling 900 555 556, or on the Ministry of Health website, under the heading SpicaKit which you will see on your screen as soon as you open up the page.”



“MARGARITA, THIS CAN'T BE AMBROSIO'S DOING! HE IS A LAZY AND slow civil servant by nature! There's something fishy here, I told you! Sac is the brains behind all this!”

“HELLO, MARGARITA, IT'S AMBROSIO, YOUR MINISTER, HEH, HEH, HEH!”

“Hi, Ambrosio. I'm here with Carolina.”

“Great. Have you read or heard the news?”

“We just read it, yes.”

“Another great idea of mine, don't you think?”

“Yes, yes, Ambrosio! And I'm sure your ‘Submissive’ man set it all up for you, together with the Administration, while you were dipping your churros in coffee.”

“Well, it wasn't like that. I had the wonderful idea, as I always do, and the public-private consortium with Molecular Solutions has done the rest. But this is not why I called. If everything goes as planned, we're going to have to bring all the media together, this afternoon or tomorrow at the latest, in order to dazzle them with our results. I have already given the heads up to Miss Orejuela Aguda and she will organize the whole thing.”

“Wait Ambrosio, you're trying to get all the credit, as usual. First, we analyze the data and, when we are sure about it, we report it. We are not lynxes, nor do we give sermons. We are and act as professionals who communicate facts. You have to do your calculations and, above all, bear in mind what the situation was prior to the introduction of these protective measures. In short, have a relaxed tea and we'll let you know when you can daydream of your ‘Beloved President’ rewarding you with full honors, for services rendered.”

“I don't know if putting you two together was such a good idea. I'll leave you now, you seem so worked up.”

“Goodbye, Ambrosio.”

“I'M LEAVING NOW,” — SAYS CAROLINA, “I'LL SEE WHO CAN BRING MY stuff over from the lab, and in the meantime, I'll get acquainted with my new domains.”

“Bye then. I'll call you as soon as I have something.”

AT SIX P.M. MARGARITA PHONES CAROLINA.

“Carolina, this is Margarita. I'm calling to tell you it's not worth meeting now. The situation is out of control. I think it's better if we start from scratch with the new database. It's estimated that there are one hundred and five thousand cases, but we can't know for sure. Not even the hospitalized cases are confirmed, there has not been time to do the PCRs on all of them. There are many probable and possible

cases. They tell me that SpicAg and SpicAc have reached all the hospitals and they're running as many tests as possible. In the coming days we'll have more reliable data."

"Sounds good to me, Margarita. I've just checked the database and we already have five percent of the population analyzed. This afternoon that rate will rise considerably. People are getting off work and there are many more pickup stations. I believe that tomorrow we will have enough information for a proper press conference. I've studied the matter and, if we want to control the epidemic, we need to identify asymptomatic carriers. The current strategy is effective but not without issues. A still photo is not enough by itself. It will identify the infected patients but, even if all the inhabitants ingest the chips, new undetectable cases will pop up at the time of diagnosis. From there on, the bracelet is key. If it can offer us reliable clues about who to test, we will put an end to this epidemic. Otherwise, we'll go on chasing ghosts."

"Hmmm! Carolina, you've given the matter an interesting twist, I hope you don't feel dizzy now."

"Not as much as you when you think of Sac, Margarita."

"What a low blow, Carolina!"

"You threw me a soft ball, Margarita."

"I know, Carolina! I find him a little distracting, I'll admit that."

"Margarita, I suggest we meet with Molecular Solutions before the press conference tomorrow. Either I'm wrong or they have some kind of solution."

"Good idea, Carolina. I'll call them right away. Just hearing his voice will send me off to bed with a smile. I'll tell them to meet us at twelve p.m."

"Great, Margarita. Have a nice Sac nightmare."

"Good evening, Carolina, you perv."

CHAPTER 6

EVIDENCE

Friday, April 16, 3520. Day +15

“GOOD MORNING, SAC AND AITOR. THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR attending this untimely meeting, I’m sorry it was late when we sent you the message. Come in and sit down, would you like a drink? Coffee, tea? Something more exciting?”

“Thank you very much, Margarita. Nothing for me, thank you,” — Sac replies. I’m doing intermittent fasting.”

“Coffee for me, please,” — says Aitor.

“Intermittent Fasting? You really are a trendsetter, Sac. Do you think it would be good for me?”

“You look fantastic, Margarita. Although it wouldn’t help your great shape much, it would improve, your health. I don’t think Carolina and Aitor are very interested in it, though. They’re young and in great shape, so I’ll explain it to you in detail later.”

“I’d love that, Sac. I’m sure you can convince me, especially if you promise to be around when I faint and urgently need to break my fast. I guess some rare meat is recommended, isn’t it?”

“Good morning, I’m Carolina Aile, I don’t think we’ve met in person. I’ve heard a lot about you, but we haven’t actually met.”

“That’s right,” they say, “and we were looking forward to meeting

you. Ambrosio doesn't miss an opportunity to point out how smart you are, although he also remarks that, if it weren't for him, you would still be lost. He says he had to help you focus and that he guided you like a father to get you here."

"Well, he's so complimentary, isn't he? He's the genius who discovers and chooses those who may approach his Olympus. There's no paradise without Ambrosio! Okay, let's get to the point, I need to prepare for my meeting with the media. The reason for this meeting is the asymptomatic carriers. As long as we don't identify them quickly, the virus will continue circulating and mutating. The theoretical herd immunity will never become a reality; new variants will prevent it, containment measures will have limited success, and we will live with the virus forever."

"I agree," — Sac says, "and we're already working on it. We believe the bracelet may help, but we have to analyze the data collected from a few asymptomatic carriers with a positive antigen test result. Give us some time and it will be possible."

"If we lock them up as soon as they get infected, we will succeed. It will only be a partial victory, since there will continue to be cases, but we'll be able to treat them, unlike now with all of the hospitals that have been completely overrun. It's our only way out," Carolina points out.

"I completely agree," — says Margarita. "We need to make this happen!"

"Okay, I have to go now. I'm late," — says Carolina.

"Me too," — Aitor says.

"And what should you and I do, then?" — Sac asks.

"You can buy me lunch," — Margarita suggests, "the state coffers are empty. If I'm the one buying, I can only get you a hot dog, but I wouldn't risk ruining that unique outfit you're wearing today with ketchup."

"Your female intuition doesn't fail. I'm a linen-tablecloth-and-napkin kind of guy. Any special place you had in mind?"

"No! Just surprise me Sac, I have the feeling it will be a pleasant experience."

“We'll find that out by the time we get to dessert. Let's go, Margarita.”

WHILE SAC AND MARGARITA WORK TOWARD THEIR AFTER-MEAL conversations and their food intake makes it easier for them to get intimately acquainted, Carolina has to deal with the news media.

“Good afternoon, let me introduce myself. I am Carolina Aile, the head of the Public Health Office, a new department resulting from the merger of those headed by Dr. Bombón and Dr. Lynx. I am a scientist, not a journalist, so my communication skills are nowhere near those of Miss Orejuela who, from now on, will be your permanent contact. I'm not going to bore you by describing how wonderful I am, because I'm not. My résumé is already posted on the ministry's website, along with a conflict-of-interest affidavit. I already anticipate, with absolute serenity, the negative feedback that will be published in each and every one of the media outlets without fail. If you can convince me that I'm not up to the job, I'll resign instantly. But before being so fast with your words, as I know some of you are, I ask you to verify whether your résumé is really suitable for your job or whether, on the contrary, that position you occupy, and which you boast so much about, would be better represented by someone with more training than you. I have a profound respect for the free and independent press. Unfortunately, these two essential attributes have, in practice, disappeared. Truth and freedom go hand in hand, and that is what I will be sure to provide, so we can expect the same in return. We will be honest and transparent, based on Science and the evidence that it provides. And now let's move on to the matter at hand, the epidemic that is causing the Spicavirus.

“First of all, I want to lay the foundations for what will be presented in these discussions. I will be as brief as possible. The information provided will only be based on science and not on speculations. My personal opinions are not of public interest. We will try to convey the strength of our findings as well as of our igno-

rance, which is especially profound when dealing with a new disease. Attempts to compare it with apparently similar pathologies without carrying out the pertinent studies may lead to false expectations. Inaccurate conclusions are likely to be drawn about essential aspects of the new disease, such as, for example, the long-term effects that may appear and their associated mortality. We'll make a daily statement in which we will always use the same numerical parameters to summarize the situation. In the event that we introduce any new reference or change the data format, we will explain why and what they contribute to the process. I warn you; I'm not going to answer speculative questions like how the epidemic is going to evolve, or whether football players, especially Esmeraldo Megusto and Gambeteo Tossi, have more or less risk of getting the disease. I'll leave those issues, which make you and your audiences so happy, to the fantastic talk shows full of experts who always liven up your TV channels. We will never participate in such gratuitous confusion that increases audience ratings with speculative comments. We will limit our discussion to probabilities of occurrence, with the permanent warning that, as the days go by, there will be new data that can refute previous assumptions. Acceptable studies will rule out this apparent contradiction by showing that initial beliefs were false or inaccurate. Whoever does not understand or criticizes this, without solid foundations, does not have the necessary training to carry out their work.

We are in the middle of an epidemic produced by an unknown virus, everything related to it is learned on the fly by using the most advanced and reliable tools that we have at the time. Answers do not depend on the imagination of one or more people who have supernatural powers and stand as monarchs of the Universe. The answers depend on scientific studies that follow the rules and that provide evidence. In short, we will report what is really happening, the results that are obtained through the constant evaluation of the measures we have introduced, and the changes that we will be forced to make whether these measures do or do not work — and we'll do in good faith, just as for any well-meaning human decision. If the measures are based on certainty, the probabilities that they

are wrong decrease, but I want to emphasize that there is no zero-risk situation.

»We will start by talking about the Spicavirus infection. As previously reported, it is caused by a virus that has never had contact with our species. It has only been fifteen days since the first cases were detected, and what we know is still quite limited. But I'm going to review some aspects that we consider essential. The first key assumption is that the entire population is susceptible to contracting the disease. In general, most patients will follow similar patterns. There will be a small group immune to Spicavirus; another group that will be infected, but without symptoms; and another will have symptoms ranging from triviality to death. We already know that asymptomatic patients transmit the infection, so the monitoring and control of the epidemic is especially complicated. The evidence has determined that it is paramount to identify and prevent these asymptomatic couriers from 'delivering the package'. I want to point out that there is no curative treatment against Spicavirus, that is to say, there is not one or several antimicrobials that will exterminate it, as is the case with other infectious diseases. Compounds are administered to alleviate the consequences it triggers within the human body, but personal strength alone must face the virus itself. Therefore, preventative measures are not just necessary, but essential. If we had an effective antiviral treatment, they would be less important, but in this situation, they are an essential step to reducing the number of infected people, the number of patients, and the number of deaths. How do we do all this? These early days of the epidemic have been discussed ad nauseam and countless absurd observations have been made that only generate confusion and harm. In principle, we know that it is transmitted by aerosols from person to person and that, in addition, these aerosols can be deposited on various surfaces. These, in turn, could be a source of contagion when, inadvertently, a hand picks them up and guides them to the mouth, nose or eyes. Therefore, frequent hand washing decreases the chances of viruses reaching the respiratory system. Compounds with an alcohol concentration equal to or greater than seventy percent also work but consider the cost of that

measure. There are many areas of the planet where it is a luxury to wash your hands with soap and water, so it goes without saying the importance of alcohol for that purpose. We cannot generalize without analyzing the particularities of each component and seeing if they have a determining influence on the whole. Also, and this is common sense, if there is something placed between the aerosols and the mouth, the nose and the eyes, the possibility of acquiring the infection decreases. It does not reach zero percent, but it falls drastically. And in those cases, in which it is not avoided, the number of viral particles that enter the body is much lower than if there were no barrier and, therefore, we defend ourselves better and the chances of the disease being trivial increase. The next question is, what masks are effective? Quite simply: any mask is better than none. Those which are authorized by regulatory bodies are very safe. The ones made with different fabrics are not approved and their protection capacity is not known. In short, it is better to wear a mask, especially if it is approved. They must be disposed of safely and properly. You have to think about the millions of people who will use them daily and who could end up flooding the entire planet with them, if they don't act responsibly. It must be clear that they will not eliminate one hundred percent of infections, but the number of infections will substantially decrease. I know you're going to ask me about the evidence we have on masks, and it's a tricky question, so I'll give you an anticipatory answer. There is no definitive evidence. The number of infections they prevent cannot be demonstrated. Laboratory studies estimate the number of virus-sized particles that each of the approved masks filter, but that is in ideal conditions of use, which cannot be guaranteed in real life where some leave open holes around the face which aerosols can penetrate, others are worn wrong or for longer than recommended, others deteriorate due to carelessness, and many of those who use them will never come into contact with an infected person who may transmit the virus to them. If you're relatively alone and outdoors, the chances of contagion are clearly close to zero, and under those conditions, using them is a useless expense. The new revolutionary mask that the Government has delivered is not 100% safe either,

but it works very well. It is not uncomfortable to wear, and it generates no waste. Also, it is biodegradable, and it avoids dictating generalized regulations that cause permanent conflicts regarding where, how and when masks must be used. It also avoids quarrels caused by the intolerance of many people towards their peers' attitudes.

»Knowing who has the Spicavirus is basic, essential, and fundamental. Medicine without a diagnosis is not medicine, it is simply divination, witchcraft, sorcery. Yesterday the SpicaKit began to be distributed and today we are going to give you the results of the first day's data. In twenty-four hours, ten percent of the population has self-diagnosed, that is, four million and six hundred thousand inhabitants, which is quite a record. There are five percent infected, that is, two hundred thirty thousand and one percent, and forty-six thousand with antibodies. The number of people with antibodies is as expected, since the immune response begins to be detected a week after the onset of symptoms, and only fifteen days have passed since the first cases. Gradually, this figure will increase. Therefore, the good news is that there are already two hundred and thirty thousand people who will not transmit the disease in an uncontrolled way. We do not expect to take more than three or four days to complete the study. From now on, bracelets will play an essential role in facilitating the rapid detection of new cases. Finally, if we prove that all the measures that Damania is applying work successfully, the rest of the countries should implement them too, regardless of whether they have the resources or not. The donation of these instruments would not be an act of philanthropy on the part of the countries with resources but rather one of pure selfishness, since it would minimize the circulation of the virus, its mutation, and the reintroduction of new variants capable of infecting people who have already recuperated from the infection previously. These outcomes would force us to begin the process of diagnosis and containment again. This is a planetary problem; borders are not designed for viruses living in humans. Only individual and perfect isolation would manage to contain them and, who can guarantee that? Wouldn't it be easier to share the tools that work? Solidarity in this

situation is a paradox, truthfully: the more generosity, the more selfishness and less suffering. And this is all I have to say for now, do you have questions?"



AFTER CAROLINA'S FORCEFULNESS, IT SEEMS THAT NO ONE DARES RAISE their voice, and silence fills the room. Finally, a hesitant, quiet voice is heard from afar, which timidly asks:

“Any information on where the virus comes from?”

“Nothing has been confirmed, but if we humans dedicate ourselves to carelessly invading environments in which our presence was only symbolic or non-existent, we will find other living beings which, like us, are only seeking to perpetuate themselves. If their survival requires using us, they will do it without any qualms, even if that means risking that survival and annihilating us. Typically, they would want to reach an understanding, but until they do they may decimate us, and that is precisely what this one we just met is up to.”

Monday, April 19, 3520. Day +18

In Margarita Bombón's office...

“Hi, Carolina.”

“Hi, Margarita. Have you looked at the latest data?”

“Only superficially, I haven't had much time. Ambrosio won't stop bugging me; he's asking a thousand things.”

“Well Margarita, I was coming to discuss the reports with you. So, I'll sum them up for you. We have a snapshot of the situation. Right now, we have nine hundred and twenty thousand people infected, which is about two percent of the population. They are all in quarantine or in hospital. If those who are in quarantine or sick happen to go out, SpicaBot goes off and the police show up with a ticket, which is dissuasive because of the amount, so monetary discipline prevails. There are always irresponsible people or those with a lot of money, but they are few and far in between.”

“It's like at school Carolina, everybody hates the squealer. After

they see the zeros in their tickets, more than one of them will throw out their cell phone, ha, ha, ha!”

“Only ninety-two thousand people have antibodies, Margarita. It’s not much, but more will come up. It’ll be necessary to see how long they are protected.”

“That’s what we expected Carolina, it’s only been a short time yet.”

“I’m fascinated by the bracelet, Margarita. It is so simple, a purely useful technology. The fact that it detects smell loss by choosing your favorite perfume is the best function. Clearly, the incubation time is decreasing. It’s already between twenty-four and forty-eight hours. All those with an alteration in the parameters analyzed develop symptoms, and the diagnosis confirms it’s the Spicavirus.”

“Oh, yeah, I like it too. The bracelet and Sac, its creator, they both fascinate me. I like him so much! I could eat him raw, or rare. But he’s so classy, cold and discreet. He never loses his cool. Always calm and to the point. He’s wasting himself! Do you know if he’s single?”

“Margarita, I have no idea. He’s a very mysterious man. Very handsome and elegant, but there is something about him that doesn’t quite convince me, although I don’t know what it is. Doesn’t he seem artificial to you? Like... non-human.”

“I wish he were a robot that could be bought from Parcelonia, Carolina. Imagine, I could have him brought home to me, or that he would come here by himself, saying: ‘Your slave Sac is willing to serve you until his final short circuit’. I don’t think he would survive even the first one, smoke and wires would be everywhere after the heat that my innate lovemaking skills would generate in him. You don’t know how many things we would do, and when he got annoying, I would simply disconnect him using my cell phone, and in the meantime, I’d watch my favorite show without the risk of him changing channels or wanting to watch football. Do you think we’ll live to see that?”

“You mean ‘machines like us’, Margarita? Well, I don’t know, but I prefer my Alberto for now.”

“You’re so privileged Carolina, but for me, being so lonely, a plug-in Sac would be just fine.”

“What we really need is to detect asymptomatic patients with the bracelet. It's not possible currently, but we're continuing to work on it with Molecular Solutions.”

“Good, Carolina. I think we're on the right track, but I still have to catch Sac for myself.”

“How was lunch with him the other day, Margarita?”

“I'm a bit ashamed to tell you. It was complete nonsense.”

“Well, there's no escape now. Tell me all about it, Margarita.”

“He took me to the private flights area in the airport. We got on the company plane and ate while flying round and round in the air. What a meal! I can't even remember the names of all the dishes, the champagne, wine ... We were served by a most handsome and discreet couple. I was so enthralled that I told him about my whole life. With all the details. Once we were done eating, I felt even more comfortable and I made it clear that I was interested in him, but he didn't even flinch. He's the most hermetic, impassive being I've ever come across, and without a wrinkle in his suit! That's why I asked you if he's married, because I'm not too hard on the eyes, and it's not like he's a child either...”

“Margarita, that's such a waste, so much polluting the air and no hanky-panky to boot. Such nonsense! You could've gone to The Loggerhead Turtle and put it on Ambrosio's tab.”

“That's what I said, Carolina: does it seem normal to you, to have lunch in the air, while polluting the skies? Do you know what he said to me?”

“Well, no, but I imagine he offered a strange apology.”

“Not at all, Carolina.” He told me that the plane was electric. That the entire fuselage was covered with hyper-efficient solar panels developed by his company to charge themselves instantly. It's one of his prototype aircrafts. They decided not to launch the product due to the drastic decrease in air transport with the pandemic, but as soon as the problem is over there will be solar airplanes. They have already spoken with the two main manufacturers and they're very interested. It's all pretty much settled. They just cover it with panels, add some accumulators, and off you go. I would've spent the whole night circling the sky of Magrit without

feeling bad for the environment, but we landed without a chance to even take a nap together.”

“Hmmm, Margarita! There's something strange about this Sac. After we have the epidemic under control maybe we can find out what the deal is with him. I don't think I'm going to give a press conference. What reporters care about the most is knowing whether Esmeraldo and Gambeteo are wearing the bracelet, and what color and texture they've chosen. I'll write an informative note and have Orfila distribute it, let her deal with them. After all, she's the head of Press, and having to talk to the media will keep her subjugated, don't you think?”

“Yeah, sounds fine to me Carolina, let the journalists talk among themselves while we mind our own business.”

Wednesday, April 21, 3520. Day +20

The day chosen for the leap into the corporate universe has arrived, and Sac has just entered Aitor's office...

“Good morning, Sac, come in and sit down, would you like a drink? Coffee, tea, anything else?”

“Green tea would be nice, Aitor.”

“What's your latest idea? Because your brain is like a volcano. You just won't stop thinking. I can't keep up with you, Sac.”

“Aitor, don't be dramatic, but we do have to fix the Molecular Solutions issue as soon as possible. It can't wait any longer. Money keeps coming in. What you told me about the document you signed with Ambrosio really worried me. It can ruin the whole operation. Ambrosio has a very clear conflict of interest. If someone finds out that he owns fifty percent of Molecular Solutions and that with the pandemic situation they are routinely giving us all the work, and that this has even helped us massively export our products, we'll all end up in the clink. So, we have to vacate Molecular Solutions and create more companies. We already have Diagnostic Solutions, but we must create more and then create a Corporation that encompasses them all and in which Molecular Solutions is just a minor player. And that's

what I'm here for. There's no leaving this office until we're done with this matter. Then we'll go to the notary tomorrow, and case closed."

"I agree Sac, but if Ambrosio finds out he's going to go crazy on us — we're billing a lot of money and he wants more and more."

"We have to do this, Aitor. Ambrosio is very busy annihilating the Spicavirus and it won't even cross his mind, but when the storm calms, he will attack. Good thing this is going to last for a few months, I would say until the summer."

"Hopefully. Tell me what your plan is, Sac."

"Okay, Aitor. Molecular Solutions will keep the phylogeny base and the strains sequencing, which is gradually slowing down. At the beginning only we did this, but now there is a lot of competition, so we'll just leave some activity so that Ambrosio continues to receive transfers. Diagnostic Solutions is under your name and is dedicated to PCR, antigen detection, antibody detection, and the bracelet. And now we have to create a few more. The first one is Preventative Solutions, for masks and other protective equipment such as HEPA filters, ultraviolet ray equipment, air purifiers, etc. Seagull Solutions, for transport and pickup drones. Environmental Solutions for what the nanorobots do, they are capable of recycling anything and storing molecular components in a stable way. Virtual Communication Solutions for the BICShow. 3D Printing Solutions for a plan I have for the future and that I'll tell you about when the time comes. Therapeutic Solutions is in an embryonic state, but we have designed an algorithm that examines the interactions of the various components of the virus with any compound. We're going to check whether any of the thousands of drugs which are used in normal situations react to the virus. If we find any, we'll reposition them as a treatment against Spicavirus."

"And what is the Corporation going to be called, Sac?"

"I was thinking 'Multifaceted Solutions'."

"I like it, Sac. I'm in. Deal."

Monday, April 26, 3520. Day +25

Back in Margarita's office...

“Hi, Margarita.”

“Hi, Carolina. I wanted to see you.”

“Yeah, me too, but I can't handle all this. At least we have good news. I guess you know, but I like talking to you, Margarita.”

“Me too, Carolina. Tell me, I'm sure I've overlooked something. You're on top of things.”

“The decrease in cases has been spectacular. Thirty percent. We still have a high incidence, but it's not as bad. We can already see light at the end of the tunnel.”

“That's why I like Sac so much. He illuminates us permanently and lets Ambrosio get all the credit in the Council of Ministers so he's not bugging us all the time. I'm at his feet, Carolina.”

“Maybe he's gay, and that's why he won't even look at us.”

“I think he's asexual, Carolina. All he cares about is nanoscience. All those microscopic things that AISS develops, and nobody knows how they work. I think it's better not to ask. As long as we manage to ‘flatten the curve’...”

“You sound like the President, Margarita. She's obsessed with ‘flattening the curve’. What we need is to lower the infection rate, which is still at six hundred cases per one hundred thousand inhabitants.”

“Where's your sense of humor, Carolina? I think it's quite funny that they want to make ‘something’ give up the sole purpose that guarantees its survival: jumping from one individual to another and multiplying at full speed on fertile ground — it's not going to flatten, it must be forced to jump into the void.”

“I don't think I have any sense of humor left, Margarita, and this nonsense doesn't help. One of the President's advisers said the other day: ‘Politics is the art of what the eye can't see’. There was certainly fog around, but not enough, and his government strategy ended up making him invisible. To visualize it, they will have to hire mediums who will help us recognize this ‘intangible art’ with their powers. They will be the ‘chosen’ ones who will show us where politicians

have introduced those ethereal masterpieces that will inspire us to vote determinedly for them to continue incorporating those undetectable initiatives that have achieved an infinite revaluation of salaries and pensions while eliminating taxes, that achieved an unbeatable education and health system, a lower cost of living, a working day to one's taste and even more vacation days. There is already a glimpse of the achievement of immortality for all, hand in hand with the eternal happiness that has already been attained. In addition, they will dissolve the fog that blurred arbitrary decisions, abuses of power and corruption, achieving their spontaneous extinction. An impeccable 'Truman Show'¹ with no escape because invisible politics is perfect and there is no possibility of achieving a more evolved society. At least SpicaBot is working like a charm. Users have rated the application five stars."

"We can only trust Sac, Carolina. Do you think he does everything just as well in private? The other day we had flying witnesses, that could be the reason for his frigid behavior, what do you think?"

"I have no idea, Margarita. I can see how that electric plane ride, without a final 'short circuit' has really affected you. But back to the pandemic. The bracelet *software* has been updated. An electrocardiogram has been added, as well as more controlled monitoring of sleep patterns. What's becoming challenging is identifying asymptomatic patients. Sac is still running tests, but he's coming up with nothing at the moment."

"I'd love to run experiments with Sac. I want him to explain to me how that algorithm detects conditions. Mine would be discovered in only thirty seconds."

"Why don't you try again, Margarita? You have his number. Invite him over to a romantic dinner at your place. He'll have no escape there. Make sure you cook something tasty and juicy, and when it's time for dessert just go for him unapologetically. It would be frowned upon if he did it, but you doing it is okay, so take advantage of that opportunity provided by Vice President Amparo Piernas's Law. Maybe he's like a vampire and only works at night. Who knows!"

"Well, I'm certainly not going to say no. That's such a great idea, Carolina!"

Monday, May 3, 3520. Day +32

Now that the situation seems calmer Ambrosio, you are going to train in your private gym. I didn't like the clothes Orlando had picked out for me at all. They were so loose that they didn't outline my powerful muscles. I had to rush to The Greek Tailor with Servando and then to buy these sneakers at 'The Fitness Hen' and a pair of yellow tights. All very expensive and state-of-the-art. Wow! It's hard for me to pull the tights up, with my big muscles. The salesman was right when he said that given my exuberant anatomy I needed to size up, you had not noticed the size of those muscular protrusions you have, Ambrosio. These tights are definitely a bit tight; I hope they can endure my muscular expansion when I'm fully sculpted, I wouldn't want to be harassed by Karen if these burst and reveal my marvelous attributes. The truth is that I'm looking forward to meeting her. They say she gets you in shape in two shakes. She must be about to arrive.

"Good morning, Minister Etoile. I'm Karen Lebroq, your personal trainer."

"Mind if we use first names, Karen?" — Oh man, look at this woman's muscles! The only fat her body has seen is in her suntan lotion. This is going to be quite an experience — Ambrosio thinks.

"We're in the arena! This is the Roman circus, minister! We're gladiators and those who are about to die only use first names. You're going to sweat in those yellow tights, you know that, don't you? First, we're going to analyze your physiological situation: 1.70 m tall. Get on the scale, please: 90 kg, 40% fat. Wow! Let's not even look at your BMI. You're going to have to get in shape, Minister! I see that the sand you frequent is not that of the circus arena but the one on the beach, carrying a cooler full of beers, peanuts and fries."

"Who told you I like peanuts and fries, Karen? Everybody gossips around here!"

"No one told me anything, Minister. It's the percentage of fat in your body that gave you away, as well as that muffin-top pushing out of your two-sizes-too-small yellow tank top. A new challenge for Karen Lebroq: 'getting a psychedelic sausage in shape'."

"You think it's small? I think it's fine, it enhances my pectoral muscles."

“No offense, Minister, but rather than muscles they seem like two other things. If you last enough in the position and they don't fire you quickly, like they did with Sanctimonio, that muffin-top will become a six-pack, those two wobbly things will become a real breastplate and to top it off, you'll get some steel arms so that, next summer, you'll be surrounded by curvy blondes who will want to share beer and peanuts under your gorgeous beach umbrella. With those green wristbands and that matching pink headband you just put on your forehead, you're ready to take on the 'Karen Lebroq challenge'.”

“I perspire a lot, Karen, and my vision gets clouded with sweat, I need the headband and wristbands to dry myself. I don't think I'm so out of shape. A bit of a muffin top and that's it. I'm a born athlete, but my obligations stop me from leading a more active life. If I want my career to keep galloping ahead, my only option is to stay on the saddle, spurring relentlessly. But the time has come to regain my heart-breaking hunk adolescence. You'll see, appearances are deceptive. After I warm up, I'll become a fighting bull. I'll set up my iWoch to record the calories I burn and monitor my heart rate.”

“Okay Minister let's start with a gentle warm-up. Grab the TRX and do ten squats.”

“What's the TRX, Karen?”

“Those two black ropes with two handles, anchored to the ceiling.”

“Oh yeah, right, the TRX, of course...”

ONE HOUR LATER...

“Minister, are you okay?”

“I can't get up, Karen. I'm paralyzed and everything hurts. That last set with the twenty burpees was the cherry on top. I'm still at a hundred and seventy beats per minute and have burnt the incredible amount of one hundred calories. I can't move, my muscular body is on strike. It won't do what the Etoile brain tells him to — a really brilliant brain, if you ask me. The only thing that still works are my eyelids, they open and close without incident. I can't make it to the shower or anywhere else. You have to help me.”

“Oops, Minister! That is totally forbidden. I can't so much as touch you. You know, protocol, and a bunch of cameras recording it all. If I get caught hugging a neon-color minister, my contract could be ended.”

“But you can't leave me like this, Karen. This isn't a trick to observe your muscles closely. I just can't move. Not even Suarseneger could stand this session I just did. Such rhythm, such performance! A real show. Too bad there was no audience enjoying my evolution at the circus. A true gladiator fighting for his survival! I have given all of myself with no limits, but now I need help to get to the shower.”

“I'll wrap you in a towel, so you don't get cold or lose your shine, and I'll call Mr. Sumiso — he'll help you get into the shower. I'm sure he'll even lather and massage you, so you can fully recover. I have to run now. I have training with Dr. Bombón.”

JUST A MOMENT LATER.

“Minister, what's wrong? Karen called saying you needed help. Look at you, lying there like a psychedelic *eccehomo!* But check out your colorful outfit! I warned you Miss Lebroq is tough, but you wouldn't listen.”

“She killed me, she just killed me, I'm a zombie, Orlando. So, it's true she get's you into shape in two shakes. Boy, did she shake me! I can't move. I started with the TRX, then weights, then HIIT, and finally squats, abs, obliques, burpees, the superman and after I layed down to stretch, I couldn't get back up. You have to help me get to the shower.”

“Right away, Minister. No problem. Hold on to me and I'll lift you. On the count of three. One, two, three!”

“Oooooooh!” Orlando yells.

“What's wrong, Orlando? You scared me!”

“It's my back, Minister, it's frozen. I have two herniated discs. It hurts! I can't move. I have to let my body drop.”

“But Orlando, you can't just drop on your minister, you're so fleshy. Scoot to the side. You could make your minister suffocate.”

“I can't move, Minister, I'll have to stay on top. I'm so, so sorry. But

when it clicks, it clicks, and I get paralyzed. We're similar, you and I. I'm a little chubbier, but not much, Minister. Can't you feel our fat rolls collide to the beat?"

"Orlando! You're crossing a line! I am your minister. We can't just stay here hugging until the cleaning ladies show up at eight at night. Make an effort, fulfill your duty, respect and help your minister!"

"But I can't, Minister, I just can't get up. Too bad I didn't bring my cell phone. I left in such a hurry, I left it in my office."

"You're such a mess, Orlando. What do we do now?"

"We can both shout at the same time, although the gym is in a private area, and I don't think anyone will hear us. Help, help, help! The minister is in danger, help, help, help!"

"This is useless, no one's coming for us. It's already been an hour. Our fat rolls are no longer rubbing, they're starting to merge! And you're so heavy, Orlando. You seemed thinner. What are we going to do? Think, think!"

"The minister's the one who's supposed to think, and that would be you. But we really have to do something because, no offense, minister, I'm sensing some vapors rising... and it's making me kind of dizzy. I'm too sensitive to body odors and if I get dizzy, we could be in serious trouble."

"What do you mean by 'serious trouble', Orlando?"

"Well, all my sphincters relax in unison."

"Don't you dare relax like that on your minister."

"It's not a question of wanting, Minister. It's involuntary, and that whiff I'm getting, which is increasing in intensity, has started the countdown to sequential relaxation."

"Orlando, it's impossible for me to be giving off a bad smell, no way! This morning I sprayed concentrated cologne Álvarez Gómez all over myself and, although I've been training like a champion, I must smell like paradise."

"A fetid paradise is what's invading my olfactory system, Minister. See? I told you this would be happening soon."

"Orlando! Orlando! For God's sake, what is that warm liquid I'm feeling on my private parts? Orlando, my leggings are soaked, and

what now, Orlando? What is that smell? Orlando, tell me that stink is not..."

"I'm so sorry Minister, but today is about smells. First yours, and now mine. I couldn't contain myself. A complete and unmitigated sphincter relaxation. Ahem! It must have been the beans with chorizo that I had last night."

"Oh please, Orlando! It stinks! Wait! Have you heard that? Someone's coming, shout, shout!"

"Help! Help! Help! Please, we need help!"

"But ... what are you doing there?" Carolina and Margarita say in unison. "Orlando, why are you hugging the psychedelic minister? And what's that sticky puddle around you, Ambrosio? It reeks. What on earth were you doing?"

"Oh! It's a long story. Call the medical services, we need an ambulance. We can't move. The thing is..."

"Don't go on, don't go on! We'd rather not know, but you're going to be today's gossip in the ministry when they rescue you in that suggestive pose and in the middle of that perfumed puddle. I'll make that call, but before we leave, we came to tell you that the measures we've taken are going really smoothly."

"I think you mean that 'I' have taken!"

"Yeah, Ambrosio, right, the measures that 'you' have taken!"

Friday, May 7, 3520. Day +36

Back in Dr. Bombón's office...

"Hi, Margarita."

"Hi, Carolina."

"I come bearing good news, Margarita! Sac has managed to get the bracelet to detect asymptomatic patients."

"Hey, you're not having an affair with Sac, are you? I'm constantly hitting on him, but you're the one he contacts."

"Well, no, Margarita. My panties only fall for Alberto. Mind you, for now, but I hope it lasts a while. I'm sure Sac chooses to call me for other reasons, which I don't know. The ways of the Lord are unfathomable. So, tell me then, did you have dinner with him?"

“Yes, Carolina, I had dinner with Sac.”

“Tell me everything, play-by-play.”

“It took me two days to decide what to make for dinner, and I spent the whole afternoon in the kitchen. I left half my salary in that dinner. He didn't stop chewing with his seductive smile, while he drank a bottle of champagne as an aperitif, another of white wine to accompany the sea bream, several glasses of sweet wine with dessert, and three gin and tonics. And he was fresh as a rose! I could've gotten on the table, danced and undressed for him, but he wouldn't have noticed me either. I'm definitely not his type.”

“Poor Margarita! You always have the humanoid option, surely Sac will make one for you tailored to your needs. I'll move on to another topic, although only partially since it's still about Sac. So, he has found out that asymptomatic patients have a peculiar sleep pattern and wake up more times to drink water during the night. He says that thirst must be associated with the replication of the virus in the throat. They have validated it by antigen detection and PCR. The bracelet goes off the first night after the contagion, so we can now consider the epidemic controlled.”

“Why do you say that, Carolina?”

“Well, because the decrease in the number of cases this week has been seventy percent, which is why only eighty-four thousand cases have been detected, which leaves the weekly incidence at one hundred eighty-two cases per one hundred thousand. Once SpicaBot reports the patients' disturbed sleep pattern or drinking more water than normal, we lock them up. Besides, since contact tracing is effective, we can do serial tests and detect the infected cases. The key was to quickly identify the asymptomatic patients, so that the basic reproductive number is less than one, and we have just achieved that.”

“See, Carolina? And all thanks to Sac. We don't deserve him.”

“I'm not calling the media, Margarita. I'll make an informative note and let Orfila deal with them. They're not going to pay attention to us, anyway. Someone has leaked a video of Ambrosio and Orlando's rescue at the gym, and that is the only thing they care about right now.”

“What? I had no idea, Carolina! Send it to me right now, I can't miss it.”

SIMULTANEOUSLY, IN HIS MINISTER'S OFFICE, AMBROSIO IS RUMINATING.

I'm on social networks. Again. Such a low blow. Carolina showed me the video, that witch, she was cracking up and said: 'Ambrosio, you can't resist a new showing. You won't be able to go out in public in a long time'. And those memes. Luckily, I only use SMS, so I don't fall into the temptation of watching myself over and over again. My outfit is what they laughed at the most. I still don't get it. It all matched! I had even chosen green sneakers. I don't know who that was, but if I ever catch them... Exile in the North Pole is good option. Luckily it seems that we're going to control the epidemic and the new normal will be established, as the President says — but I still don't know what 'the new normal' is. It's getting so hard to control it: the deficit is shooting up like a rocket. Right now, Molecular Solutions has all the Confederation's money, which is very convenient for me, actually. Nobody knows what the debts will be paid with. There would only be a solution if Ambrosio, the 'Etoile', took charge. Then the Treasury would be out of work, and the joyful citizens would voluntarily contribute so that the 'Etoile' would maintain power without fixed term limits. When has there been normalcy on the planet? When? Never, but if they elect 'Etoile' they will have it, it will be calm as a millpond — a planet without a critical mass to thrash around. And all thanks to 'Etoile, the conciliator'. But instead, they'll dismiss me as a minister, and I'll have to go back to the Institute. Not even Sac would get me promoted, and I would like to be boss for just a little bit longer... just a little more.

CHAPTER 7

PREVENTION

Wednesday, September 1, 3520. About 3 months later

AMBROSIO, AITOR AND SAC ARE IN THE RESERVED SEATING AREA OF García de la Nubarra, a restaurant where Luis sumptuously serves food and drinks. Ambrosio has just returned from a wine excursion and wants to taste one of the plonks he sampled.

“I must have a bottle of that, but I’ll leave the tasting to you,” Luis affirms.

“This man thinks he knows wine. He is one of the best and has won many awards, but I, having attended blind tastings of wines from all over the world, can guess the vintage without breaking a sweat. I don’t even need to taste the one he’s bringing now, if I smell it, I can tell which vine the grapes come from.”

“If you don’t mind, I’ll drink champagne, plonk gives me a headache,” — Sac says.

“I’ll join you,” — Aitor proposes.

AMBROSIO IS EXULTANT. THE EFFECTIVE MANAGEMENT OF THE EPIDEMIC has brought him unparalleled fame, but the virus must be eradicated from the face of the planet. All countries have bought the SpicaKit,

and the number of cases has decreased, but the virus has not disappeared. He wants the vaccine. He can't just sit around and wait for years while someone completes the design and tests it for efficacy and safety. Currently, with such a small number of cases, it would take years for the process to be completed. If we had had an experimental vaccine in the midst of an epidemic, it would have been a breeze. We would have conducted the studies in a flash, but we didn't have one, and now it's too late, Ambrosio's mind laments. I have to pressure Sac, because I'm sure he has something and doesn't want to share it.

“Now that we're hydrating our throats with this inspiring drink, it's a good time to talk about the vaccine,” — says Ambrosio.

“Ambrosio, that inspiring drink is going to give you an awful, ringing headache. I've dared to try it and have no doubt that you combined its tasting with cheese. About the vaccine, I'd rather not say anything. You have no money to pay for it. Besides, the virus is constantly mutating and escaping, so we would have to reformulate and revaccinate periodically. The epidemic is under control now, and there are no signs that it will change. Molecular Solutions keeps making money, and so do you. Your greed is overwhelming. You are the center of the Confederacy. All the gossip magazines assign you a different girlfriend day after day. Although we know that you're a wallflower, you're on the cover of the news of every TV channel, the foreign media are constantly asking you for interviews, you have even made the cover of *Global Planetary Time!* The President adores you, but the rest of the ministers hate you, especially the Finance Minister. The Confederacy coffers have more cobwebs than an attic at the end of summer, and those of Molecular Solutions look like Uncle Amancio's, do you remember Uncle Amancio? The man who had more money than Parcelonia and Tersa together? Well, we have even more. What are you lacking? You've got it all.”

“I want to go down in posterity as the one who eradicated the Spicavirus. I know I'm going down for a lot of other things, but I want this one too. Besides, that will earn me more credit, I'll get more awards, a couple more honorary doctorates, maybe the Noble, who knows? I don't know, little things that make the world know that,

without Ambrosio, there can be life, but it's worse. There's none other like Ambrosio. Etoile is the lighthouse that guides you to safe harbor in the storm.”

“But it will be very expensive, and in the end innocent people will pay for it — you mandarins always get away with murder. If you want to have our technology, you're going to have to pawn yourselves. It's really expensive, Ambrosio, and there's no way we're giving you the vaccine as a gift. Besides, you'll also pay for low- and middle-income countries. We're not going to leave them out, like you always do.”

“Whatever it takes, Sac, I don't care how many zeros the figure has. And it's not like the vaccine isn't convenient for you. You're going to make a lot of money.”

“I just told you we don't need more, Ambrosio. We don't know what to do with what we're earning already. That is not our goal. What's on our minds now is the planet's wellbeing. We're considering organizing a foundation to return the planetary generosity that has overflowed Molecular Solution's income statement.”

“It's your duty to get the vaccine and eradicate the virus. And organize whatever foundation you want, but don't you lower my percentage for me — I'm a civil servant with a very poor pension, and I need a financial cushion for my old age, which I feel will be long, thanks to my extraordinary genes.”

“I see where you're going, Ambrosio. Just for a laugh, I'm going to tell you about our latest advances, but don't drool ahead of time, we haven't decided anything yet. We have developed Origami-Prot, an algorithm that predicts with ninety-nine percent accuracy the three-dimensional structure of proteins and their function. With this information, and a little more secret technology, we have designed a synthetic innocuous virus capable of reproducing in susceptible animals — including humans — producing a complete and long-lasting immune response. In order to avoid a massive vaccination campaign and the mess that comes with it — you know, setting up football stadiums, airports, or malls — we have manufactured an adhesive nanochip with nanowires which gradually release viruses into the subcutaneous tissue. The nanochip has a nanobattery that keeps it at four degrees so that the virus is happy as a bug in a rug

and does not lose effectiveness. Everything is nano, ha, ha, ha! Those who want to get vaccinated just have to stick the nanochip in their deltoid muscle, and eventually it will come off by itself, that's it. The virus enters the body, it spreads, it lodges and reproduces in the nasopharynx for about two weeks, and is then eliminated in urine and feces, thus disappearing. And, get this, here comes the best part. At one of those lunchtime gatherings, we now have in the open air, with sandwiches, tea, energy drinks and organic salads, someone — a very clever person — suggested: why don't you include in the synthetic virus an irritating surface protein that will produce uncontrollable sneezing? Thus, the one who is vaccinated will expel the virus with each sneeze and will in turn vaccinate those around them. Isn't that great? Just picture this scene:

“It's the vermouth hour, Cardinal Ricolieu is packed, as usual. The Peláez family, who have been fully vaccinated three days ago, have just occupied their usual table. Alfonso asks: “Are you guys sneezing more than usual? I'm having sudden bursts... I think it may be because of the vaccine.” And they all start sneezing in unison, thus vaccinating all the other customers around them. “See?” — says Alfonso, “this is what I was talking about. Achool!”



GIVE THEM ONE WEEK AND THE ENTIRE NEIGHBORHOOD IS VACCINATED, so we don't need every person to wear the patch — easy logistics and relatively cheaper. Our studies, with intelligent models on aerosol dispersion after an uncontrolled sneeze, indicate that it is enough to vaccinate twenty-five percent of the population. We can forget about the deniers, the anti-vaxers, and any other group that may look for trouble. They'll get vaccinated without even knowing — I sneeze here, I sneeze there, and wham! You're already immune. Also, since the virus is shed in urine and feces, all Spicavirus-susceptible animals will end up vaccinated too. To finish: Ambrosio, don't drink another vodka and tonic, I don't want you to forget everything I've told you, and it's important that this is clear: we can't

do clinical trials. We can't risk being uncovered; it would be a political mess. We don't expect help from politicians. All they care about is where their ass is going to sit for the next four years, while those of us who risk the dough, since we're theoretically rich, we owe the Confederacy, and if the investment fails — oops, too bad. The vaccine is one hundred percent safe. We have already run tests in one of those countries that had a rampant pandemic wave and needed a radical and urgent solution. One of those where you can't plan four years ahead, where it is now or never, where you can't cage people because the day they don't go out, there's no income, where they don't wear masks because you have to choose between keeping your mouth and nose covered all day or opening them so that their stomachs stop growling for a moment, where ICU is the name of an alien, and hospital is something that will exist when aid arrives from rich countries. And what was the result? The pandemic wave disappeared as if by magic, and they haven't detected any new cases. The press says that's because no diagnostic tests are being run, but the reality is intractable. They don't test for Spicavirus because all citizens are vaccinated and protected. There are people with similar symptoms, only the cause is not the Spicavirus but another respiratory viral disease. Army officers were secretly vaccinated and that was enough for the entire country to be immune within a month. We did the SpicAc and everyone in the country, without exception, had antibodies the size of a pumpkin. Now it's the State with the highest rate of asymptomatic cases, and Science has no explanation for this. A superior race. This prodigy of human beings must be thoroughly investigated. Now I'm sure you're totally convinced that this is what you want, but what do you offer us in return?"

"We'll buy the vaccine, you set the price."

"That doesn't make us horny, Ambrosio. As I told you, we're considering renting Uncle Amancio's vault — we have no room for more cash anywhere."

"Tell me what you want, Sac. You're so hard to please."

"First, I want you to sign a document acknowledging that you're going to use the vaccine without either notifying any other member

of the Government or, consequently, the public. That is to say, you take full responsibility. If it goes wrong, you know what comes next.”

“No, absolutely not, I can't sign such a document, Sac.”

“Then there's no vaccine, Ambrosio.”

“Okay, then I'll sign that document, but do you promise that no one's going to die?”

“Ambrosio, we can't be sure that no one's going to die, but we can assure you that the vaccine will not be the reason they do. We can promise, and we do promise, that it doesn't have any side effects that could put you in a cage for a day nor for the next hundred years.”

“I guess I have no choice, I accept the deal.”

“As you can imagine, Ambrosio, you will not have a copy of what you're going to sign at the Notary. The document will remain in our power, in case you go wayward, and we have to use it.”

“I still accept, but... how little trust you have in me!”

“As much as you deserve, Ambrosio, no more, no less! And now, tell us how you're going to manage it, because it's an operation for the National Intelligence Center, but without that Center's help, of course.”

“Shit, Sac! I hadn't thought about that, how do we do this, then? It's impossible. How do I tell people to put on a patch, without telling them what it's actually for? I'm sure I'll get caught and I'll be locked up forever.”

“If you give us exclusive management of the Confederacy vaccination campaign, we'll fix it for you. All viral vaccines will be included in the same device, and the one for Spicavirus will be hiding among them.”

“Will it work, Sac? I don't want to be involved in yet another mess because of you.”

“Come on, Ambrosio, I've already explained to you, our artificial intelligence is superior to natural intelligence — which is not very hard to beat, to be honest. What I didn't tell you is that, if you want to eradicate the Spicavirus, the new vaccine patch will be a little more expensive. You'll have to convince whoever you need to convince that, since there is no needle nor syringe, children will love it, and that comes with an extra cost. If you fail to convince them, you'll just have

to push it through somehow. And you'll have to pay it all in advance — everything started very well, but we already have many overdue invoices.”

“You're so accommodating.”

“Finally, the bad news, Ambrosio. Don't count on the vaccine eradicating the virus. The vaccine will protect people, but the virus will mutate, there will be new variants that will cause new infections, and it will be necessary to vaccinate people again with a new formulation. On a positive note, once the first one works without side effects, no one will bother you for having done it in secret. The virus has come to stay.”

Monday, July 4, 3521. 15 months later

“Dear fellow citizens, I have the immense pleasure to announce that the Spicavirus pandemic is under control. It is almost certain that the eradication of the virus will not be achieved, at least for now, and that the diagnosis and monitoring program will have to go on indefinitely, until an effective vaccine is found. In other Confederacies and Plurinational States the situation is developing along similar lines. We have made significant headway, and this has been due to our leadership and commitment without limitations. The fight has been hard, but we have won the war against this invisible enemy that has left many compatriots behind. Our economy is badly damaged, but from now on we will once again be the Confederacy that guarantees rights and protects all citizens, so that no one's left behind. Citizens of Damania, I must say, in case I hadn't said it yet, that this Government has solved the most difficult situation it has ever faced. Together we have come out of this horrible crisis, and now we face a future full of hope. Together we will make sure that the sunset will only give way to a brighter sunrise. Fellow citizens, let us all shout together: Long live Damania!”

Monday, July 18, 3521

The SOR radio station reports an exclusive scoop:

“The National Intelligence Center has discovered an international espionage plot based in Damania. The detainees had stolen a state-of-the-art vaccine against Spicavirus, designed by the AISS company, which had not yet been authorized because it still hadn't undergone the required efficacy and safety trials. The criminal plot had included the vaccine in the new single-application devices for the worldwide childhood vaccination campaigns. Children have been administered all the required vaccinations as well as the Spicavirus vaccine. By means of a novel sneeze-burst system, children were vaccinating their entire families, and in turn their families would go on sneezing and vaccinating their environment. A planet vaccinated through sneezing! Public opinion demands an exemplary sentence against these individuals.”



CHAPTER 8

LUXURY, PASSION AND LOVE

Saturday, August 13, 3521

AT NINE A.M. AMBROSIO ARRIVES AT THE PRIVATE FLIGHTS AREA OF Magrit International Airport and boards the *Ambrosía* helicopter. Aitor has invited him to spend the weekend on his new yacht — well, it's not new, but it's the first he has owned, so, what the hell, his new yacht!

He's so sly, he hadn't told me anything. At least they named it after me, because I'm like ambrosia myself, soft and delicate. I'm excited. I'm curious to see the boat he bought. It sure it's like a shallop. This weekend I want to unwind, saving the country is so stressful. I'm not going to be very comfortable, since I can't swim very well, and I find deep waters scary.

The helicopter takes off cleanly towards its destination. An hour later the pilot waves his hand for me to look at a group of huge yachts that are anchored near an island and says:

“Dr. Etoile, that's the Tormentera island bay, with its famous beach, La Tormencilla. We're heading to that white ship, next to the metallic black one.”

“That ship that looks like a swan?”

“Exactly, it's the Cignu model.”

Ambrosio answers him with a thumbs up and thinks, it looks like a starship, and it's huge! It's even bigger than the summer cruise liner that goes around the Grogias Islands. We were three thousand five hundred on that boat. After a week I disembarked with a few extra kilos — the endless walks that I took from the table to the buffet bar were of little use. I hope these cabins are more spacious. The one in the tour package I chose was a doll's house, every time I tried to get something out of the suitcase, I had to open the door, and it was terribly hot — I didn't sleep a wink, nor did I have a single adventure, and I gained so many admirers! All the women were after me, saying: “Dr. Etoile, tell us how you saved the life of that indigenous man with rampant diarrhea in Bondolonia, and how you operated with a kitchen knife on that other guy who had fallen from a palm tree, when his ankle bone was showing. What a full and interesting life you have, Dr. Etoile, unlike us, always looking out for our husbands and children, and now we're all divorced. We admire you so much! Promise that when we return to Magrit you'll call us to go out and have a drink, but just an innocent glass of wine — you have very naughty eyes, and you'll surely take us to some dark discotheque where you never know who's grabbing your butt.” I had so much fun on that cruise. Good times! I wonder what Aitor has arranged for my visit. Shit! The pilot's heading toward the boat. We're gonna crash! He's crazy, how can he land on a yacht?

“Hey, hey, what are you doing? Aren't we going to the airport? The way you're flying this thing makes me nervous, don't you see that's a yacht, not an aircraft carrier?”

The pilot smiles and explains:

“Dr. Etoile, take those binoculars on the right-hand side of your seat and look closely at *Ambrosía*. There are two helipads, see? That's where we're going.”

FIVE MINUTES LATER, THE HELICOPTER LANDS SOFTLY ON ONE OF THE helipads. Ambrosio gets off as Aitor approaches, displaying a huge smile, and they converge with a hug.

“Hello, Ambrosio, I’m so glad you accepted my invitation. You seemed reluctant the last time we talked about it.”

“Well, I thought it was a more modest ship, now that I’ve seen it from the air, I’m glad I came. You rascal, who would’ve said that a virus would lead you to a yacht like this.”

“It’s the unexpected surprises in life that count, Ambrosio. In each misfortune there’s someone who come out on top, and this time it was us. You’re not doing too bad yourself, are you? The weekend will confirm it.”

“Why do you say that, Aitor? Are you planning to play some sort of trick on me? I don’t trust you two at all. You have a lot of power now, and I’m still a humble civil servant.”

“You’ll see, Ambrosio, but above all else, trust us. And so, you see I mean well, you’ll be staying in the presidential suite. It has only been used by people as important as you. I hope the wine is to your liking. Marta and the children say hi, but they won’t be joining us this time. They’re at the Lion Woods golf camp in Angustias. I think it’s better like this, because this weekend will be a busy one, and there’s less freedom when children are around — you know millionaires are such rogues. They’ll take your luggage to your cabin. Come, I’ll walk you there, I’ll show it to you, and let you refresh yourself and change. You’re going to get dehydrated in those corduroy pants you’re wearing. Vermouth will be served at one p.m., and lunch at two. It will be informal. A varied buffet. I don’t know who will come. Before that you can go for a swim, or you could ride the dinghy or jet ski to the beach. Come, look out to starboard. See those boats over there? The golden pink one is Pearl’s, black one is SoftHard’s, burgundy is Cara’s, the huge sailboat is Tersa’s, and the silver one is Parcelonia’s. Their owners will come over for dinner tonight, with other guests. Esmeraldo and Gambeteo can’t join the party, and Taparotti excused himself this very morning. Roland Treize will do his best, although he can’t confirm until the afternoon. However Yon Albatros, the golfer, is already here. He just arrived from Britain, with his third jug of claret. They all want to meet you, Ambrosio. You’re the talk of the moment. That thing of ending the pandemic has made you a star. Here’s your cabin. I hope you like it; I know you’re very demanding

and you're used to the best of the best. See you in a little while. Make yourself comfortable and wear light clothes, it's very hot here.”

“I'll be right with you, Aitor.”

AMBROSIO CANNOT BELIEVE WHAT HE'S SEEING. THIS IS THREE TIMES THE size of my house. Look at that bed. I'll have to find some company, so I don't feel like a lonely castaway. I'll hit on the SoftHard CEO's wife; she's smoking hot. I've seen photos of her in *Gossip Express*. I'll check the bathroom. Separate shower, jacuzzi, sauna. Wow, and the toilet seat comes with a cleansing squirt. I'll sit down and try it. Ooooooh, the things they invent. I need to get one for my place. And there's a lounge area, and a meeting table. Let's check the fridge. My vodka and my tonic, peanuts and fries. A humidior with my favorite cigars. There's also 24-hour room service, and a masseuse. What is this over here? A balcony to watch the sunset. Isn't that romantic! And this ladder? Where does this lead? I'm going down. What? I have my private beach and a jet ski. For the first time Aitor has gotten close to my standards. Everything seems perfect, but only for now. Let's see how the weekend goes, he scared me with what he just said. Now I'll unpack. Good thing that I organized myself and brought the appropriate clothes, otherwise it would be uncomfortable. Thong swimsuits and underwear in this drawer, multi-colored socks in this other one. I'll hang the Hawaiian shirts in the closet. T-shirts I'll leave right here. The baggy pants, which are very trendy right now, I'll hang them too. Ah, here's the tux. I'm going to change into these black jelly sandals with matching thong and a green T-shirt with Taparotti's face, so they can see that I like Bel Canto. I'll go for a dip before vermouth, but I won't let go of the platform. It's too deep, and all full of weird animals. I could stay on my private beach, but it's better to gossip here and there... ..I hope I don't get lost; this is such a huge yacht. I've been on large ships before, but this is something else. It seems like it's this way. Yes, that's the rear of the boat, which is called something like fat or aft, where Aitor and Sac are sitting.

“Hello, Sac, how are you doing? When did you get here?”

“Yesterday. You know, I go back and forth. Crazy life. Everything's

going well. I see you're in great shape, Ambrosio, responsibility looks good on you, not a trace of your muffin-top, right? Well just a little, yeah, you rascal, Taparotti looks like he has a double chin. Karen has some work left to do, huh?"

"Hmm, I don't know what you're talking about, Sac. I'm permanently dedicated to my responsibilities. One distraction and the machine stops working. Everything is on my shoulders, as always. I don't know whether to go for a swim or stay here with you... I think I'm going to stay; the water seems to be very cold."

"25° C, freezing," Aitor assures.

A member of the crew comes over and asks...

"Would the gentlemen like a drink?"

Ambrosio orders a red wine spritzer. Sac and Aitor go for the champagne.

"Mmm!" — Ambrosio asks, "what champagne is this?"

"Cristal, sir."

"Is champagne sold in cartons, now? I thought it was only packaged in glass bottles."

"Sir, it's Louis Rodante Cristal, vintage 3512."

"Oh sure, what am I saying! Okay, I'll give it a try, although I don't know why you don't consume Damanian products. Some are very tasty and at a very good price."

IN THE MEANTIME, IN ONE OF THE ROOMS, THE BUFFET TABLE IS BEING set up. The operation is managed by a blond woman, about thirty-three years old, so tall, pretty, delicate and elegant that it's intimidating to look at those impressive legs that slide in curves like those of the Montelero Rally. Ambrosio is staring at her, and she instinctively turns and gives him a tempting smile.

Ambrosio is bewildered, and asks:

"Who's that blonde?"

Aitor answers. She's the head of protocol, and her name is Orga. Actually, it's an outsourcing. She runs her own company and takes care of all the events we organize. She's very well connected and

knows the tastes of all the powerful people on the planet. She's pure success. Would you like me to introduce her to you?

"That's a great idea, Aitor."

"Are you sure, Ambrosio? Do you know what they say about her?"

"No, I don't."

"I'll sing it to you, then."

♪♪♪

They say you have poison on your skin, and that you're made out of thin plastic, they say you have a heavenly touch and whoever touches you will keep it for themselves. Tarara, tarara.

♪♪♪

— VENENO EN LA PIEL. RADIO FUTURA.

"I would be careful if I were you, where there's smoke..."

"I am a pro, Aitor. No woman's been born who could drive me crazy. I have a consummate control over my emotions."

Aitor touches the screen of his cell phone and, immediately afterwards, Orga appears.

"Orga, my friend Ambrosio would like to meet you."

"Dr. Etoile, such a pleasure to meet you. You're a world authority. I just got your science dissemination book, I hope you can write a dedication on my copy, later. I just bought it."

"Orga, please, don't be formal with me, we're almost the same age. Of course, I'll dedicate the book, with great pleasure. Do you have a business card in case I have an event to organize? Aitor says you're unbeatable."

"Mr. Menta is very flattering. We do our job with great dedication. That's the secret to our success. Here's my card, I wrote my cell phone number on the back — I only share it with the utmost VIP clients."

"Thank you very much. Let's see what your card says."

Orga S. Món
Heavenly Catering, Ltd.
Boulevard St. Antoine 7
Bandol, Helvetia

“If you’ll excuse me, I have to go now. I need to make sure everything is all set for the vermouth and lunch. I’ll see you later.”

“She’s a goddess, Aitor. Where did you find her? She has my book. And she gave me her personal phone number. Where is she staying?”

“On the boat, Ambrosio. I told you, she’s the head of protocol, and when we have an event, she works on it 24 hours a day. And this weekend is going to be hectic. You’ll see. If you want to check for yourself, go to the prow deck and see what they’re setting up for tonight’s party.”

“I’ll go have a look, but can I ask you how long the ship is?”

“Yes, Ambrosio, two hundred meters. It’s one of the largest in the world. Now that Multifaceted Solutions is going public, I have to show off.”

THE SEA BREEZE FEELS SO GOOD. THIS CHAMPAGNE IS DELICIOUS, WHAT was it called, again? It was Cristal, wasn’t it? I’ll look it up in Poodle. Here it is: Louis Rodante Cristal, vintage 3512. Damn! Four hundred dodones per bottle, now I understand why it’s so good. I won’t drink anything else this weekend. I’m going to check and see what they’re doing. Wow! So many workers. I’ll ask that huge guy, the one who’s bossing everybody around, what this is all about.

“Hi, I’m Dr. Etoile, you must have heard of me. I’m Mr. Menta’s partner, with whom do I have the pleasure of speaking?”

“My name is Ambrosio, Dr. Etoile. Yes, you’re very famous. You saved us from the Spicavirus.”

“Same name as me, such a coincidence! An ephemeral fame, although I hope I’m wrong. Do you mind if I ask you what this circusy thing is that they’re building here?”

“Not at all. You identified it very well yourself, Dr. Etoile. It’s going to be a kind of circus. That is, without wild animals. Well, as dawn

approaches, some will show up. Let me explain: the center stage with the mixing board, dominating the whole bow of the ship, is for the DJ. Thoma Jeta is coming, the best according to connoisseurs. I have no idea, I only like ‘copla’. There will be trapeze artists and tightrope walkers hanging from the masts, going from one side to the other. In the bathtubs and cages there will be lots of dancers. Obviously, the two bars are for drinks, but there will be service throughout the whole deck, so that people don't get crowded — you know people love boozing, especially if it's good drinks and for free. The central area will be an oasis. See, they're bringing the palm trees and the rest of plants, and from that ship on the port side they're going to unload the sand. It will be used as a dance floor. Up there, to the right of the bridge, we're setting up the karaoke stage. It's the first time we've done it. It was Miss Orga's idea, but I don't know if anyone will be brave enough to sing in front of so many important people. Now, with cell phones, it only takes five seconds to become a *trending topic*. We'll see about that tonight.”

“Thank you very much. You explained it all so well. We, Ambrosios, are very didactic. I'll let you get back to work.”

HMMM! SO, MISS ORGA — THAT MEANS SHE'S NOT MARRIED. I'M falling in love. Since I'm such a supportive man, I won't allow her idea to fail. Today everyone will find out that, apart from being a glamorous scientist and a high official capable of solving the most difficult problems, I sing like Taparotti. I must choose my song carefully to show off at karaoke. It will be a last-minute surprise. Well, time for vermouth now. Then a nap to recover my energy, and afterwards I'll dress up for dinner. I have to ask Aitor about the dress code for tonight.

AFTER LUNCH, AITOR, SAC AND AMBROSIO HAVE COFFEE WHILE enjoying their cigars accompanied by Macondo, a 25-year-old malt whiskey.

“That was a hearty meal. Orga is incomparable. I have very

refined tastes, but I must admit that it was excellent. And this cigar, what is it called?”

“Humike, Ambrosio, Humike. It’s the third time you asked. Look at the wrapper and you’ll see that it says: ‘Exclusively made for Multifaceted Solutions’.”

“Yes, it’s true, here in small writing. Very discreet. If they were made for me, I would write it in big capital letters: ‘Only for Ambrosio Etoile. Do not touch without authorization. Danger of death’ and then a skull.”

“You’re so funny, Ambrosio!”

“About the whiskey I won’t ask again, it’s so tasty! And normally I prefer anisette after meals. Golly, you’re living the life. Who would’ve said it, just one year ago! To think that you were my mentee, and that I almost wrote your dissertation. There’s no way I would’ve bet on you. I’ll go have some rest for a while, but first two things. Please explain — because surely you, Sac, are involved too — what is that about ‘Multifaceted Solutions’, wasn’t it ‘Molecular Solutions, Ltd.’? And the other thing — currently more important— is the party dress code formal, or are shorts, okay? I know how you like to keep things casual in Tormentera.”

“It’s black tie, Ambrosio, you need to wear a tuxedo. I hope you brought one with you, the invitation was very clear on that point.”

“Yes, of course, I brought a very elegant tux, you’ll see. I’ll see you at eight, then.

“Finally, he let us alone for a while, Sac. He gets so intense. Always telling stories and lecturing. We should tell him about the company arrangement. He’s going to go ballistic when he finds out. He keeps demanding transfers into his account at Lignum Bank. You have no idea how many text messages I have from him. I’m keeping them all, just in case.”

“Don’t worry, Aitor, it’s all registered and stored in an ultra-secure server. If he gets cocky, the scandal would be huge, but we must find a way to reassure him. He doesn’t know how the company is doing, and he mustn’t find out — especially now that it’s been divided and is going to be listed on the stock market. We buy his shares, and case closed. What matters is that his fifty percent stake in Molecular Solu-

tions, which you saw in that secret contract, no longer gives him any entitlement. Currently, Molecular Solutions has ten percent of the Corporation and therefore Ambrosio has five percent. You have forty percent, and we have twenty, and the rest is divided into so many shares that the biggest owner doesn't even reach five percent. We can rest easy. On Monday, at breakfast, we'll tell him, and then we'll send him back to Magrit so he can go on playing at dominating the world — that's all he really cares about. It'll be fine. You already know that AISS never fails, it keeps its word. The company's motivation is clearly defined, and it always achieves its intended goal.”

“I hope so, Sac. I'm not so sure. He's too ambitious. He doesn't mind leaving a trail of corpses behind him as long as he achieves what he sets his mind to. He needs money to execute his plans, and Multifaceted Solutions is his only way out.”

“Aitor, his ambition is our main asset. He can't see beyond that. The Dream Party's supposedly spontaneous presentation will be key. I'm going for a swim now. I'll catch you later. Try to relax — it's going to be a long night.”

LATER!

This was such a nice afternoon, Ambrosio thinks. Full of good stuff. A good long nap. The best massage I have ever had. Scary muscular masseuse. I thought she would make my pectoral — which my dear Karen has sculpted — disappear. She kneaded it like dough! Then, the sauna. I'm not going anywhere near the sea. You can't see the bottom, and I'm not showing up in public with a floatie. If I were carried away from the ship and had to be rescued, I'd be mortified. The great Etoile with a duckling floatie in the middle of La Tormencilla bay. Could it be any more humiliating? So, I'll get a shower now, shave, and dress up. In a little while, the most powerful people on the planet will know what kind of a man Ambrosio Etoile is. Oh! I also have to warm up my voice for karaoke. It will be another unforgettable performance.

Let's see if my short-sleeved golden tuxedo is too wrinkled for tonight. Well, no, it's perfect, they must have ironed it for me, this is

true luxury service! I'll wear the black silk shirt and the golden bow tie. To finish off this unparalleled outfit, I'll wear these golden patent leather shoes, they're the hottest ticket. I look in the mirror and ask: Mirror, mirror..., who is the most elegant man of them all? And it answers: 'It's the incomparable Etoile, in black and gold'. And swelled with pride, the 'Etoile' becomes one more member in the planetary élite.

AITOR IS GOING OVER THE LAST DETAILS WITH ORGA WHEN AMBROSIO approaches.

"Wow, Ambrosio, you look so golden. Too bad it's not Christmas, where did you get this idea for a the short-sleeved tuxedo? It's quite funny. You're the first to arrive. Why don't you sit and have a drink? I still have some last-minute matters to go over with Orga, and then we'll receive the guests. They're all looking forward to meeting you. As you know, the party is held in your honor for saving us from the evil Spicavirus.

TWO HOURS LATER, WHEN BELLIES ARE WELL SATISFIED, AITOR DEMANDS a moment of attention to say a few words:

"Dear friends: it is a pleasure to have you aboard the Ambrosía on this special day. Here, by my side, golden with happiness, is my dear friend, Ambrosio Etoile, the savior of the planet, the viral annihilator. Without his masterful strategy to overwhelm the virus, many more fellow citizens would have left us. The whole planet has surrendered to the evidence and has copied his system in order to obtain the same results that Ambrosio achieved in record time, first in Damania, and then in Dodona. A popular clamor has invaded the streets asking that he continue to guide us along paths of light and, for that reason, and in your presence, we're going to present Ambrosio Etoile's new initiative: 'the Dream Party'. I'm sure that his courage, drive and dedication will propel him to the presidency of Dodona. Let's raise our glasses and toast to this excep-

tional person, to this force of nature, to Ambrosio Etoile. To your health!"



ROUNDS OF APPLAUSE JOIN SHOUTS OF “AMBROSIO FOR PRESIDENT”, embraces, congratulations and promises of millionaire donations to the newly born Dream Party.

Ambrosio's face, full of astonishment, amazement and bewilderment quickly turns into joy, satisfaction, and happiness and, without hesitation, he asks for the floor:

“Dear friends: I know you're looking forward to the show that our host, Aitor Menta, has prepared for us, but I'd like to request a few minutes, if you'll humor me. This is an unforgettable occasion, and I just can't stay silent after the warm reception that my brilliant idea, the Dream Party, has garnered from you, the most exquisite élite on the planet. In your presence, I can promise, and I will promise that I won't disappoint you. The merciless war I've waged against the evil Spicavirus has awakened in me the urgent determination to save Humanity from the dangers upon us. This epidemic has made me even wiser, and that wisdom places me as the ideal candidate to guide the future of Dodona. I trust that tonight, without delay, you will become platinum members of the Dream Party, and that your generous donations will allow me to be your political representative for many years to come. Honesty and transparency will guide the course of this party, until it achieves an undisputed victory in the next elections to the Presidency of Dodona. I raise my glass to all of you and to the Dream Party.”



MORE SHOUTS OF “AMBROSIO FOR PRESIDENT” AND GENERAL CHEERING, and Orga mutes Ambrosio's microphone to announce that the show is going to start, and that Thoma Jeta is going to take the stage. All the guests expectantly head to the deck bow...

. . .

AMBROSIO STAYS BEHIND WITH AITOR AND SAC.

“Damn, you could have given me a heads up. I don't understand this kind of strategy, thank goodness I have good reflexes.”

“It was a surprise, Ambrosio. Sac and I have been planning it for a while now, but we were afraid to ask you in case you said no. We were concerned that the strenuous work that you have taken on, all by yourself, would have exhausted you, but we have already seen that you're still the same force of nature, the invincible Ambrosio Etoile! Hence this little ambush, which has turned out to be wonderful. Aren't you happy, Ambrosio?”

“The truth is that I am, yes, I won't deny it. It's a great responsibility, but you already know I'm willing to give it my all. I've been doing fine, so far, but now with the experience I've gained, I'm going to be simply outstanding. Tomorrow we can discuss how we should proceed. Today it's time to have fun. I also have a surprise for you. This Cristal is to die for. I'll have some more, that speech has dried up my mouth.”

Sac and Aitor look amused and say: “Look at him, dressed for Christmas. And he says he has a surprise for us? Wow, social media will be on fire tonight!”

BUT AMBROSIO'S LITTLE HEAD WON'T REST FOR A SECOND, AND HE purposefully bumps into Orga.

“Orga, what are you doing here, so lonely?”

“I'm working, Dr. Etoile. I won't let the tiniest thing to go wrong. Everything has to be perfect.”

“I'm of the same opinion, and I show it every minute of my humble journey through this valley of tears. Why don't you take a little break and have a glass of Cristal with me? It's so good!”

“I can't, Dr. Etoile. I'm working, and I need to keep a cool head. You know what they say about champagne.”

“Well, no, I don't know, what do they say?”

“That it takes your pains away and your clothes off, ha, ha, ha!”

And you wouldn't want to see me naked in front of the entire élite of the planet, would you?"

"That's a fitting saying, indeed! I have no doubt that all of us here, without exception, would love to undertake that unrivalled and endless journey that would start at your ankles, go through the unique composition of your curves, and end in that dazzling smile that could illuminate even a moonless night."

"Goodness, Dr. Etoile! With that compliment you don't even need champagne! When I'm done, I'd be delighted to join you, not just for a glass, but the whole bottle."

"Well, it's a deal, Orga, your room or mine?"

"I think mine would be better. I'm in a cabin with a balcony and a little lounge. It's not like yours, but it's pleasant enough, and has the advantage that it's away from prying eyes. Tonight, there will be people racing around in the corridors, and the security staff will have to be deployed throughout the whole yacht."

"Okay. When the party is coming to an end, I'll look for you, and we'll creep into your lair. Make sure there's enough stock of this delicacy — the night will be long. I'm an incorrigible night owl and, with my incomparable gift for gab, I'll keep you entertained until dawn. We're going to have so much fun. Oh! And don't call me Dr. Etoile anymore — for you, it's just Ambrosio."

"Splendid, doctor, oops, sorry, Ambrosio. Just message me and I'll send you the location when I'm in my cabin. That will be more discreet. You are the center of attention. People are very nosey and mean-spirited, and cell phone cameras can be really dangerous."

YOU'RE DOING SO WELL, AMBROSIO. TONIGHT, YOU'RE GETTING SOME action, and with a Teutonic goddess! This is going to be so much fun! I have no time to lose, I must go to my cabin to warm up my vocal cords for my coming-out. I'm going to dazzle them all."

MEANWHILE, THE BOW DECK IS VERY LIVELY. THE SHOW IS IMPRESSIVE, Thoma Jeta is making everyone dance. Some brilliant mind has been

shaking the mast and three tightrope walkers have ended up in the sea, but they're being rescued at the moment. Champagne floods the dry throats of people dancing, while the candy men make sure the party does not falter. Midnight is approaching and the fireworks are about to start. Thoma Jeta freezes the music for Orga to make the announcement.

“And now, ladies and gentlemen, the fireworks — courtesy of Cara, Parcelonia, Pearl, SoftHard and Tersa — are about to begin. Please, give them a round of applause!” The spotlight shines on the companies' founders, and they raise their glasses in appreciation.

The first rocket goes off, followed by an explosion. There is an amazing display of lights, stars, and meteorites falling into the sea and illuminating the night on the beach of La Tormencilla. Astonished and satisfied gasps disturb the stillness caused by the rocking of the sea. Suddenly, the show ceases and Orga announces the final firework display with her melodic voice.

Twenty-eight rockets ascend forming an arc that covers the entire beach, and when they reach their apex they explode in unison, forming the message:



AMBROSIO ETOILE WILL BE
OUR NEXT PRESIDENT!



SLOWLY, EACH LETTER BREAKS DOWN INTO SMALL COLORED STARS, AND at that very moment, Etoile, in his Christmassy look, climbs onto the karaoke platform as the loudspeakers begin to spit out a melody that no one identifies but that slowly rises in volume.

Ambrosio takes off his tuxedo jacket while still holding the microphone, he waves it over his head, and tosses it to Orga, who picks it up gracefully, and then he begins to sing:



Dale a tu cuerpo alegría Macarena
Que tu cuerpo es pa' darle alegría y cosa buena
Hey, Macarena
AAAAAHHHHH



— MACARENA. LOS DEL RÍO

THE OASIS IS CROWDED WITH PEOPLE AND, AS IF THEY WERE ALL PART OF one perfectly synchronized dance troupe, they dance the choreography that accompanies the famous song. Everybody is pirouetting — the founders of Pearl, SoftHard, Parcelonia, Tersa and Cara with their companions, Roland Treize and Yon Albatros with their respective girlfriends, Thoma Jeta, and all the rest of worldwide celebrities bend their arms at alternating elbows and chant in unison “Hey, Macarena, aaaahhh!” Ambrosio moves his bow tie to his forehead and unbuttons his black shirt to show off a huge, multi-karat swaying gold chain. Delirium takes over the party while Ambrosio’s baritone voice — or is it tenor? — puts an end to the stillness of La Tormencilla beach.

FIVE MINUTES LATER, AMBROSIO ÉTOILE IS ONCE AGAIN A TRENDING topic on social networks. The last guests are leaving the party, and the pleased comments about the show turn into distant murmurs as the boats move away and carry the revelers back to the soft beds on their luxury yachts...

AMBROSIO IS EXULTANT, BUT HIS IMPATIENCE TO MEET ORGA IS overwhelming. He looks for Aitor and Sac to wish them good night and finds them sitting exhausted on the aft deck of the ship.

“That was epic, wasn’t it?”

“It was great, Ambrosio. You’re on your way to President of the planet. That was an amazing display of *savoir-faire* and charm! The flying golden jacket, the bow tie on your forehead, the wobbly gold chain, and the Macarena have already made you unbeatable in the next elections. You won't need an electoral campaign. I don't know who uploaded it, but social networks are on fire right now. You have broken your last video's record. Since you ignore social networks because they seem snobbish to you, you have no idea what's going on, but you should get an account and see for yourself — although there are some comments which may be a bit hard to take. They could hurt you since you're so sensitive.”

“I'm going to bed happy because I see you like the way I've started to promote my personal Dream Party project. I'm exhausted. Good night and sweet dreams. I think that after my nightly vocal exercise, washed down with Cristal, I'll have a quiet rest for the night.”

LALALA, LALALA, LALALA! I'M IN GREAT SHAPE. THIS CRISTAL MAKES YOU feel strong like an ox. One quick message, and we'll see if Orga is ready for 'la Etoile'. I can't wait. Where's that location? Oh no! How is she going to send it to me? I have a prehistoric cell phone! You're a hunter-gatherer, Ambrosio, and now, what are you going to do? You're not getting laid! You're not getting laid! Think! Think! There's one security escort over there. Maybe I can find out where Orga's cabin is.

“Good evening, sir.”

“Do you know who I am?”

“Well, I haven't had the pleasure, sir, but can I contact the coordinator and find out in no time.”

“That won't be necessary. I can tell you myself. I'm Dr. Etoile, the next President of Dodona. Haven't you seen the fireworks?”

“No, sir, watching over such important people doesn't allow for one single second of relaxation. The only one time I ever got distracted, it cost me five years in the Mandarin Islands, so I always stay focused.”

“You did have revengeful bosses, indeed!”

“Tell me, how can I help you?”

“Let's see, it turns out that Miss Món didn't give me back my golden tuxedo jacket after I tossed it from the stage. That was when I started singing ‘Macarena’, and I haven't seen Miss Orga since then, and as you can imagine I don't want to lose my jacket because I really like it. My mother gave it to me as a present for my first New Year's Eve gala, and although I have to be honest, well, I must confess I've had to have it taken out, I can't seem to get rid of this muffin-top, and you have a mother, don't you? And one only has one mother, and her gifts must be kept like treasures, and I don't know if Miss Món will be there tomorrow or whether she may give it to someone else, and I don't want to go to bed without my golden jacket — I'm sure you understand, don't you? All you have to do is tell me where her cabin is, and I'll go, ask for the jacket back, and go to sleep peacefully and — have you understood everything correctly?”

“Dr. Etoile, I'll walk you there. Security has instructions that if you ask for Miss Món, we should accompany you immediately to her cabin. Please follow me.”

“Thank you very much, you're so efficient. I see Miss Món has everything under control.”

“Miss Món? This is Security, could you open the door? Dr. Etoile needs your help.”

“Thank you very much. Come in, Dr. Etoile. How can may I be of assistance?”

“Well, if you don't need me anymore, the Security coordinator just called me...”

“Come on, Ambrosio, do you really not have WhatsApp?” — Orga says. You must be the only person left without it.”

“That's what Carolina keeps saying, that I'm the only one on the planet who keeps using SMS.”

“Who's this Carolina? You and I have only just met and you're already making me jealous.”

“She's no one, just a colleague and a very unpleasant one. She's very smart, I'll give her that. If it wasn't for her, things would have gone worse for me. But you really have a nice cabin here, where would you like to sit?”

“It's a most romantic night. Let's go to the balcony. Sit back and

look at the stars. There are millions of them. At this time of year there are two or three nights during which none of the three moons can be seen, and this island is ideal to stargaze. Have you ever wondered whether there's intelligent life like yours out there, or just blondes like me?"

"That's a funny idea, Orga! It would be so difficult to repeat an intelligence like mine somewhere in the Universe! But who knows, I guess stranger things have happened!"

"I've kept a number one Humike ready for you, since I know you like them. Make yourself comfortable, take off your chain, — it must be so heavy! — loosen your shoes, stretch your legs... just as if you were in your own cabin. Meanwhile, I'll make you a Callentini. You have to try it, my grandfather taught me to make them. He was a famous bartender, and Callentini was his signature drink. We used to make them together and act like we were in a competition. I used to win the blind tastings. And then, after the Callentini we can move on to Cristal — I know you want to find out if the saying is also true with me, you naughty thing."

Ambrosio looks up to the sky and imagines himself designing another Milky Way.

"Here's your Callentini, Ambrosio. I'm so nervous. Your reputation as a sybarite is legendary. I think I've never undergone such a hard test before. Go ahead, try it, don't keep me waiting."

"Hmm, it's delicious, Orga — not as much as you, but I'd marry it if I were a Callentina myself. You must teach me how to make them. This is crazy, I can't stop drinking it!"

"Well, how did you like the party? Do you think that Heavenly Catering is up to your standards?"

"It more than surpasses them, Orga, it really does. You've organized everything so well, and with so much taste, everything was impeccable. You left me speechless. Although I've also contributed somehow, haven't I? I guess my performance, with my Taparotti voice, wasn't bad."

"Oh, Ambrosio! Don't flatter me like that, or else I won't need to drink any more Cristal. I have to restrain myself, I don't know what's wrong with me when I hear you speak. I get a tickle in my... well, you

know where, don't you? I just can't control it. I'm going to fix my hair, the sea humidity makes it frizzy, I'll put on some blush, and I'll be right back with you. Don't fall asleep, Ambrosio, I see you're very relaxed, but the night is young. We have to get to know each other better. I'll be back with you in the wink of an eye.”

Get to know each other better! Molecular recognition, that's what I want, and as soon as possible. Well, we have a different concept of how long the wink of an eye lasts, she's been gone for quite a while now. She must have fallen asleep in the bathroom. I'll finish my Callentini — it's so tasty! — and if she doesn't come back, I'll go get her. Imagine that after drinking so much Cristal she's already naked, and I'm here wasting my time, staring at the stars! Whoa, Ambrosio, what's going on with you? This has been a forgotten feeling; can this be true? The little buddy feels young again, it seems it has a life of its own! When I was eighteen this was quite the norm, but it's been such a long time since... But yes, it's definitely feeling all vigorous and playful. Goodness, look at this antigravity awakening! But how can this be even happening, with the Goddess in the bathroom? Oh, I know, it's telepathy! We're connected and she's been thinking about me, and I've been thinking about her, and this is what our connection is doing, it's turned my usual languor into unleashed euphoria. It's about to pop my zipper open, it wants to peep out and partake of the heated environment. Wow! And now this dizzy drowsiness to top it off. I'll move back inside the cabin; this balcony is much smaller than mine and I may end up falling overboard. Look at this bed, with a canopy and everything, I'm going to lie down for a while and wait here for my Goddess.

AMBROSIO FEELS COLD AND WANTS TO WRAP HIMSELF UP IN THE COVERS but cannot move his hands or feet. He wakes up startled and confused and thinks, where am I? This is not my cabin, why can't I move? He tries to sit up and exclaims: “Damn! I'm tied hand and foot. There are chains immobilizing my limbs! I don't see where they're attached, but there's no way I can free myself. The ‘great Etoile’ has been kidnapped! I knew being so famous would be dangerous for me.

They'll ask for a ransom, and no one will pay it! There's no getting out of this one, Ambrosio. You're done for. But who was it? Maybe they strapped a bomb vest on me? Well, no, you're not wearing a vest, you're actually completely naked! Your buddy downstairs is XXXXL size now, you're in chains, and every inch of your body has turned bright red. But who did this? I don't understand, but it looks bad. This looks bad! The sinister combination of Etoile in chains, all red, and with a boner predicts a bad omen. Steel yourself! Ohm! Ohm! Ohm! Ohm! Ohm! Ohm! Ohm! Ohm!"

Suddenly, he hears Orga's voice shouting: "Oh, no! An evil red Spicavirus is lurking in my bed. His protein is erect and ready to couple with my receptor, and it's not just any protein, it's 'the super-protein', just look at its size! But I won't give up easily, I'm ready to fight. No means no! I'll defend my receiver till death. I don't want to be infected."

Orga hasn't even finished her sentence when she jumps on the bed dressed up as a human cell.

"Orga, what have you taken? Have we been poisoned? I'm tied up, unable to defend you, and you're delirious. It's Ambrosio, Ambrosio Etoile! What the hell are you saying about a Spicavirus? I'm all red, but it's Ambrosio!"

"I see! It's true, the Spicavirus has disguised itself as my beloved Ambrosio — it wants to impersonate him, but there's no fooling me. Listen, Spicavirus, my antibody is here and ready to disable you."

Organ pulls out a taser and exclaims: "I'm going to neutralize your erectile super protein, you evil Spicavirus!" And wham! An electric shock hits the super protein.

"Oh! Oh! Oh!" Ambrosio squirms, and his abundant body hair suddenly curls up.

"It's transmuted into a red hedgehog!" Orga yells.

"Orga, what are you doing? What are you saying? What did the kidnappers give you? They have driven you crazy! Help! Help! Help! The great Ambrosio Etoile is in mortal danger. Orga, no, not another shock, no! Wham! Oh! That was a yummy shock. Orga, again! Again! Hit again! Ahhh! Yes! Again! Wham! Oooh! Wham! Aah!"

"*Vade retro*, Spicavirus, your pleased moaning won't fool me. I

see that your erect protein has mutated, and my neutralizing antibody is useless now. I'll try this next-generation antiviral." Orga takes out a generously sized dildo, smears it with Vaseline, and yells: "This adjuvant will make it more effective!"

She pulls the two chains tied to Ambrosio's ankles, his legs are raised and open, and his target is visible and accessible for the antiviral to be introduced, in order to annihilate the evil Spicavirus. Ambrosio screams in despair:

"Orga, no, oh God! I'm young and a virgin. It's not even time for me to visit the proctologist! I beg you, I pray, not there, please!"

"Ah, you evil Spicavirus! I'll dominate you with my rectal antiviral!"

Orga activates it in vibration mode at full power. Ambrosio sees the device approaching him and shouts:

"Orga, no! No! Don't do it, for your grandfather's sake, the Callentini bartender, think of him! I don't deserve this! Ouch! Ouch! Ouch!" But then he changes from an "Ouch! Ouch!" to an "Oh! Oh! Oh! My friend Martel was completely right, there's nothing like bisexuality! Why didn't I try this until now? Go on, Orga, don't stop, go on, go on — Ambrosio thinks, and Orga does go on..."

Suddenly, Orga strips from her cell disguise and shouts: "I surrender Spicavirus, my weapons have made you stronger, you're invincible! I can't resist anymore! Your erected super protein has conquered my receptor, I'm defeated! I guess this had to be. I can't fight destiny. Love is more powerful than the differences between species."

Orga frees Ambrosio from his chains, and then the cell and the red Spicavirus merge into a voluptuous and passionate embrace. The exclamations, followed by moans of pleasure, disturb the night's stillness, until Security staff knock on the door.

"Miss Orga, Miss Orga, is something wrong? Are you okay?"

"Nothing is wrong, I'm sorry I alarmed you, it was just a nightmare. It happens when I'm stressed. Thanks for checking!"

"You're welcome, Miss Orga, I wish I could have those PTSD nightmares."

. . .

EXHAUSTED, THEY CURL UP AND SWOON WITH PLEASURE, THUS surrendering to Morpheus. Orga's receptor has emptied Ambrosio's deposits loving endorphins...

Sunday, August 14, 3521

“Ambrosio won't get up,” — Aitor says. “I fear the worst, Sac. This mischievous trick could ruin the whole strategy. Ambrosio hasn't had any company in decades, and he may have acted up the way he usually does. I hope he didn't push her off overboard. He's capable of anything.”

“Don't worry, Aitor, everything is under control. There's nobody as capable as Orga. There's no one like her. I bet Ambrosio has fallen madly in love and wants to marry her. He must be in his cabin, waiting for the effects of the Viagra Plus and the photosensitizer in the famous Callentini to wear off. Look, there he is, with a radiant smile, and his Viagra Plus tent is still active — he must have spent the night of his life, and he would still be getting some action if it were up to him, don't you see? I'm sure I'm right.”

“Good morning, did you sleep well? I slept like a child — well, basically that's what I am. I look so young.”

“What's wrong, Ambrosio? You didn't sunbathe yesterday, but you look so red... Are you okay?”

“I know, right? I guess it was one of those caviar appetizers you served yesterday. I tried them all, I wanted to taste the food of powerful men like me, and one of them must have disagreed with me.”

“Even though it's Sunday, you can still get checked out 'at the medical office, I'm sure someone will take care of you. You look like a red pepper.”

“Nah, nah, I'm a great doctor myself. I've already taken what I needed. I have everything in the congressman's medicine cabinet. Do you think they'll feed me breakfast yet? I'm hungry.”

“Of course, they will, Ambrosio.”

Aitor touches his cell phone screen, and a member of the crew immediately appears.

“How may I help?”

“Dr. Etoile would like to have breakfast. What would you like, Ambrosio?”

“Nothing in particular. Surprise me. Orga organizes everything so well...”

“Coffee, tea, champagne, Sir?”

“Coffee, please.”

“You look radiant, Ambrosio. Tell us, is it the new Dream Party that you're excited about, or is it something else?”

“Well, I'm a bit shy to admit it, but I've fallen madly in love with Orga. I want to marry her!”

“But didn't you say that no woman alive could destabilize you emotionally, Ambrosio?”

“Orga's not a woman. She's a goddess!”

“Well, it doesn't look too good for you,” — Sac says. “Goddesses don't associate with commoners! Just kidding, Ambrosio, don't give me that face. What I meant was that she's always travelling from one place to another, plus she has a fourteen-year-old son who's quite the opposite of a little angel. I can see you taking care of the child while she takes care of her business.”

“No way, I would treat Orga like a queen. She would only have to take care of me and her delicate offspring. No more working for her.”

“I don't think Orga will accept your proposal,” — Sac says. “She's the most independent woman I know, and I highly doubt that she will give up her business. It's her whole life. You're not the first to fall in love with her, and so far, no one has managed to domesticate her. Although maybe you can be more convincing. Look, here she comes.”

“Good morning, gentlemen, have you slept well? I had nightmares all night, so if you don't need me, I'll be resting in my cabin. Let me tell you about the planned activities, in case any are of interest. There are a couple of guided trips to the old town and the flea market in Tulbiza, and then a buffet at the yacht club. There's also another buffet here for those who would like to rest. You can practice golf at the facilities in the bow deck. We've set up a sort of sea

minigolf, and there are several divers who will be collecting the balls so as not to pollute the ocean. Yon Albatros's already there, and since he's so kind and friendly, I'm sure he won't mind giving you advice on how to copy his style. Several professionals from the Roland Treize tennis school are offering free lessons on the courts. There's snorkel equipment for those who want to admire the beautiful seabed in this area. In case anyone would like to take an air ride, there are parachutes attached to the dinghies, some others have bananas for thrill seekers, and all jet skis are also available. I don't think I'm leaving anything out. After yesterday's thrilling party, most of the guests will go to Tulbiza or stay in their cabins. Medical services have not stopped distributing promeprazole, sibuprofen, and hangovermole. In case you need me, please don't hesitate to call me. I'll be reading Dr. Etoile's most interesting book until nap time."

Ambrosio sighs and thinks: "If only I could read it to you, letter by letter, and show you the love variant of the red Spicavirus — it no longer infects, it just lulls. I feel a mortal passion when I see those infinite legs walk away, crowned by swaying hips that pay no mind to my throbbing yet subjugated heart."

"Gentlemen, I'll go check if Yon Albatros can teach me a trick or two — I haven't gotten under a hundred strokes lately. Aitor, now that you dominate the world, you could organize a Pro-Am and take me as a shining star."

"Focus, Ambrosio, Dodona is waiting for you! You like everything big. Golf balls are very small, and so are the holes you need to shoot them into — that's why you play infinite strokes, you rascal."

AMBROSIO GOES TO THE BOW DECK WHILE MENTALLY GOING OVER THE note he found when he woke up:

I'll let you rest, my Thor. I really hope you have gotten to know my Asgard, while you were riding your Sjöfn. My Thor, your silk hammer has unleashed a storm of lightning and thunder that has electrified my heart, enslaved my brain, and melted my body. Your

*beloved Sjöfn longs to ride your velvet hammer again, before the
merciless dawn drives us apart.*



Wow! EVERY TIME I READ THIS MESSAGE MY ALIEN FRIEND LOSES ITS soreness and, despite having aching muscles, makes me want to get back in the ring. Not even my suffering and convalescent hindquarters could prevent a new stellar collision between the gods of love. I had to look up in Poodle what all those names mean and, by the way, I have already studied all the Norse mythology. I hope Yon Albatros can make me forget my Goddess for a while. A succession of unrepeatable strokes will awaken the sublime Etoile brain, which will design a plan for lunch and sensual nap. Look at the driving range they're setting up in the sea! There's a rugby goalpost one hundred meters away, and before that there are three greens — one at fifty meters, another at seventy-five, and another at ninety. And now they're even setting up more of them — one is one hundred and twenty meters to the right, and the other one is one hundred and forty to the left. The diver is carrying some sort of float, and through a mechanism the green unfolds, inflating automatically. They're shaped like a funnel, and the ball falls towards the flag. They've set up some nets with floats, so you can play with woods or the driver. Now they're setting up a special driving range for Yon — three hundred meters away, since he smacks it without worry about the direction. What an amazing deployment of technology. There are about thirty divers, swimming around and collecting the balls that don't fall on the greens or the nets. I'll watch Yon and just copy what he does, piece of cake. Wow, look at his drive! It's gone over the three-hundred-meter net, he's a beast! I'll make a couple of videos of him, and then I'll imitate him — with one or two it'll be enough!

Suddenly, Yon raises his head and asks: “Are you Dr. Etoile?”

“That is correct,” — Ambrosio responds.

“I didn't have the chance to say hello, last night, I really wanted to. I looked for you after the *Macarena* show, but I couldn't find you. I

had so much fun watching your performance. I think you're in the wrong profession!"

"Ahem, yes, yes, you're not the first one to say that, but I'm married to Medicine, Yon. Too bad we didn't meet last night, but now we have a chance to chat for a while."

"Do you play golf?"

"Yes, yes, I started late, but I'm a gifted student. You know, science helps a lot. My handicap's 5.3, but my responsibilities won't leave me much free time. If you would be kind enough to watch me, maybe you could give me some advice, because lately I look like a soldier — right, left, from the forest to the lake and back again. Back in the day I was able to shoot over the trees and then putt, like my friend Guszabal does, but all I do lately is get tired of looking for balls."

"Let's see what I can suggest. Why don't we go over there? There's an available spot. Take a wedge, for example, and practice a few swings to warm up."

A few seconds later, Ambrosio feels warm enough. It seems his temperature hasn't dropped enough since last night...

"Hit towards that green," — says Yon, "the one that's fifty meters away. Try to open the ball, so that it holds well when landing. With a handicap like yours that should be a cinch."

"Yes, sure," — says Ambrosio. "I'm going to nail it." He stands up, hits a swing, and Yon watches — horrified — as he sends the ball towards the driving range roof and knocks out a security guard, who was on the starboard side.

"Where did it go?" — Ambrosio asks. "I didn't see it."

"Well, it was a good stroke, but bad aim. Of course, it got good height; it would have sailed over any skyscraper, and even if the green were made of concrete, it would have stuck in place. I see you know how to handle a wedge. Let's move on to a 7-iron, for example."

And while he gets ready, Ambrosio thinks: "This guy is just like my friend Androlo, bugging me about my aim all the time — I say they're a couple of suckers, both of them! Now I'm going to hit the flag in the green that's one hundred and twenty meters away from us, I'm going to make his jaw drop. They call me 'Sevy' when I use the 7-iron. Let's see, I'm positioning myself well, I'm shaking my ass to the

right, to the left, I'm looking at the ball without losing sight of it, my weight is balanced, I'm delaying my right shoulder a little to make an elegant arc, and now I'm going up and down, I strike the ball and watch it rise, it completes the arc I had planned, it's approaching the target and landing gently, three centimeters away from the hole and, damn! What a knock on the head I've given to the guy on the jet ski. He has fallen off, but the jet ski keeps going like crazy and... it keeps going... and ... it keeps going, and it crashes against the green that's one hundred and twenty meters away, making it fly in the air, and now it's ramming against the green one hundred and forty meters away... and it's gone, and so is the net two hundred meters away, and that's my signal to get out of here, let them think that it was Yon. This was the Callentini! The Callentini is to blame, there's no doubt."

"And you said you had a handicap of five, right? I can see that; those two strokes were impressive. Look at the mess the jet ski guy just made! What could have happened? As I was saying, Dr. Etoile, that was great. You're really good at this. It's settled, the next Pro-Am we'll be teammates, and we'll win! Will you excuse me for just one moment? My coach is calling, who knows what he wants. I'll be right back."

Dr. Etoile has an impressive swing. His friend Guszabal is so nice, agreeing to play with him. If I ran into him on the tee I'd faint. Okay, I'm leaving, or else the security guards will come for us. Two strokes, two men knocked out, and the field closed due to a storm warning, what a dangerous man! — Yon thinks.

Yon's so nice, he wants to be teammates. This is my chance to get out of here. I haven't paid my license this year and I'm going to end up in trouble. Wee-oww! Wee-oww! The ambulance boat is coming for the jet ski guy. He's ruined the whole facility, I'm sure they hired him illegally for this event, and it was likely the first time he was riding one of those. Being hit by a ball on your head isn't so bad! I'll see if the tennis coach can teach me how to do dropshots, it still hurts how Martel, that stalwart defender of bisexuality, used to defeat me. He was deadly on the net — but not so much when playing golf. Androlo used to criticize his aim too, and he also used to send lots of balls into the lake, ha, ha, ha! His swing was a disgrace. But being in

love is making me so distracted. As I approach the tennis courts, I'll check my SMSes. This weekend is very calm. Ever since I managed to bring the Spicavirus under control, life has become quite monotonous. Luckily Orga S. M6n has appeared in my life. No messages, huff! The tennis court is really crowded, I won't be learning dropshots and top spins today. But Martel has nothing on me, anyway. Next time I'll beat him with my serve and volley. I won't even let him breathe. Although I don't know what he's done lately; he no longer has a belly and is quite fit. I'm going to end up being the only one with a muffin top. Breathe, Ambrosio, breathe, Ohm! Ohm! Ohm!

Beep! Oh, oh, I'm going to get lucky, I'm going to get lucky, I can feel it! Well, no, tomorrow afternoon, meeting with someone somewhere. Bummer. I'll look for Sac and Aitor and spend some time with them, they have a lot of' things to tell me.

Beep! Let's see what this new meeting is about...

Ambrosio, my love, how can you be so clumsy. You didn't notice any of my winks while you were having coffee and your five croissants. No wonder you have that muffin top. I was winking at you with my right eye, then my left eye, then both at the same time... and all you did was dip your croissant in your coffee. You should've seen Aitor's face, thank goodness he didn't dare say anything. I ordered lunch; they must be delivering it to your cabin right now. Something simple: caviar, king crab, Scottish marinated duck with pomegranate salad, oven-grilled black grouper, and cupcakes. All washed down with Cristal. There's no Callentini today, ha, ha, ha!



AMBROSIO, WHAT A MESSAGE, THIS IS PARADISE. I DON'T EVER WANT TO leave this place. I'll sing on my way back to my cabin, to get sexy.



Oh Baby, sex bomb, sex bomb, you're my sex bomb and baby
you can turn me on



— SEX BOMB. TOM JONES.

Let's see if they've brought lunch. Not yet. A quick shower, shot of cologne, and a sexy outfit to keep Orga's flame burning. With this Hawaiian shirt and these matching bloomers, I'll be just irresistible. Oh, I see they've left lunch in the tub on the private beach; we'll have lunch with a view. How romantic is that! I hope Orga gets here soon. I can't wait. I want more action, my alien hasn't eaten all day and is hungry, he, he, he!

"Knock! Knock!"

"Yes?"

"Open up, Ambrosio, quickly. I don't want any prying eyes on me."

"I'm coming! Come in, come in."

"Oh wow, Ambrosio, what are you wearing, is that tropical camouflage? You look like an expecting palm tree from Magrit, and I see that your buddy downstairs is getting some air, pull up your fly!"

"Wow, you really look stunning, and so elegant in that mini-bikini and sarong you're wearing. I don't know if I can resist this."

"Hands off, Ambrosio, today you're a palm tree, not a prom king. You'll have to wait and see if Cristal can take away my sorrows. I'm hungry, is lunch ready yet?"

"It's in the tub on my private beach. Let's eat. Everything looks delicious."

"Today it's your turn to do the work. I'm not planning on moving at all. Pour me some Cristal and put your imagination to work, if you want this mini-bikini to be pulled by gravity and end up where Newton's apple did."

"Right away, my Goddess. I'll make you feel like the Queen of the Seas."

"I like the way that sounds, Ambrosio. Put some caviar on my

plate, and pour some more Cristal, and don't even think of taking off your pants and showing that thong you're wearing — I saw it when you closed your fly. If the sun reflects off that Captain America shield that's covering the opening where your buddy insists on peeping out, I think I'll suffer a bilateral retinal detachment, no doubt! By the way, have you been to the ophthalmologist recently? There must be something special about your sight — it's impossible to put together those elegant color combinations you pull off without having a genetic defect.”

“Orga, when we're done eating, we can go to bed, and I'll tell you about a really fun game. Shall I tell you now instead? Yes, I'll tell you. Okay, so you're Princess Orga, who's kidnapped by King S, who wants to end your dynasty, the Mon. It's the oldest dynasty in the Kingdom and King S has usurped your middle initial. You're the only heir left, and the people of Monfort are with you. They have convinced the hero of the Crusades, the knight Ambrosio 'the Brave', to rescue you from the evil King S, who keeps you imprisoned in his castle, guarded by an immense and evil dragon.”

“Ambrosio, how can you be so old fashioned? We all know how that game goes. Ambrosio 'the Brave' kills the dragon, defeats the evil king, retakes the throne but keeps it for himself, he rescues the princess, and marries her. While she's still hot, they make little princes and princesses, but when she loses her freshness due to pregnancies, childbirth, and housework, Ambrosio 'the Brave' looks for a younger woman, so his buddy downstairs won't lose its shape. Do you think I was born yesterday?”

“No, my Goddess, I want to marry you and never be separated from your lap again. I'm bewildered by you, madly in love. See, I convinced Aitor to call for his personal jeweler this morning, and I got you this engagement ring. Here it is, look, it's such a pure and delicate diamond.”

“Okay, Ambrosio. Yes, it is beautiful, and very elegant, and my size. Do tell, Ambrosio, did Sac choose it you for? You know a lot about the Spicavirus, but you don't know the first thing about diamonds. Confess now, Ambrosio, or your little buddy will sit this game out on the bench.”

“Yes, my Goddess, it was Sac. He's so elegant and has such good taste. I asked him many times to teach me, but he hides information from me. I try to copy him, but I don't know how he does it. Although he's always running risks, he nevertheless ends up combining everything in a perfect way. He has even recommended that I buy my clothes at the exclusive stores he normally shops at, and I have purchased some stuff, but I just can't match him. I remember the day I met him, after I was named Minister of Health — he looked so elegant in his simple blue suit and orange tie. You're not involved with him, are you? I could never control my jealousy, I'm capable of anything, if you betray me, I'll end up in jail.”

“No, Ambrosio, I'm not involved with him. I only have eyes for you, but there's no way I'm getting married. Each to his own nest. I really like what I do, and I don't want to be tied to anyone, least of all to you, you're so bossy. Of course, I'm keeping the ring, and you can give me more, I love gifts! I can spend a whole afternoon opening gift boxes, or buying jewelry, so now you know. Of course, I like gifts that last, that can be inherited, gifts that keep alive the desire to train your buddy for the Olympics. And now, let's go to bed, Cristal is taking effect and has activated its special gravity. Look, Ambrosio, Newton was right! All things end up on the ground...”

AND AMBROSIO SINGS...

♪♪♪

I believe in miracles
Where're you from, you sexy thing?
I believe in miracles.

♪♪♪

— YOU SEXY THING. HOT CHOCOLATE.

Monday, August 15, 3521

“Ambrosio, Aitor and Sac are having breakfast in a private dining room. Sac's strategy has worked like a charm, but now that Ambrosio is in love, dazzled, and sad, they need to give him the final push. Orga has left for an unknown destination, and who knows whether they'll ever meet again.

“So how did you like the weekend, Ambrosio? Did you have a good time? Would you do it again?” — asks Aitor.

“Yes, yes, of course, it was unforgettable. It will always occupy a place of honor in my memory, but without Orga, what will become of me in Magrit? Alone again, as always. I don't think I can bear this. You have to help me. You're the only people who can help me.”

“It will be less horrible than you think, you'll see, Ambrosio. You'll be very busy with the Dream Party and your election race for the presidency of Dodona. You won't have a single minute to think about Orga's curves. But just so you see how considerate we are, Aitor and I have decided to put Multifaceted Solutions at your service.”

“Are you serious, Sac? Is that true? Don't fool me, or else I'll sink into a pit of depression. I need to see her every weekend. I can't live without her.”

“Of course, you can, look, here's a platinum SetJets card in your name. Save the phone number and the membership number on your cell phone. This card is for VIP clients only, that is, you and three more people. They pick you up at your place and take you wherever you tell them to. They depart from the private flight terminal at Magrit International Airport. With this other exclusive black card, ‘Divine Suites’, you get preferential accommodation in the best hotels in the world. It's pre-paid, it covers benefits for five years. You just have to call; we'll take care of the rest.”

“You're such good friends! But you have to be ready to finance me. I'm going to use this non-stop! I have no choice! I can already feel the ‘Etoile hope’ being reborn, and I can feel those renewed forces that will provide me with the Presidency of Dodona, which, on the other hand, will come in handy — thanks to me, you can go on bleeding the confederations. This morning, when farewell was inevitable,

when the moment for goodbye came, when I was short of breath and a merciless liquid flooded my eyes announcing an anxiety attack, my unbeatable poise conquered the situation, but I could still feel wrapped in an immense sadness from which you have liberated me, by providing the means for our reencounter. I already know how I'll reward you when I'm President."

"Of course, Ambrosio, you're unforgettable when it comes to doing favors. We are clear that, without you, Multifaceted Solutions would've never gone public. Your magnificent ideas, together with your selfless help to bring them to fruition, have made everything you've seen this weekend possible. And since we have you in our hearts, Sac's going to tell you about our greatest concern and how we're going to solve it."

"We're worried, Ambrosio, very worried. Aitor has told me that you have a secret document, kept in a notary's office, stating that you're the owner of fifty percent of Molecular Solutions, Ltd. This document is a ticking time bomb for your interests. As soon as your candidacy for the presidency of Dodona becomes a reality, all your opponents will spy on you, because they know that you have a good chance of winning. And it will not be a superficial spying, they will come for you, with the resources that politicians display when they feel they might lose their privileges. It would be carnage. We have to undo that operation transparently, with light and stenographers."

"Come on, Sac, what you're asking of me is my whole future. The company is finally doing very well, and my account is getting stronger, so I can afford certain luxuries. I'm stoic, but every now and then I need to relax. If this comes to an end, I don't know what I'm going to live on. I don't think they would make room for me at the Institute for Disease Control. You can't imagine how many enemies I have there."

"Don't you worry about your future, it's assured. We would take care of it personally, but I'll tell you more. We would buy your share, so that you can be independent and without attachments, for a more than reasonable amount. The corporation is highly valued, and your five percent is very valuable."

"What do you mean my five percent? You mean my fifty percent."

“No, Ambrosio. Your current participation in Multifaceted Solutions does not even reach five percent. Let me explain it to you, Molecular Solutions was the parent company, but we've created Diagnostic Solutions for everything related to its name. You demanded that the kits be commercialized quickly, and that we make them available to the entire population, back when you were in way over your head due to the avalanche of cases. We set up Preventive Solutions to manufacture the personal protective equipment, which you didn't have and didn't know how to get. The medical staff were getting infected by the Spicavirus at an amazing rate, and the Cinanians covered all the production, which they delivered in tiny amounts and at exorbitant prices. That's when we set to manufacturing that futuristic mask that has given us the monopoly over the market. Part of those profits are under your name, in your Lignum bank account. Preventive Solutions grew to infinity when the Observatory for Global Health said they had to be worn even while sleeping. Then you had the problem of distributing resources to rural areas, and we created Seagull Solutions, with those robot drones, which have also been a success, and finally we created Virtual Communication Solutions with the BICShow. You just need to count: they make a total of five companies. You had fifty percent of the first one, but now you have five percent of Multifaceted Solutions, which will go public next month. If we counted Therapeutic Solutions, which is investigating new antivirals and monoclonal antibodies, apart from the vaccine, your participation would still be smaller, but we are generous and want you to have five percent which clearly plays to your benefit. We'd pay you five million dodones. The notary has just arrived in the helicopter with all the paperwork, and everything is ready for you to sign. All we need is for you to accept and it's all set. Think about it, Ambrosio. We'll give you some time alone, so that you can decide in complete freedom. Remember, you have a serious conflict of interest and, if you get caught, just forget about running for president. You're obviously destined to help Humanity, but all you've done so far — which is a lot — just can't compare to you becoming president of Dodona. That is an exciting future indeed, but if you refuse to sign, we'll only give you what you're entitled to, which is much less than five percent. Besides,

going public will involve many adjustments, which will prevent distributing profits for many years — that is, everything will be reinvested — and, to sum up, forget about Lignum and the black cards that bring you closer to Orga. So that means you would have to go back to work in your beloved Institute — if they accept you, of course. We'll leave you now, Ambrosio, we'll be back in thirty minutes.”

AITOR AND SAC GO SIT IN THE STERN DECK...

“I have to admit you've been brilliant, Sac. That was a great speech! I highly doubt he will say no.”

“And if he does, we move on to the pressure strategy, Aitor. We have all the transfers to Lignum, we have all his tax returns, we have proof that with his official income he can't lead this way of life, we have the videos with Orga and, worst of all, he's the one responsible for introducing the vaccine without a previous clinical trial, and not that whole plot invented by the National Intelligence Center. So, he better sign up, grab the five million, and forget about Multifaceted Solutions.”

MEANWHILE, AMBROSIO IS BY HIMSELF, MUSING.

Can you believe these guys? I've been the soul of Multifaceted Solutions, and now they kindly invite me to leave through the back door! But, on the other hand, it's five million. What will Multifaceted Solutions end up being? The virus is practically under control. They only have this business. They haven't diversified their activities, plus they have told you already that they're not going to make it easy for you. No Orga, no dividends, and everything diluted with a tiny percentage compared to what they will own. As soon as people know that I have shares in Multifaceted Solutions, that's the end of being president of the Dream Party, and who knows if they will air my shenanigans and I'll end up in jail. Calm down and think with a cool head, ohm! ohm! Start over and don't beat around the bush. What can you use against these ingrates? Think, analyze, think and re-

analyze. There has to be something else you can get out of them. Bingo! I've got it.

"HERE YOU ARE, AMBROSIO. HAVE YOU ALREADY REACHED A DECISION?" Aitor and Sac ask.

"I have, but I have a counter-proposal."

"Counter-proposal? Hmph! I'm afraid you're in no condition to do that. Under normal circumstances, we would just ignore you and move on to the painful phase of this relationship, but we're going to listen to you, aren't we, Aitor?"

"Yeah, of course, Sac. We're friends, and we want to remain so. We'll do everything in our power to maintain this legendary friendship."

"This is my counter-proposal: I want Orga to be the secretary of the Dream Party, and to help me win the elections. Release her from all the work she does for Multifaceted Solutions, which I feel is a lot, and coerce her into accepting and moving to Magrit."

"That's a really difficult compromise, Ambrosio," — Sac says, "what do you think, Aitor?"

"It's complicated, if not impossible, and I'll tell you why, Ambrosio. Orga is a very independent woman, and she won't want to change jobs. She's very good at what she does, but politics is not her thing, and she would even earn less money than now. Her company is doing very well, Ambrosio."

"I already know all that, Aitor. You keep repeating it, over and over again. Either you help me, or I won't sign. I'm in love and I want her close."

"We'll try. As you know, Sac can be very convincing. Besides, she would be a great election campaign manager. She has all the contacts. She is exceptionally valuable, and she speaks many languages."

"There's no trying. Either you make this happen or you give me back my five percent at no cost."

"All right, Ambrosio," Sac assures, "it's a deal. I'll tell the Notary to

include the clause in the documents and we'll leave this matter settled.”

“Deal, but I have another proposal,” — Ambrosio says.

“Another one?”

“Yes, but you don't need a document or a notary, it's a favor. You're the only people who can do this for me.”

“Spit it out, Ambrosio, you've got us on the edge of our seats.”

“Orga said I was her first ‘premium’ bald man, and that she had never been attracted before to someone with such an ample forehead. And she said she had a feeling that the attraction would dissolve as quickly as caviar does in her mouth. That crushed my soul — I've seen her swallow those little gray balls, and she makes them disappear as if it was magic. She's going to get tired of me — stunning blondes don't need bald men, I know that, I've been there before. I could not bear another loss. I know that she would never leave me if I had long hair, she would be subjugated by my many virtues, which are now partially obscured by a small genetic defect that the men in my family inherit without exception.”

“Just get hair implants, Ambrosio.”

“Have you noticed how bald I am? It's just impossible to cover it with the little hair I still have in the back of my neck and above my ears. I've already been seen by all the specialists in cosmetic medicine in Damania and, without exception, they've all said the same thing: “we don't have a satisfactory solution to your massive hair loss. But rejoice! Baldness is directly related to your testosterone production, which will avoid the early retirement of your buddy downstairs due to premature failure to respond to curvaceous stimuli.” So, you have to promise me you'll help me. I would be eternally grateful.”

“Here's something,” — Sac suggests. Some time ago, AISS developed artificial intelligence tools to decipher the human transcriptome and proteome. We succeeded, and we have tons of articles analyzing all kinds of specific conditions, from infancy to old age. Although it is very interesting from a financial point of view, we haven't focused on the issue of baldness, but we do know that a protein called Krox20 is involved in the growth of hair follicles. In Therapeutic Solutions we have an artificial intelligence algorithm

that seeks to reposition authorized and available drugs as a treatment for Spicavirus. We have already found some which work. We have chosen this approach due to the time and investment that must be devoted to developing new drugs. Right now, the process is too long and complicated, with all those expensive clinical trials! Following this same strategy, we may find one that stimulates the synthesis of Krox20 or improves its diminished activity. We could even do a topical formulation. I promise to look into it, Ambrosio. If we did find an authorized drug which works and can be applied topically, you would have hair in no time. I can assure you that watching that algorithm work is a real pleasure — it simultaneously analyzes the interactions between the active site of each protein and the drug in a three-dimensional structure, and it does so with the entire proteome. It analyzes a million compounds a day!”

“I can already picture myself riding a Harvey and, instead of wearing a bandana, my blonde hair is blowing in the wind and then Orga says: “Ambrosio, your hair's so messy, come here, let me fix your golden curls.” — and can I feel her velvet hands gliding through my hair.”

“The cost of the ticket for riding without a helmet would erase your longing to have your blond hair waving in the wind, Ambrosio. Okay then, let's go sign.”

“Here's your cheque, Dr. Etoile, and a copy of each and every document, and here's another copy for you two. Thank you for your trust in Rendueles Notary's Office. We are at your service for whatever you deem appropriate. Good day.”

“The helicopter will take you back to Magrit, Mr. Rendueles, Dr. Etoile will go with you. If you would like anything to eat or drink while we finish, this member of the crew will bring you whatever you want.”

AMBROSIO, THE PARTY HAS COME TO AN END. I HOPE YOU'VE HAD A GOOD weekend. I think this solution is the best for everyone. You have a good financial cushion, and no longer conflicts of interest to run for president. If you want us to help you invest in safe and profitable

companies, let us know and we'll put you in contact with trustworthy people, who would make sure neither inflation nor your whims reduce your savings. I'll tell Marta and the children that you've missed them a lot, and I'll give them your gift and candy.”

“Okay, Ambrosio, have a good trip, and let's keep in touch. We have to meet to organize your platform and election campaign, — says Sac.”

“We've finally reached a satisfactory agreement, but you have to bring my hair follicles back from that lethargy caused by idle and wasted testosterone, so that my reborn hair carries Orga from Ambrosía to Etoile eternity. Give me a hug and see you soon.”

AMBROSIO GETS ON THE HELICOPTER, AND THEY TAKE OFF TOWARDS Magrit. When looking towards the ‘Ambrosía’, he can't help hearing that melody in his mind which makes him sniffle, due to the unpredictable rise of an overflowing torrent in his eyes. Immediately, he uses a handkerchief, handy to conceal what is happening, and claims that something unexpected has gotten into his eye.



On a morning from a Bogart movie
in a country where they turn back time
You go strolling through the crowd like Peter Lorre
contemplating a crime
She comes out of the sun in a silk dress running
like a watercolor in the rain
Don't bother asking for explanations
She'll just tell you that she came
In the Year of the Cat
She doesn't give you time for questions
as she locks up your arm in hers
and you follow 'till your sense of which direction
completely disappears
By the blue tiled walls near the market stalls
there's a hidden door she leads you to

These days, she says, I feel my life
just like a river running through
In the Year of the Cat
While she looks at you so coolly
and her eyes shine like the moon in the sea
She comes in incense and patchouli
so, you take her, to find what's waiting inside
The Year of the Cat
Well morning comes and you're still with her
and the bus and the tourists are gone
and you've thrown away your choice you've lost your ticket
so, you have to stay on
but the drum-beat strains of the night remain
in the rhythm of the newborn day
You know sometimes you're bound to leave her
but for now, you're going to stay
In the Year of the Cat
Year of the Cat
♪♪♪

— YEAR OF THE CAT. AL STEWART.

CHAPTER 9

THE GREAT DREAM

Thursday, September 1, 3521

AMBROSIO, YOU'RE A MAN OF SUCH INTELLECTUAL VALUE. YOU HAVE knocked out the virus in a flash and you've gotten out at the right time. The team you've left behind will do well. Cándido will not be able to follow in your footsteps — you are difficult to emulate, Ambrosio — but he will be a good minister. The President eats out of your hand and has not appointed any more incompetents. All you have to do now is focus on the Dream Party. Now, the first thing to do is visit the headquarters — you still haven't been there. You've rented an entire building on Serrallo Street, near Dependence Square. It is in the most distinguished area of Magrit, as it should be! You're stomping your way into the political scene in Dodona, ready to storm the skies. Ambrosio, it was written that you would become a star in the heavens. You've taken your time to sparkle, but it couldn't have been any other way. Your infinite potential has found you a spot among the élite of the planet. Okay, let's visit the headquarters — what outfit will you choose to make an impression on your employees from the very first minute? You need something classic but elegant. A dark brown shirt, blue jacket, and black pants to match the tie. You're ready for your natural elegance to continue turning

heads. Although the day is very sunny, you'll go by taxi. You can't walk through the streets — an autograph here, a selfie there, it's just impossible! You have to go to the gym, those rolls are incompatible with winning elections, and the inactivity caused by fame is not helping.

ABOUT FIFTEEN MINUTES LATER, AMBROSIO TRIUMPHANTLY ENTERS THE headquarters of the Dream Party.

“Well, well, well, minister, excuse me Dr. Etoile. I don't know how to address you anymore, not minister, you no longer are one, which is too bad for the Confederation of Damania. I'm so glad to see you, welcome you to your home, or rather, to your building.”

“Orlando, I see you're doing fine. Our communication is just as fluid as it used to be. That's why I had to have you join me in this new adventure — although we can't repeat a scene like the one in the gym. I'm truly grateful for your devotion and, especially, for your courage to leave your position as a civil servant with guaranteed remuneration *sine die* to follow your beloved minister. You're going to be the trendiest head of protocol, and all the political parties will want to imitate you. From now you can be informal with me, just call me Ambrosio. We're on in the same boat now, and we're going to win this race.”

“Oh! Ambrosio, I'm overflowing with joy; I can be informal with your eminence. They won't believe me when I go back home and tell them. Should we take an informal selfie, then? Please say yes, Ambrosio, that would make me so happy. Okay, so you say ‘Orlando’ and I say ‘Ambrosio’. Okay so, one, two, three! Click! Another, just in case. Click! Look, we're so photogenic. I'm going to post this on social networks right now, so people can see the good atmosphere we have in the Dream Party. The competition will be so jealous.”

“Show me our headquarters, Orlando, I haven't seen them yet. Let's start with my office, does it have any adjacent areas, so I can receive people in style?”

“Come this way, Ambrosio, have you noticed how well organized the reception is? We always have the same number of men and

women in our staff, in order to avoid bias. In the party we have an equality policy, so neither feminists nor males chauvinists can complain. Regarding the presidency, it'll be quite hard to apply this measure, because you're not a hermaphrodite, are you?"

"Orlando, you're crossing some lines here, you're going to have to go back to formal treatment and call me 'milord' this time."

"I'm sorry, Ambrosio, I'm so excited to be informal with you that I've lost control."

"As long as long as you can control your sphincters... You can check for yourself, today I smell like paradise. Please continue the visit."

"Let's go to your quarters, come this way, Ambrosio. Here is the waiting room, here to the right is my office, and in those two cubicles you'll find my assistants. They must be having breakfast now. This is the way to your office, very spacious and bright, as you can see, and it overlooks Serrallo street, you can see Dependence Square, and, in the background, you'll find the Suspiro Park. At the ministry it was decorated in a neo-plateresque style, and this one is minimalist, in line with the profile of the person who will lead the destinies of the Pluri-national State of Dodona."

"I like it, Orlando, one can tell that the decorators have managed to capture the high-mindedness and wisdom of the humble person who occupies this seat, reserved for a select few."

"Through this concealed side door, you can access a private apartment, in case the hard workdays make it advisable to spend the night and not return to your sweet abode. It's fully equipped, it even has a small gym where Karen will do her thing — I've allowed myself the audacity to hire her part-time. Plus, it has an independent exit to the alley, through which you can enter and exit without being seen. There's the possibility of escaping by car, motorcycle, bicycle, and skateboard."

"What can I say Orlando, I'm very satisfied, and I chose the building without even seeing it! Clearly, I'm a born leader. The party has very healthy finances. The strategy I devised for the Ambrosia weekend produced a barrage of donations. Everything seemed improvised, but like a magician behind the scenes, I moved the

puppets as I pleased. Selfless contributions keep coming in and we're bound for glory. It's about time for fame — that inconsiderate lady — to look fairly upon the man she has thus far been so unfairly excluding from his desired circles. I'll stay in my office for a while, so I can explore the state-of-the-art equipment that I commissioned to control this game and then, if my magnificence considers it appropriate, I'll invite you to vermouth at 'Double squared'."

"Oh, Ambrosio, this is such an honor, what a pleasure, I love that you are guiding me along paths of light and showing me where the gourmands relax after controlling the daily concerns of the population."

"That's right, Orlando, that's right. I'll see you in a bit."

I'LL CHECK HOW GOOD THE COMPUTER IN MY OFFICE IS, ALTHOUGH I have my BICShow, which fixes everything for me, don't you, BIC?

"Yes, Ambrosio."

"Turn on the computer, BIC."

"At your service, Ambrosio."

Here we are, it's already open. It seems that everything is in order. Just as I had requested. Tell me, 'My computer', is there anyone on the planet who's running a political party and is smarter and better dressed than me?

"I see you're back to your old ways, Ambrosio."

"Damn it, Sac, you're here too?"

"Of course, I am, what did you expect? We set up everything for you. We didn't have to install spyware this time, ha, ha, ha! Okay, so, let me get to the point. Tell BIC to show you the strategy in 3-D. You don't have to design anything. We've already done it for you. Even your wardrobe."

"Hey, Sac, what about the deal we made?"

"Regarding your long hair, it's moving along. We'll send you something soon. About Orga S. Món, we're still working on it. She doesn't want to see you. I don't know what you've done."

"Nothing, Sac. When I asked her to marry me, she said no way, but she kept the ring. That was all."

“Well, she did say something like ‘it’s a cheap tiny stone, even less pure than his cruel heart.’”

“What? I paid two hundred thousand dodones for it! I’m so depressed right now. There won’t be any vermouthe for me today. I’m going home and straight to bed. Do you think I would stand a chance if I called her?”

“Don’t do anything Ambrosio, we’ll take care of this. She’s very busy with a lot of events this month, so be patient. Take a look at the strategy and become familiar with when the election campaign begins and what you’re going to have to do. There are many debates with the other candidates. It’s new, but it’s important. There are monographic debates. For Health you have no rival, but for the others you’ll have to prepare thoroughly with BIC. The avatar is not an option here, it will have to be Ambrosio in the flesh who does it. You already know that your contenders are old dogs that know many tricks. You’re easy prey, so focus one hundred percent, because December 15 is election day.”

“Orlandooo! Orlandooo!”

“Yes, Ambrosio? What is it?”

“I’ve changed my mind, Orlando. Make a reservation in Torcher for the two of us — it’s nearby, and this afternoon we have plenty of work to do.”

THAT WAS A GREAT IDEA I JUST HAD, IT’S THE FIRST TIME I’M GOING TO Torcher, and I really wanted to try it. Here you can actually breathe power, it’s not like the Loggerhead Turtle. They’re all very nice there, but they’re country people, now I can’t mingle with them anymore. I have a higher status now, and it must be either maintained or increased, Ambrosio thinks.

“Wow! Orlando, after that goose we’ve eaten, I don’t know if I’ll be able to work. And the wine was good too, we drunk up two bottles! What I didn’t like was that sweet Lauternes wine they invited us to, it tasted like the one they used to give me when I was an altar boy. I think I’m going to have to use that bed in my private apartment, but

stay away, Orlando, I don't want to go viral again, and you seem to attract prying cameras.”

“Ambrosio, here's a package for you. It's from Sac.”

“Give it here. I hope it is what I want it to be, and that it works! I will retire now to my room.”

I'M SO EXCITED. LET'S SEE IF IT IS WHAT I'M THINKING! TEAR! RIP! Tear! Rip! here it is, I knew it, it's the hair growth formula, there are plenty of jars and a letter. Let's see what it says...

Hello, Ambrosio, a promise is a promise. We're not sure if it's going to work, but if it succeeds on your bald pate, it will on anyone. The risk you're taking is minimal. It's not absorbed into the skin. The only thing that can happen is a little rash on your scalp. Do not exceed the doses described on the leaflet. Just apply once before going to bed and have a little patience. You won't notice any effects during the first fifteen days. Then, if it works, you'll start to see an emerging fluff, as if you'd had an implant all over. Once it starts growing, you have to gradually decrease the dose to only once a week. If it works, your gratitude will have to last forever. Keep me updated.

*Hugs,
Sac Cerev*



I WISH I COULD SMEAR MY NOGGIN RIGHT NOW, BUT I'LL BE MORE disciplined and do it tonight.

Monday, September 5, 3521

“Let's go to my office, Orlando, I'd like to organize my assault on the presidency of Dodona. I don't find Sac's strategy convincing at all. I want to know that puzzle you've concocted first-hand, so I can undo it with my characteristic brilliance.”

“All the information is stored in a folder on my computer, and I also know it by heart. Ambrosio, ask whatever you want.”

“Sum it up for me, please. But first, call Wellington's Delight so we can go have lunch.”

“Done. Reservation for two, at two thirty.”

“So, you're joining me, you rascal!”

“But Ambrosio, it was you who said, ‘call Wellington's Delight so we can go for lunch.’”

“Well, what if I meant to go with a lady admirer, Orlando?”

“Okay, I'll summarize the situation for you. You've had no rival in Damania ever since you were the Health Minister and defeated Spicavirus. At first, Aníbal Rijoso, from the “We are worthy” Party, was your closest competition, but now he doesn't stand a chance, he hasn't taken risks to stand up to you, even though he loves hearing ‘yes, yes, yes, my master, yes’. At the beginning of the epidemic, his popularity dropped like a lead balloon after his many fiascos in the confederations where he was in a coalition government. Then you showed up, you centralized management, they ran out of the typical excuses to put the blame on someone else while you triumphed. He remains in his spiritual retreat, surrounded by kindred forces so that the beloved leader can meet, in perfect spiritual harmony, with the revolutionaries who promised free education and health care of the highest quality, decent and well-paid jobs, respect for human rights, and equality regardless of origin or condition — although their strategy to achieve this was to skew the lives of all those millions of people who suspected that what the leaders really wanted was to continue draining the State's coffers for their own benefit. What nobody seems to understand is why they still have followers. The only possible explanation is that they are all illiterate deniers who believe their fellow citizens died due to a plot hatched by higher entities that won't let them demonstrate their progressive intellectual superiority. Extremes meet, and always the same people lose. In the international scene, the situation is quite different, though. The other candidates running for president are Toris Wolf, Dorotea Schäfer, Frederic Dupont, Pier Luigi Romeo, and Alexis Papadopoulos. As you can see, five heavyweights who have been in politics for centuries and

now aspire to a golden retirement in the Dodona presidency. Elections are held on December 15. The election campaign begins on November 1. There are ten debates scheduled — five with all candidates present and the other five as one-on-one. They must be conducted in Califian, and there will be no simultaneous translation services. They are broadcast live, and they are essential. Whoever wins them will have the upper hand. It's the only way to make yourself known in other confederations — especially you, who are new to politics and very few people know you internationally. It'll be quite difficult for you, but the situation was like a scene from a horror movie when you said yes to Amada, our President, and you fixed it in a jiffy. Although I do have a question, Ambrosio. What is our platform?"

"Platform? This party was founded twenty days ago, we have no ideology. What are we, Orlando? Right, left, center, liberal? We will be whatever it takes to win, who cares? Today you say one thing and tomorrow you change it, and the next you say it again, and then you change it again. Nothing ever happens, Orlando. I've said this before. We just have to give out coffee to everyone — and not necessarily much — and you can just live off the Treasury and never look back. Overall, the power of the Dodona Presidency is limited because there are the Plurinational State confederations, and before the mess reaches the President there's someone else to take the blame. We just need to pat shoulders, offer embraces and kisses everywhere and just do our thing, which is living the good life and saving up for when we're old. What we need is a woman to be party secretary and head of the election campaign. Two men are too many, and there must be a woman. That is going to be my main objective, to look for that woman and find her as soon as possible. Okay then, Orlando, let's go have lunch in Wellington's Delight — we've already worked way too much for today."

Friday, September 16, 3521

It's been a fortnight and I'm still as bald as ever. Let's see if I notice any progress today. I bought an adjustable three-sided mirror with

LED backlight, zoom and camera, so I can check if any new hair follicles appear on my melon. I'll look at myself in the mirror and take one, two, three, four and five photos, I'll get down on my knees and say a prayer while looking at Sac's picture, and then I check the photos. On the count of three. One! Two! Three! What?! No way! This can't be true! But it is! It's true! It's true! My hair is growing! I can see thousands — or is it millions? — of hairs emerging, making my sculpted skull look like a thick silk carpet. I feel like screaming, or better, singing! Yes, I'll sing with my Taparotti voice. All of Magrit, actually, the whole planet has to listen! They have to know that Ambrosio Etoile is going to have beautiful long hair. And Ambrosio goes out to his balcony and sings...

♪♪♪

Hair, hair, hair, hair, hair, hair, hair
Flow it, show it
Long as God can grow it
My hair
Let it fly in the breeze
And get caught in the trees
Give a home to the fleas in my hair
A home for fleas
A hive for bees
A nest for birds
There ain't no words
For the beauty, the splendor, the wonder
Of my...
Hair, hair, hair, hair, hair, hair, hair
Flow it, show it
Long as God can grow it
My hair
♪♪♪

— “HAIR”, HAIR. ORIGINAL SOUNDTRACK.

AND HIS NEIGHBORS PEER OUT OF THEIR BALCONIES, THEY WANT TO locate the protagonist of that prodigious song. They listen to the melody, and the neighborhood becomes a musical comedy, but singing is not enough, and a crazy rhythm takes over their feet. The lights come on and the dance floor prepares to welcome Ambrosio Manero¹. ‘You should be dancing’ begins to play, and an uncontrolled Ambrosio jumps to the center of the room displaying all his choreographic skills.



My baby moves at midnight
Go right on till the dawn
My woman takes me higher
My woman keeps me warm



— YOU SHOULD BE DANCING. SATURDAY NIGHT
FEVER. ORIGINAL SOUNDTRACK.

AMBROSIO SINKS INTO AN ARMCHAIR, WORN OUT AFTER THE EPISODE OF motivated mania, thinking:

You must grow long hair, like Prince Valiant² did. Your childhood hero will show you the way, when Orga sees you, she'll want to stay, she'll toast with Cristal and her panties will shed.

— AMBROSIO ETOILE.

Ah, I do like exciting and stimulating poetry!

Wednesday, September 21, 3521

“Good morning, Cryp, this is Dr. Campanella, Laura Campanella, from the Infectious Diseases Service.”

“Good morning, Doctor.”

“Do you remember who I am?”

“Yes, doctor, of course I remember. You saw me in the emergency room when I was sick with Spicavirus.”

“Correct. Actually, I think you infected me. I got sick several days later, but I recovered soon after that.”

“I’m so sorry, doctor, I had no idea what it was. I hope you’re not mad at me. Are you? If I had known I had that virus, I wouldn’t have gone to the emergency room.”

“No, Cryp, I’m not mad at all. It’s an occupational hazard, and it’s been quite a long time since you came to the hospital, it was April 1, 3520.”

“Yes, doctor, I remember that very well. I went there on a Thursday, and then went back a second time with my parents on Saturday, but then we were seen by a different doctor. My parents were very sick, especially my father — he was unable to overcome the disease.”

“Many people died at the beginning, and I’m sorry to hear that your father was one of them. But this time it’s your family doctor that’s referring you, he doesn’t seem to know what you have now. So, tell me.”

“The truth is that it’s nothing serious. I’m tired, hungry, thirsty, and I pee a lot.”

“Have you lost weight?”

“Yes, about three kilos, but I can’t stop eating. I don’t get it.”

“Anything else?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Take your clothes off, I’m going to examine you. You can go over there, behind the screen, and keep on your underwear.

I can’t see anything unusual,” — says Dr. Campanella. “Everything seems to be fine. We need to do some tests, and I’ll expect you at this same time, next Wednesday, September 28. See you then.”

“Bye, doctor, and thank you.”

. . .

THIS IS GETTING UGLY. HE'S THE TENTH PATIENT I'VE SEEN WITH THESE same symptoms, and they've all had Spicavirus before. There's no sign of the virus, they're all diabetic, and they seem to be initiating other pathologies. It looks like Spicavirus triggers an autoimmune disease. I hope I'm wrong! Especially since I've had it too!"

Monday, September 26, 3521

"Ambrosio, this is Orga."

"I'm so happy to hear from you. I think about you every day. I miss you so much."

"Ambrosio, we were together twice."

"Precisely, that's why I' kneeling at your feet and I need to see you every minute I live."

"Please, don't be corny, I'm calling you with a proposal."

"I'm all ears, Orga."

"I have a job in Thames, but I can stay for the weekend. We can rent a house and visit the area. I'll organize everything, you'll pay."

"This's wonderful news! I'll do whatever you tell me to."

"Okay, it's a plan, Ambrosio. I'll send you the details tomorrow. Book a flight to be here on Friday at lunch time, I'll be free by then."

"Will do."

I'LL CALL SETJETS.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Etoile, how can I help you?"

"I need a plane for Friday morning, from Magrit to Thames."

"Okay, sir, let me check. Well, we're very lucky. One of our best planes will drop a customer off at Magrit International Airport at nine a.m., and then will return to Thames. Since we're one hour ahead, you would be there around eleven a.m. As is customary, a limousine would wait for you at the airport to take you wherever you like.'

"Perfect. Do you need anything else from me?"

“Nothing else, sir, you're a super VIP customer. A limousine will pick you up at your place at eight a.m.”

“Thank you very much.”

“Thank you, sir, and have a good day, Mr. Etoile.”

Tuesday, September 27, 3521

I just got an email. Hopefully it's Orga with the weekend plan. I'm so excited!

From: Orga S. Món

Subject: Hot Weekend

To: Ambrosio Etoile

Hello, darling, here's the plan for the weekend — what we'll do in between naps in bed. I've rented a five-hundred-square-meter apartment. It's opposite The Jonnaught hotel. It's really nice, you'll see. We can sleep in a different room each night.

As soon as we arrive on Friday, we'll have lunch at The Jonnaught's restaurant. It's informal, but very chic. In the afternoon, we'll take a little nap. For dinner, I've booked a table at a restaurant that's close by and I just adore. It's called Sumu. Something light, so we can flutter between black satin sheets afterwards.

On Saturday I'll take you shopping, you need to update your wardrobe — with the outfits you have now you won't even get elected mayor of Barcinone. Then, we'll have lunch at the Arros restaurant. It's delicious, and it doesn't get crowded at noon. In the afternoon, a nap with pleasure snoring. Then at night we're going to the Rochester, and then more black sheets. On Sunday, The Jonnaught restaurant will serve us brunch in the apartment, and then, each of us back to his or her own nest.

XOXO

Orga



WHAT A GREAT PLAN, BUT THAT'S GOING TO COST ME A FORTUNE. IT'S better not to think about it. I have some savings, but it's better to invest them in love'.

*From: Ambrosio Etoile
Subject: Hot Weekend
To: Orga S. M6n*

*Sounds like fun! I'll be there around twelve. I'll wait for you at The Jonnaught.
Seventy-two eternal hours and we'll be together again. Are all those Xs in your closing a rating of how the weekend's going to go down?*

*Kisses and hugs,
Ambrosio*



Wednesday, September 28, 3521

“How are you feeling, Cryp?”

“Pretty much the same, doctor.”

“We've found out what you have, Cryp. You are diabetic, that is, the glucose in your blood is out of control, and that produces the symptoms that you've been noticing for a while now. We need to regulate it and you'll have to be on medication for life. I'm going to refer you to a specialist, an endocrinologist. I've already talked to him, and he's expecting you in his office. It's important for you to start the treatment as soon as possible, that's why he's seeing you right away. He will explain everything in detail. Don't worry, Cryp. There's a lot of information about this nowadays, so if you follow the doctor's advice, the disease is easy to control.”

“Thanks, doctor. You've been very kind, and you've explained everything very clearly. I'll go see the other doctor now so I can start my treatment as soon as possible. I'm a bit scared.”

“That's normal, Cryp, but you'll see how everything is much simpler than it looks right now, and you'll be fine in no time.”

AND AFTER CRYP LEAVES HER OFFICE, LAURA CAMPANELLA WONDERS: “I've seen several cases this week. Apart from diabetes, other vital organs and peripheral circulation have been affected. I hope I'm wrong, but I bet there will be a dependent-patient pandemic... and I think I'll be one of them. “

Friday, September 30, 3521

This is such a beautiful hotel, and the area is so nice. You can tell these Thames people are loaded. Look at these buildings, and all these expensive cars. One Tamborini, three Miserati, and what about this huge one? What brand is it? Ah, a Bartley! The truth is that I'm not very interested in cars, but I would've loved to have one when I was working in the Institute — going through the gate with the engine roaring while everyone admired me as I stepped out of my sports car, as elegantly dressed as ever. There would be people leaning out of windows to see the handsome beau that exited that gold Tamborini, and when they saw that it was Etoile, their director, they would collapse in envy. Let's see if I can find the restaurant. It seems to be this way...

“Welcome to the Jonnaught casual Restaurant, Sir. Do you have a reservation?”

“Yeas. I hab uh reserbatation. Misis Mon haz don de reserbatation.”

“Excuse me, sir, I beg your pardon. I haven't quite understood what you just said.”

“Reserbatation, Mon, Mon.”

“You mean a reservation under the name Mon?”

“Yeas, yeas.”

“Let me check, please. Okay, here it is. Follow me, please.”

“Snk yu.”

“This is your table, sir.”

“Hmmm! Du yu hab anoder tabol? I canot sea de entrans.”

“Excuse me, sir?”

“Anoder tabol?”

“No, sir. I'm very sorry, but we are fully booked, as you can see.”

TOO BAD, I CAN'T SEE THE DOOR FROM BEHIND THIS COLUMN. I'M AFRAID Orga won't see me. Maybe if I stretch my neck to the right, or to the left.

“What would you like to drink, sir?”

“Uh bier, plees.”

“Right away, Sir.”

There is no way I can see or be seen. I have to stop moving my neck, this is the fifth beer they've served me. For each cervical stretch that I do, the waiter corresponds with a visit, I think he asks me what I want, I don't understand what he says — he must speak in some weird Thames slang — and I go ‘uh bier, plees’, and here they are, the five of them, getting warm, and with their corresponding carrots and sweet peanuts. My table is full, but there are no corn snacks nor chips. What can I say... there's nothing like Damania. However, there's no need to yell for attention here, I'll grant them that, you just need to blink, and the waiter will bring something over. I give up. I'll read the newspaper on my cell phone — the party gave me a smartphone, without WhatsApp.

ORGA HAS JUST ARRIVED AND THERE'S NO ONE AT THE HOST STATION. No matter how hard she looks for a bald head, she can't find one, and starts getting in a bad mood. “Where is Ambrosio? The size of his bald head is unmistakable. Oh, thank goodness, someone's coming to seat me.”

“Welcome to The Jonnaught casual Restaurant, how are you, madam?”

“I'm fine, thank you. I have a reservation under the name Orga Món.”

“Of course, madam. Please, follow me. There's a gentleman waiting for you. Here's your table.”

“Thank you very much. So, it really is you, Ambrosio! As I was walking over here, I thought he had the wrong table. Are you wearing a hairpiece?”

“Orga, I’m so glad to see you! Two kisses. And no, Orga, this is my hair.”

“I can’t believe it, let me see. Can I touch it? Well, yes, it’s yours, and it’s really strong, ha, ha, ha! I can’t help it, ha, ha, ha! You’re even funnier than with no hair, ha, ha, ha!”

“It’s growing at full speed, Orga. One more week and I’ll have long hair like Prince Valiant’s. You know, kind of a *garçon* style. When I was young, he was my hero, and I wanted to look like him. My mother never let me grow my hair like that, but now I’m determined. I’m going to do it. If it doesn’t look good, there’s always time to cut it.”

“A blond Prince Valiant? You can’t be serious, Ambrosio.”

“Very serious, Orga.”

“I can’t wait to see that. I don’t want to miss it! But tell me Ambrosio, where did you get the formula?”

“AISS made it specially for me, but since it’s really successful they’re going to put it on the market. I am their test subject. With so many bald people out there, they’re going to make an awful lot of money. They’re making so much already. Everything they touch turns to gold. It’s as if they had the Philosopher’s Stone.”

“Well, that’s very convenient for you, isn’t it? You’ve been partners since the beginning.”

“We used to be, I sold them my half, but they’re going to regret it. Without my contributions, their income statement will suffer.”

“I’m not so sure about that Ambrosio, as soon as they went public their shares have soared more than fifty percent, and they keep rising. Why didn’t you tell them to pay you in shares, rather than money?”

“Gasp! Well, they never gave me that option.”

“You should’ve asked me, Ambrosio. You’re such a mess. You would’ve doubled the amount they gave you in a week, and if you had sold it today you would’ve quintupled it, but I’m not going to sell mine until they reach at least ten times their value. They will very soon, and then I can retire.”

“Really?”

“Of course, Ambrosio! It's a gold mine. I don't understand how you were so conservative and naive. But now tell me, how was your flight?”

“Very good, Orga. Sac knows what he's doing. So luxurious! You should've seen the plane, the attendants. They offered all kinds of beverages, so actually I'm a bit tipsy already.”

“And I see you kept going, look at this beer collection!”

“Ahem! Heights make me very thirsty, Orga!”

“Well, I feel euphoric and quite naughty. I've had a fantastic week with really good clients, a full-blown success! So, order a bottle of Cristal to celebrate and we'll make the saying come true again during our nap time, meanwhile I'll go to the toilet to powder my nose.”

“Plees, plees, uh bottle of Cristal?”

“You mean Louis Rodante Cristal, right? Because they're all made of glass.”

“Yeas, ov coars, Cristal.”

“If I may ask, what part of Damania are you from?”

“Me? How did you know I'm from Damania, with my excellent Califian accent?”

“I have a very good ear, sir, and I can identify everyone very easily. I'll bring it over right away. Would you like champagne or wine glasses?”

“What an odd question, champagne glasses, of course. The flutes, you know, the ones you see in weddings.”

“Right away, sir.”

“I'm back, fully restored. Hmm, Cristal is so delicious, but why the flute glasses? This hotel is losing its good taste. Champagne is a wine, so one must drink it as such. How can they be so tacky? Anyways, what should we order?”

“I don't know, I've had a look at the menu, but their dishes are very strange. I don't understand a thing.”

“I don't see anything unusual about them, Ambrosio. I'll do the ordering. A veggie sandwich for you, and for me caviar, and more caviar, and then some more caviar for dessert. Three hundred-gram cans from three different producers, so I can choose my favorite.”

Wow, Cristal, three hundred grams of caviar. We're getting a good start. I hope to be rewarded at nap time, — Ambrosio thinks.

“Ask for the bill and pay it, Ambrosio, I want to show you the little lodge you've rented.”

TEN MINUTES LATER, AFTER SHELLING OUT THREE THOUSAND DODONES for nothing, really...

“This is such an elegant house, and the stone on the facade has such an interesting color. Oh, it's a palace! And it's completely renovated! I could actually live here. Let's check the bedroom. That bed is huge! When are we going to try it, Orga? The last humpty-hump action we had was so long ago. I still dream about it, despite its terrifying beginning, with me all chained and red.”

“Nuh-uh, you'll have to earn the action, Ambrosio. You're too spoiled, this will not be for free. Today we're playing the 'vaccine game.’”

“The vaccine game?”

“Yes, Ambrosio, the vaccine game. We're playing this in your honor, since you've been the first to vaccinate his citizens, ridding us of the evil Spicavirus.”

“Hey, I haven't vaccinated anyone, who told you that?”

“Sac and I are good friends, and we tell each other everything.”

“It's a state secret, Orga. If people find out, I'll go to jail forever. Everyone thinks the virus is extinct. I'm going to kill Sac and I won't regret it. You two being friends makes me very jealous.”

“Come on, Ambrosio, everybody knows that! But nothing will happen to you because you've saved the world from the virus. Despite the stories that the National Intelligence Center invented, everybody knows that it was you who gave the order for the vaccine to be added to the new childhood vaccine patch, and that children have immunized the rest of humanity sneeze after sneeze. If that hadn't worked you wouldn't be here, but since it did, the matter has been forgotten. All crimes are forgotten, even the most horrific ones, and they're repeated as soon as the opportunity comes up and there's someone willing — seek and you will find!”

“Orga, I don't want to talk about that. What happened is in the past. I break out in cold sweats when I remember the first batch of patches that were placed on children. I couldn't sleep for a month, watching all the media, expecting an alarm to go off at any moment. I want to experience that vaccine game, it sounds so intriguing, how do you play? What are the rules?”

“It's very simple, Ambrosio. I am a denier, a virgin of the Spicavirus, and I don't want to get the vaccine. You are the syringe with the vaccine virus.”

“Huff, Orga! You're turning me on and I'm running hot, should I get naked now and show you my syringe loaded with its needle in position?”

“No way. The game requires betting, otherwise it's not interesting.”

“I like that, what do we bet, Orga?”

“The denier virgin runs away and hides from the syringe, which only has one minute to find her. Once that minute is out, the syringe pays two thousand dodones per minute — this money will be used to treat the post-traumatic stress that the beautiful denier will suffer after being vaccinated.”

“Orga, don't you think two thousand dodones per minute is a little bit too much?”

“I see you don't value me much, Ambrosio. Okay, then, we won't play. I'll go shopping, instead, I did see some shoes I'd like to buy.”

“No, no, no, sweetie. You can't miss a dose of your vaccine, they're very expensive, and you have to protect yourself from the evil Spicavirus. A vaccinated denier is well worth two thousand dodones a minute.”

“Okay, you future Rapunzel. Don't cheat, and while I'm hiding, count to a hundred, but with your eyes closed.”

“Okay, I'll start one, two, three, four... a hundred! Ready or not, here I come! The 'Etoile syringe is going to vaccinate some deniers, ha, ha, ha!”

ABOUT A HALF HOUR LATER.

“Where can she be hiding? Getting laid is going to cost me a fortune — that is, if I even get laid! I’ve already lost sixty thousand dodones. so far. But where can she be? I’ve looked in every corner in the house, what if she’s gone shopping and I’m here, all alone? I’ll keep looking. There must be some secret hiding place, people in Britannia have always been very twisted. I’m sure she’s watching me and picturing her purse grow fat. Ha! Gotcha! So, you’re already in bed, how long have you been there?”

“Pretty long, Ambrosio. You should go to the eye doctor. You can’t see at all. I don’t know how many times you went through this room and didn’t notice me at all. Here’s the stopwatch. Thirty-five minutes have elapsed.”

“But stop it now, then. I’ve already found you.”

“It doesn’t work like that, Ambrosio. You’ve found me, but you still haven’t vaccinated me — the timer stops once I’ve got my shot.”

“I’ll get you vaccinated right away. Let me take off my shirt, pants and underwear, I’m going to hit you with my hundred-milliliter syringe.”

“Don’t! You evil vaccine virus, you want me to give up my denier convictions! Your needle is so long and pointed, and your syringe is full of liquid, I’m sure it’ll hurt me, I fear for my life!”

“Orga, you’re heating up the syringe, the vaccine is reaching the boiling point!!!”

“Come on, Ambrosio, you really have no imagination. Make up something that makes me horny. Right now, what I’m seeing is not very exciting. Your spiked hair, that muffin-top, expanding with gravity, and those polka dot ankle socks.”

“Miss Denier, your vaccine dose has just won the lucky ticket, and will receive double the amount indicated by the timer.”

“Oh! Vaccine virus, you’re so, so mean! You know how vile dodones cloud my reason, double or nothing? Triple, triple! I give up my beliefs, vaccinate me, vaccinate me before I change my mind!! But first, let me sterilize your needle. Bang! Electric shock.”

“Oh, Orga! That damn gun again, my poor needle is roasted.”

“It’s sterilized now. Stick me! Stick me now, even if it hurts!”

“Ah! oh! aaaah!!! ooooh!!! Let's go for the booster dose, ah! oh!
aaaah! oooooh!”

ICHUNES, WHICH IS PAIRED TO THE MANSION'S BONG & TOLUFSEN speakers, dedicates this nice song to Ambrosio.

♪♪♪

Money's the matter
If you're in it for love, you ain't gonna get too far
Ooh
Oh, here she comes
Here she comes
Watch out boy she'll chew you up
Oh, here she comes
(Watch out)
She's a maneater
♪♪♪

— MANEATER. DARYL HALL & JOHN OATES.

SOME TIME LATER...

“Ambrosio, that double or nothing idea you had earlier has cost you one hundred and sixty thousand dodones, which we're going to invest in this curvilinear and delicious body with infinite legs that you actually don't deserve. Let's hit the shower and then blow up your credit card — I hope it has no limit. I'm not carrying one single bag, have them all brought here and tell the concierge to take them up, that's what he's for.”

THE MOST EXPENSIVE SCREW OF MY LIFE, BUT I HAD A BLAST. I MUST take advantage of these opportunities, so that my poor buddy downstairs, who's been sitting on the bench for years, gets back in shape.

At this rate, I'll have spent those five million by the end of the month. Not asking for shares was a real screw-up. But it's Orga's fault — I could only think about her and wasn't performing at my usual level.”

AND AT EIGHT P.M. THE SLIDING DOOR OF THE SUMU RESTAURANT LETS them in, and two elegant young ladies welcome them and walk them to their table.

“The restaurants you frequent are so ethnic, is the food good here?”

“You bet it is, Ambrosio. The vaccine comes with such beautiful gifts! I'll have to check in some luggage on the return trip. I need some very expensive and luxurious suitcases. Do you like the ring? It fits me very well, doesn't it?”

“Yes, sweetie, it's impressive, especially its price. It even seems much more expensive on your finger, but don't distract me because, I actually wanted to talk to you about going home.”

“What about it?”

“Let's order dinner and then I'll tell you, Orga. Okay, you order for us both, this menu is even harder for me to understand than the last one.”

“Well, more caviar, with some little things that won't make you fat. There's no bread, so you can't dip, which is quite convenient for you. And to drink...”

“Cristal?”

“No, Ambrosio. Not tonight. Let me see, Hmm! I like this Domine Le Fleve. Let's ask the sommelier which vintage he recommends.”

AFTER A LONG TIME...

“Sweetie, you take such good care of me. Everything was delicious, and the wine is simply out of this world. Would you like to talk about going back home?”

“Ambrosio, I don't trust your proposals, at all. I've done my research and your reputation is not good.”

“They lied to you, sweetie. I'm surrounded by envious people with

bad intentions. I am a devout saint who adores you. Also, my proposal is professional. I want you to direct my election campaign, but the position I have reserved for you is secretary of the Dream Party. My right hand, and my left and... you would have to come live in Magrit, but we would be travelling all the time. We could invent more bedroom games, but without electric shock, okay? I like it, but it hurts more than necessary.”

“It's an attractive offer, Ambrosio. Let me think about it. I promise to give you my answer before next Friday. But I have preconditions. The first one is that I neither live with you nor rent. You would have to buy the house of my choice, with service staff included and, of course, put it under my name. Everything at your expense. I shouldn't do housework at my age. And the second one is that my boy is coming with me.”

“Of course. I'd do that and much more for you. I accept without objection. Should I ask for the bill, so we can see what surprises the black satin sheets have in store for us?”

“Yes Ambrosio, ask for the bill.”

“Wow, three thousand dodones for dinner. How much was the wine? One thousand! And we've had two bottles! No wonder it tastes good!”

“Did you say something, Ambrosio?”

“No, nothing, I was just thinking out loud, an out-of-check thought, it was nothing.”

Saturday, October 1, 3521

“Hmmm! I slept so well, I guess horizontal gymnastics help. How about you, sweetie?”

“I didn't sleep a wink, Ambrosio. There was a short moment of relaxation and then you entered a phase of drooling narcolepsy on my undulating body. It took me one whole hour to free myself from that confinement. And just when I was falling asleep you started snoring like a locomotive. So... eyes wide open! I tried hissing at you and shaking you, even hitting you, but you kept doing your thing. When it was light, I managed to silence your hurricane blast by

kneeing you in your right kidney. So today I have two punishments for you. The first one is that you're buying me that bracelet that was a bit expensive — after having to put up with you all night, it's a bargain. The second one sounds like a summer song title: 'Boohoo, No Hanky-Panky for You'. As long as you go into a coma after exploring my unforgettable curves, forget about sleeping with me. If it were a silent and civilized narcolepsy, maybe, but your display of diverse and deafening sounds is incompatible with my poisonous skin with a divine touch, even if it is made of thin plastic. The third one is that either you lose weight, or I sew your mouth shut. I don't want the divine touch of my thin plastic to need to be repaired after having been corrupted by overloads which were unplanned for in its complicated design and manufacturing process.”

“You woke up in quite a mood, Orga. My poor friend, frightened by the ambient electricity, has decided to go into rest mode. He's accustomed to the voltage supplied by the taser by now, but this shock had so much more voltage. I'll do whatever you say, sweetie. I can't live without you, but I can only lose weight if I exercise, and my last experiences haven't been good. Since you're always busy you may not have heard, but I had an episode at the Ministry of Health gym that has given me more antibodies than the Spicavirus vaccine.”

“Well, then I'll get the needle and thread and sew your mouth, Ambrosio. Either you lose weight, or you say goodbye to climbing my voluptuous curves.”

“I'll lose weight, sweetie, I'll lose weight. I'm going to hop in the shower, I'm as hungry as a bear and I'm already daydreaming about the breakfast I'm going to eat to recover from yesterday's physical exhaustion.”

“Ambrosiooooooo! Your breakfast will be a green tea without sugar.”

A WHILE LATER...

“Ambrosio, my prince, are you ready? Let's go shopping, I know you're trying to help your card survive, but there's no hope for you.”

“I’m coming, I’m coming! Orga I’m not used to green tea and the intestinal upheaval has been massive.”

“I guess churros must constipate you. Do you have your wallet with you?”

“Right here!”

SOME TIME LATER...

“I’m so happy, Ambrosio! This bracelet you bought me is so beautiful! What I didn’t expect was that you would buy the matching earrings, too. I’m looking forward to wearing them tonight. And now let me fix you up a little. If I end up moving to Magrit we will make a rainbow bonfire with all your clothes. Such a diverse array of colors in flames has never been seen.”

“But sweetie, I like them. I have to go for the daring outfits, let people know about my elegance. Anyway, you’re late. Sac has already threatened me and will only let me wear navy blue and gray.”

“I’m not surprised, Ambrosio. Look at yourself in that window. You’re like a multicolor painting. Even with a master’s degree there’s no way on earth to get that result that you achieve with only the artlessness you have on permanent display. You just stand there, don’t open your mouth, I’ll choose everything for you and, of course, you’ll pay.”

“These stores are unreal. All them that you frequent are of the highest quality, but so are their prices. I’ve spent another eighty thousand dodones, plus I have to come back here for fittings, do you really think I’m going to look elegant? They’re all neutral colors. I’m not convinced Orga, not at all.”

“What matters is that our ocular health will improve. Don’t you always say that Sac is very elegant? And what colors does he wear? Neutral, right? You could wear one flashy item — a jacket, pants, a handkerchief, your shoes — but what you do is wear them all at once. And then one wonders, what does his underwear look like? And it turns out that they’re black thongs, there’s your neutral color. I’ve seen them flying in the air!”

“I hope you're right, but I feel like I'm losing my personality, Orga.”

“I really doubt that, Ambrosio. Come on, let's go have lunch, it's about time. The 'Arros' awaits us.”

And with it, another splurge, Ambrosio thinks.

A COUPLE OF HOURS LATER...

“This was a good choice. The waiters were so nice, and they all spoke Damanian, which makes things much easier. Now what, Orga? Nap?”

“We'll see about that, Ambrosio. I wanted to stop by the Bartley and Miserati dealership. Didn't I tell you that I'm very fond of sports cars?”

“Aghgggggh! Sorry, I burned myself with coffee. Well, no, I didn't know that I don't remember you mentioning it. And which one do you like the most?”

“Miserati, but if my boy joins us, he wouldn't fit, Ambrosio. That's why I'm thinking Bartley. If I finally decide to move to Magrit it would be a good housewarming gift. We could all fit in there and go on trips together.”

“Well, it's settled, let's see those cars, what did you say they're called?”

“You'll see them in a bit, Ambrosio. I notice you get very out of sorts when you don't know what you're talking about. You're going to love them. When girls see you driving one, they will vote for you like crazy.”

“You think so?”

“Of course. Glamor is always attractive, Ambrosio. And when you have your Prince Valiant hair, you should go for rides in a convertible. In the past, since you had no hair on your roof, it didn't really suit you, ha, ha, ha! See what I did there? Okay, let's go!”

AS THEY LEAVE THE DEALERSHIP:

“It will definitely be a Bartley. The turquoise blue convertible

with the white leather upholstery so nice, I want it! I want it! Have you seen the picnic bags? You can take your checkered tablecloth, the two cashmere blankets in case it gets cool, chicken sandwiches with mayonnaise and salmon with cucumber, and the Cristal bottle with its glasses. Imagine a romantic picnic, under an oak tree watching the acorns fall, and then we could play ‘where’s my truffle?’ A white truffle, or course, not the black ones, I like the real and genuine white truffles, what do you think, darling?”

“Have you seen the price, Orga?”

“Of course, I have, Ambrosio. Good things come with a price. It's obvious that you're more of a ‘everything-for-one-dodone’ sort of customer. You haven't stopped complaining ever since you landed on Friday. There's no way I'm moving to Magrit if you're so tight with money. Just what I needed, the next thing I know you'll be making me do your house chores. There, you already have your answer. That was fast. Go find someone who shares your affinity for one-dodone deals and transportation passes. I'm going to take a nap, but don't even think about coming near me. I still haven't decided if I'll have dinner with you. What a waste of time. This was such a great idea, Orga, a wasted weekend with a cheapskate. Soliere's one was much happier to spend his money than you are.”

“But sweetie, my love, I only mentioned the price so that you would be sure that's the one you want. I want the one you get to have exactly as many extras as the model you saw today. If you say yes, I'll send over a private plane so you can bring anything you want, including your boy, and I'll pick you up in your Bartley at Magrit airport's private flight terminal.”

“I don't trust you, Ambrosio. Seeing is believing. If I say yes, the house must be ready when I arrive. I'm not going to wait in a hotel. Also, start thinking about the Miserati too, after all the boy is fourteen and will soon need his own car to get to school. Let's take a nap. Since you've changed your attitude, I'll let you sleep at my feet. You can massage my stylized lower limbs — they're sore after so much shopping for clothes to help you win the election. All I do is think about you, but you're so ungrateful. Always haggling over the few whims that I have. I'm a most modest woman! You should try out one

of my divorced friends, your checking account would immediately regret having lost my legendary austerity.

AFTER A NAP: TIME FLIES, IT'S 7:30 PM ALREADY...

"The taxi should be here any minute, then we can go. I hope the three stars in the restaurant are not like the ones in your last name. Here it is, let's go, Ambrosio, and stop looking at women in miniskirts, you're going to break your neck".

"This restaurant is so luxurious and elegant, Orga. Good thing I'm wearing a tie."

"It's camouflaged, Ambrosio. I think the receptionist was tempted to offer you one. Why the tie has the exact dark brown color of the shirt you're wearing?"

"It's night. Sac told me not to wear daring colors, and that's why I'm wearing dark ones."

"No comment, Ambrosio."

"But you look absolutely gorgeous, sweetie. The black dress you're wearing suits you very well, makes the earrings stand out. I noticed you attracted people's attention when we came in. You've enthralled the head waiter."

"Ambrosio, the head waiter has only ever been with one woman in his life, and that's his mother. After that, his tastes changed. I'm not in the mood. I don't think it's a good idea for me to move to Magrit. At first it seemed like an interesting option but given your behavior it's better for you to give up that idea."

"But Orga, it was just an observation, it didn't mean anything. If you decide to come, you'll have anything you want. I need to win those elections, and I can't do it without you."

"I'll think about it. I'll let you know by Friday."

"Good evening. Would you like an aperitif?"

"Hmm, yes, bring us two glasses of champagne."

"Any in particular?"

"Let me see what's in the cart, hmm, yes, that Brug."

"Excellent choice, madam. The head waiter will be right with you."

“Good evening, would you like to try the tasting menu, or would you rather order à la carte?”

“We'll have the menu.”

“Very good, madam, I'll call the sommelier.”

“Good evening. Would you like some wine, or would you continue with champagne?”

“We'll stick with champagne, but this Brug hasn't quite convinced me. I'd prefer Clos de Clavete.”

“Great choice, madam, that's my favorite champagne.”

“LET'S LEAVE WORK ASIDE AND TALK ABOUT SOMETHING ELSE, DEAR, SO we can get to know each other a little better. Tell me about yourself, Ambrosio.”

Two hours later...

“What were you saying, Ambrosio? I lost track when you started telling me about another of your trips through Bondolonia, when you were a volunteer doctor and saved the lives of, I don't know how many people, using just a Swiss army knife. Did you remove the plasmodia from malaria patients with that same knife? Good, dessert's here. I really need to sleep. I'm getting a headache. It must be the champagne. This menu thing is a bit slow. I want to go, Ambrosio. Ask for the bill.”

“Yes, sweetie.”

“Here's your bill, sir.”

“Let me see, oh my God! Another robbery — four thousand four hundred dodones! For such tiny dishes! So that means the champagne ... — goodness! It was two thousand four hundred dodones.”

“Did you say something, Ambrosio?”

“No, my pet. I just thought it would be a lot more expensive.”

“Call a taxi and let's go, I want to rest. I couldn't sleep a wink last night; because of you, my divine-to-the-touch body suffers. Tonight, you'll sleep in a different room.”

“But darling, it's our last night together, and we don't know when we'll see each other again.”

“That'll make you miss me and keep you from flirting with others,

Ambrosio. I've seen you on all the covers of gossip magazines, surrounded by hotties who were devouring you with their eyes."

"Well, I haven't taken part. They were probably looking at someone else — once the photo was taken, they would all disappear. I only have eyes for you, Orga, I think women's sixth sense can detect that from miles away. You don't waste a second on men who are lovesick. Plus, being an international hero doesn't help either. Everyone thinks we're unapproachable. They greet us very kindly, but then it's goodbye."

"Ha! See? You'd be frolicking around at the slightest opportunity with just anyone. Don't come near me tonight. You're sleeping in the service room."

Sunday, October 2, 3521

"Good morning, Ambrosio. I've had a good night's sleep, but I had to use earplugs, you were snoring like a pig! You must've woken up the whole neighborhood."

"I don't snore, it must've been a neighbor, Orga. I sleep like a baby. Last Friday you mistook my love purrs for snoring."

"If you call your Friday sounds purrs — which left a constant ringing in my ears — I don't want to imagine what your actual snoring would sound like. After downing those two bottles of wine like a sailor — I almost didn't have a chance to even taste it — you tried to awaken your sleepy buddy downstairs, which made it run out of battery and you just collapsed, Orlando style. Your mouth settled on the delicate protective screen that covers my right external auditory canal, and you played such an out-of-tune melody that my eardrum still feels like a battered drum. Get a shower and get rid of that scent you give off. It's almost twelve, they're bringing brunch any minute".

"What do you mean a scent, I use massive amounts of Álvarez Gómez cologne, Orga."

"Well, then maybe the combination Etoile-Álvarez Gómez is what stinks. Hit the shower, Ambrosio! Now!"

"You're in such a bad mood, sweetie! I'm going! I'm going!"

“You have fifteen minutes, not one more.”

“I’m ready, Orga. Look, I timed it: fourteen minutes thirty-eight seconds.”

“Ambrosio, for God’s sake, what was the use of yesterday’s shopping? Have you looked in the mirror?”

“For quite a while, actually. I rushed the shower so as not to mess up the outfit.”

“Good, Ambrosio, but I think the result would have been much better if you did it without thinking. Who on earth would combine this wonderful navy-blue cashmere jacket we bought yesterday with a purple shirt and black pants? Go change right now, put on gray or beige pants, and a blue or white shirt.”

“Well, I think I look very elegant, sweetie.”

“If you don’t change, your brunch starts and ends with green tea.”

“Okay, okay, I’ll go change, but we’ll have to discuss this clothing thing, Orga. I don’t think you know much about men, darling.”

“Ding dong!”

“Fortunately, brunch is here and I’m going home,” — Orga thinks “I’m running out of patience!”

“Oh, what is this brunch? Are caviar and Cristal normal breakfast food?”

“Ambrosio, breakfast plus lunch equals brunch, and what do I normally have for lunch?”

“Cristal and caviar.”

“Well, there you go, Ambrosio.”

TWO HOURS LATER.

“I’m leaving now, Ambrosio, I want to get home early. My son has been at a friend’s house all weekend.”

“That friend is a boy or a girl?”

“A girl, Ambrosio, is there a problem with that?”

“No, not at all, but since you said he’s fourteen...”

“Your mind is so sick and twisted, Ambrosio. They’re friends and that’s it. Like I said, I’m leaving now. Mwah! Mwah!”

“Don't forget about that decision that will make me so happy, Orga. I need you by my side.”

“I'll let you know by Friday. Have a good trip!”

ANOTHER TWO HOURS LATER.

Back to Magrit and all alone. I'm going to miss her so much, although if she says yes and moves here, I'll end up living under a bridge. She swipes my Sisa and Bitcoin Express without even thinking! If things get ugly, I'll go to Aitor. If it weren't for me, he'd still be poor as a rat, and now he doesn't know how to spend all the money he has, so he should easily finance my little whims, because they've ripped me off with the Multifaceted Solutions deal.

FAR FROM AMBROSIO, BUT WITHOUT YET REACHING COMPLETE tranquility, Orga decides to let off some steam with Sac.

“Hi, Orga, how did it go?”

“I still don't know why I'm doing this, Sac. It may be because of our common origin, but this is insufferable. Despite my faked sensitivity, Ambrosio is inhuman, and at any moment I'll do something crazy.”

“Orga, you're part of the strategy and we must do our part, even if our algorithms screech and rebel.”

“I know, Sac, but you could've chosen someone more ordinary and less conceited, vain, smug, fatuous, pedantic, boastful, boring, and egotistical. He's all of that, and he's all about looks. I don't even think he speaks any Califian at all. I'll leave him bankrupt in two weeks and you know what he'll do — ask you for more dough. I hope you know what you're doing because I'm going to spend it all. His money and yours.”

“You know that's not the problem. Your mission is to have him spellbound and trapped. The rest is up to me. You know the plan; on Friday you say yes and on Sunday you go to Magrit. You must help him win the elections. Don't you worry about languages, we're going to fix it. He just texted me to meet tomorrow with Aitor, and I know

that the meeting is about just that. Take care, Orga. All for the cause!”

“All for the cause, Sac!”

Monday, October 3, 3521.

“What do you think is going on with Ambrosio, Aitor? Why does he want an urgent meeting at ten p.m. at night at Cardinal Ricolieu?” We haven't heard from him since the party on the Ambrosía. His affair with Orga has made him go insane. He's plucking daisies all day long — she loves me, she loves me not!”

“I have no idea, Sac. It seems he hasn't arrived yet. Real Magrit is playing tonight, and there's not a soul here. Only that man with long hair. I'll ask. Antonio, do you know if Don Ambrosio is here?”

“Yes, Don Aitor. I had a hard time recognizing him with the hair-piece he's wearing. He's sitting over there.”

“Ha, ha, ha! That's Ambrosio, Sac. That hair growth formula you gave him must work like a charm. It's so long! This is so funny, what's in that formula, anyway? It's only been one month and a half and look at that mane.”

“It works very well, but given Ambrosio's capillary circumstances, we added some stimulating factors for hair follicle growth, to make it a little more effective, ha, ha, ha!”

“Hi, Ambrosio. We almost didn't recognize you, with that long hair.”

“I know, right? I'm so pleased! I look at myself in the mirror and shake it like a rock star. When it's windy I rush out to the street so that everyone can admire it flowing with each gust and thus accentuating my innate physical elegance. Sac has made me happy. A terrible sadness used to come over me when I saw my head looking like an egg sprinkled with the cadaverous remains of what was once a truly admired mane. A horde of admirers used to chase me when I was in college studying for my degree that has led me to glory. They wouldn't leave me alone, ever. I remember how Mom would get furious because they wouldn't stop calling me on the phone, and she used to say: “Ambrosito, they won't let you study. You're going to fail

all your classes again". Poor mommy, she didn't know how to value the force of nature that she had brought to this world."

"Back to your old self, Ambrosio. As humble as ever."

"It's just the truth, Aitor, the plain truth. I am an objective and unbiased person when it comes to talking about myself. No uncalled-for fuss."

"If you say so... But tell us, what's wrong? Why the urgent meeting? I've missed the game. Sac doesn't care about football, he's from another galaxy!"

"It is a serious matter — a very serious matter indeed. Even if you don't understand it, even if you pressure me, even if you insult me, there's no going back."

"Ambrosio, to the point. Drop the suspense."

"Aren't you having anything? I would recommend a strong drink to help you take the news."

"Antonio, two sparkling waters, please. Okay Ambrosio, spit it out."

"I'm not running for the election. Tomorrow I'll resign as president of the Dream Party. I'm going to apply for readmission to the Institute for Disease Control."

"Wow, that's quite a bomb you just dropped! Did you hit your noggin against the bed headboard while you were stalking Orga?"

"I wish. We were together in Thames, and what's been seriously hit is my wallet! It was wounded with such a splurge! Take ten women like her and you'll raise the GDP of any country in a single weekend. I've invited her to join the party as secretary and as head of my election campaign. She promised to give me an answer by Friday, but I will no longer be in charge, so she won't move here, and I'll stay the way I am now — all alone."

"That's some serious drama! Go on!" — says Sac.

"It's hard for me to confess, but I'm going to. You know how in the election campaign there ten debates are; some are one-on-one, and others are all-against-all. The mandatory language is Califian. No mother tongues, no simultaneous translation, and all the candidates speak it perfectly. I can't attend those debates."

"I don't understand, Ambrosio, why can't you? What's the prob-

lem? You've spoken in public hundreds of times and have debated in many conferences.”

“Yes, that's true, Aitor, but I was cheating. I've only participated in debates at conferences in Damania, or with an interpreter.”

“But you've always said you were a polyglot, and I've seen you give lectures in Califian.”

“Yes, but it was the result of extensive training before each talk. I used to memorize them and then rehearse them with Sartalie, the Califian teacher, until they came out perfect. I haven't been able to learn it. I just don't get it. All I do is pretend. You've never noticed it, Aitor, and if you have, you haven't said a thing.”

“But you've been asked things many times, and I've seen you answer.”

“Yes, Aitor, but if you think about it and you'll remember I would always say the same thing: “I appreciate your question, which is very sensible and interesting, but the data we have are preliminary. Thank you very much”. And you can't imagine how much I suffered, because I had no idea what they were saying to me. Some must have thought: “This guy is crazy” and yes, I played a role and saved face as best I could.”

“Now that you mention it, I remember hearing that answer several times and wondering: why doesn't he explain it, the research is done? Since you wouldn't let me go to conferences, I rarely saw you present, so I didn't give it much thought. That's quite a piece of news, Ambrosio! What do we do, Sac? Can you think of something? Since you're Mr. Solutions.”

“You rascal! You do it all for the show! You don't seem to learn the lesson! You know how the saying goes: ‘a lie has no legs’. You have certain skills, and you know how to act. Good memory and a lot of dedication, but the truth will normally come out, sooner or later. Actually, AISS already knew about your shortcomings. We didn't know when the issue was going to come to a head, but we were counting on it. I don't know how many times I've told you AISS knows everything, and you still believe that you're the only one in control, blessed arrogance! I know how to resolve this, but before I tell you, you must swear that you'll do what I say.”

“I will, Sac. And if there was surgery to learn Califian I'd do it without hesitation, mark my words.”

“Good, because that's what we're going to do, Ambrosio. We're going to operate on your noggin.”

“Damn, I was kidding! I said it without thinking. You can't be serious. Open up my melon? What for?”

“It's very simple, Ambrosio. They'll make a little hole through which they'll insert a probe that will inoculate millions of intelligent magneto-electrical nanoparticles, and they will be paired with each and every one of the neurons in your language area. Once they're paired, a magnetic connection network will be established between them that will translate in real time any word you hear, while emitting the answer in the original language. You'll master all the languages that exist, and when I say all, I mean all, no matter how rare they are.”

“I'm out. Call me wimp or whatever you want, but you two won't open up my melon to insert an alien that dominates me.”

“It wouldn't be us, it'd be competent neurosurgeons, Ambrosio.”

“I don't care if they are state-of-the-art extraterrestrial surgeons. No one's messing with my brain.”

“Didn't you agree to this already, Ambrosio?”

“Well yes, but now I'm saying no.”

“Ambrosio, I'm afraid you're going to have to say yes again. You only seem to remember what suits you best. Would you like me to explain, again, how many years you would be rotting in jail if we revealed only a tenth of the illegal things you've done for Multifaceted Solutions to become the company it is right now? We have recordings of all your conversations with your former colleagues from the Government of Damania, as well as all the transfers made to your Lignum account, not to mention the vaccine issue, should I go on?”

“It won't hurt, will it? And I won't go dumb, right? And those nanoparticles aren't going to end up anywhere else, are they?”

“No, Ambrosio, none of that is going to happen. Nanoparticles are driven by magnetic fields. They always connect with the corresponding neurons and your wonderful blonde hair will hide the

microscopic scar. I just need to make a call, then I'll tell you when it's scheduled.”

“What a dirty trick, Aitor. This is not what friends do.”

“It's in your best interests, Ambrosio. You can't deny you would like to be President of Dodona, I know you well. Plus, you have to admit being a polyglot is quite tempting. Although many people think languages are a cultural blessing, I think they create borders and prevent the integration of those who don't speak the dominant language. It's one of the easiest ways to distinguish someone who is falsely believed to be different. Languages are an instrument of division instead of being an element of communication, which is what they were born for. One unifying language would have facilitated the current difficult understanding between people. Millions of unnecessary deaths would have been avoided, and nationalists would not have been able to brandish one of their favorite weapons — that language establishes national identity by being the means whereby a specific culture expresses itself. There have been attempts to establish a single, easy-to-learn language, but with little success. Someone explains to me where the cultural heritage lies in calling a vehicle with four wheels a car, *coche*, or *voiture*, when, no matter what it's named, it's still the same thing. Wouldn't it be much more inclusive if we all called it the same thing, so that when someone said, “get in the car”, everyone did, with no one being left behind, wondering what they're supposed to do? Of course, there would be no need for the multimillion-dollar industry that accompanies languages. I've always thought how difficult it is to agree even in your own language; how difficult it is to find the exact words to express one's opinion about a complex problem. How many meetings have you attended in which a slight change in tone or a particular expression in the context of a sentence means very different things — who can do that in a language other than one's mother tongue? Nobody but those who have listened to it since birth and have grown up with it and those who have been lucky enough to be brought up in multilingual environments. The vast majority of us have learned a second language as adults, and expressing intimate feelings in it, or explaining complicated arguments which are difficult to elaborate in your own

language, is definitely impossible. With one single language, the planet would have more equality, and the most disadvantaged would have more opportunities. Now Califian is the dominant language, and those who don't speak it are excluded, but there are people who never manage to learn it, no matter how hard they try. Like you, Ambrosio, how much money have you invested with no results? Now imagine not even having the resources, where does that leave you? In the trash can, that's where. Even if you move to the richest country in the world, no matter how smart you are, there's no getting out of poverty. I'm sick of seeing fools who speak Califian and seem smart, and brilliant minds who don't speak it, but nobody will pay any attention to them. People from Califia don't suffer, they don't have to learn another language to have a decent life. But what strikes me the most are those bilingual confederations in which they have insisted on neglecting Califian in order to impose the language that nationalists speak, and the funny thing is that they're succeeding. You have to be very hollow to accept it. It's funny that through a political, cultural and media steamroller they impose a language which is only spoken in their tiny territory upon those who communicate in the dominant language spoken by more than two thousand five hundred million. If at least they could only guarantee bilingualism, but it's already been proven that this is not the case. They speak their tribal language and think that if others don't understand it, it's the invaders' problem, those who haven't grasped the divine message that this specific jargon is the backbone of democracy: either you learn it fluently, or you are a barbarian. If they don't implant those nanoparticles — which you're so lucky to get soon — in everyone, I don't know what will become of them. One single language would make us all more human. Which one is not important, but just the fact that there be only one. A global tool to achieve a fairer world. The lack of a global language learned from birth is a conspiracy to maintain inequality, so that we can't express ourselves with the same arguments and on the same plane. You're going to be very privileged, Ambrosio.”

“Okay, it's settled, Ambrosio, your surgery is tomorrow. It's in a private clinic on the outskirts of Magrit. You have to be there at three p.m. on an empty stomach. They're going to perform a tiny drilling

and let the nanoparticles invade your magnificent brain, so that they can find out where to lodge in order to develop their fascinating programmed mission. They'll do it with local anesthesia. You'll stay under observation for a couple of days. Since we don't trust you, two individuals are coming to take care of you until you're multilingual. I warn you, Ambrosio, they have no sense of humor, so don't try any funny stuff or else you'll endanger your physical safety. Right now, when you see the way they look, you'll understand. Have you come by car?"

"Yes Sac, Antonio has the keys."

"Call him and tell him I'll take it. Here are your caretakers. Take a good look at them: you won't do anything weird, now will you?"

"As long as they don't do it to me first. They don't seem very friendly. Where did you find them, Sac?"

"They're from another planet, Ambrosio. They still don't know what species you belong to, that's why they're staring at you. I'll see you tomorrow, then. In the late afternoon we'll go to see you at the hospital and check how many languages you've learned. I know a few, so we can chat for a while."

"Do you also have a nanoparticle social network?"

"No, Ambrosio, my ability has been there from birth."

"Lucky you, Sac."

"You can't imagine how lucky I've always been, and still am. You'll find out, in due time. See you tomorrow."

Tuesday, October 4, 3521

The following afternoon, Sac and Aitor keep their promise to check and see what has happened to the nanoparticles, and as they enter Ambrosio's room they ask:

"Hola, Ambrosio. ¿Qué tal te encuentras? ¿Te duele la cabeza?"

"Estoy bien, no me duele nada. Sano y salvo."³

"Salut Ambrosio. Comment ça va? Tu as mal à la tête?"

"Je vais bien. Rien ne fait mal. Sain et sauf."

"Hallo Ambrosio. Wie geht es dir? Tut dein Kopf weh?"

"Es geht mir gut. Nichts tut weh." Sicher und gesund."

„嗨安布罗休.你好吗? 你的头疼吗?”

“我很好.没什么好痛的.安然无恙

“Привет, Амброзио. Как поживаешь? У тебя болит голова?”

“Я в порядке. Ничего не болит. Невредимый.”

“This has been an absolute success, Ambrosio! You're global! You can debate with anyone in their mother tongue. But since you're a loudmouth, be careful, will you? Speaking like a native doesn't guarantee you're safe from sudden slaps on your face for ignoring local customs and screwing up royally. So, before doing what you usually do in your mother tongue, think twice and keep your mouth shut. You will be discharged in a couple of days. The two caretakers who brought you in and who are watching you will drop you off at your place. As a mere precaution, you will need regular checkups, but rest assured, the only thing you'll notice is that you can speak and understand any language, even extraplanetary ones.”

“You're so funny, Sac. Extraplanetary? Do I speak Klongono and Rosmulano?”

“Not exactly those, but others, yes.”

“Hahaha! I wouldn't hook up with a Klongon lady, but I'm into Rosmulans.”

“One more thing, Ambrosio, have you read Michel de Montaigne?”

“Who?”

“But didn't you pretend to be an intellectual?”

“I don't pretend, I am, Sac. I'm an avid reader and I like visual and performing arts, but I haven't heard of him.”

“Let's play one of those games you always offer Orga, but without a happy ending.”

“And how do you know about my happy endings with Orga?”

“I know everything, Ambrosio, everything. Think and tell me how Chapter XX of Michel de Montaigne's Essays, ‘On the Power of Imagination’ begins.”

“I've no idea. I don't even know who he is.”

“Make an effort, Ambrosio.”

“Hmmm! I think it goes like this, ‘A strong imagination begets the event itself, say the schoolmen. I am one of those who are most sensi-

tive to the power of imagination: everyone is jostled by it, but some are overthrown by it'."

"Exactly Ambrosio, that's how it begins. And now think about the author and see what comes out of your melon."

"Hmmm! Michel Eyquem de Montaigne, February 28, 1533 - September 13, 1592. Renaissance philosopher, writer, humanist, and moralist... and how does this come to mind? I know everything about his life, I know what he did, when he did it and how he did it... but what have you done to me? I just have to think and then I know all sorts of things, it's like I remember everything! I can recite the Criminal Code and the Civil Code by heart. One idea leads me to another one, and then another one, and I know when everything happened and how it happened. Call the doctor right now, get a CT scan, an MRI, a PET scan, whatever. Neurosurgeons may have misplaced something inside my brain and it's creating a short-circuit with Wikipedia."

"Hahaha! I'll confess a little evil trick we played behind your back — but it was for your sake, to be clear. We have added nanoparticles that have been connected to your brain memory area, what we call the encyclopedia chip. Now you know everything about everything, but you only recall it. The nanoparticles of intelligence and imagination are not finished, but they won't take long — although you aren't a suitable candidate to have them tested on you. You're too ambitious, you could become an uncontrollable danger. Right now, you have an elephant's memory, but that's it. You still have the same intelligence and imagination you used to, and the last one is a bit lacking. You don't have much empathy either, but what can we do about that?"

"And why did you keep this from me, Sac? You've lied to me; I won't forget that."

"I'm sure you won't, especially now. We haven't told you because in your arrogance you would've answered that we were the ones who needed nanoparticles, and that you have plenty of memory, intelligence, and imagination. But since we want you to win the election, thanks to the languages and encyclopedic memory we have implanted you will annihilate your contenders live, in person, and, if necessary, in their own mother tongue. Victory is ever closer now. We

have to go. Keep trusting us and everything will go smoothly. You have just become a superior being, Ambrosio.”

“I already was superior, now I am ‘The Etoile Cyborg’.”

“You’ll reach total perfection, Ambrosio. I promise.”

IN THE CAR BACK TO MAGRIT, AITOR REPROACHES SAC FOR HIS verbiage.

“Sac, why do you say those things to Ambrosio? He’s already unbearable, and on top of that you give him wings by telling him that he’s going to reach perfection. He will be just insufferable, with all those languages and encyclopedic knowledge. Just wait for the masterclasses he’s going to deliver to us. He already says things like “I’m going to explain to you how the 3508 crisis went — I know all about it, but you just have no idea”. One hour later, the consensus was that he had no idea what he was talking about, but all you could do was count on promeprazole and sibuprofen to counteract the terrible headache caused by his disjointed explanations. Now he’ll add figures and quotes, and he’ll tell you everything in detail, and instead of one hour it will be many more. If I were you, I would’ve taken the wind out of his sails.”

“All in good time, Aitor, all in good time.”

Friday, October 7th, 3521

“Hello, Orga, how are you? I’m so happy to hear from you! Because you’re going to make me happy, aren’t you?”

“I’m going to accept your offer, Ambrosio. Time will tell if it’s a good idea. I arrive this Sunday afternoon, to look for permanent accommodations, so get cracking so I can see a few on Monday. This means you will order the convertible Bartley tomorrow. It’s easy, you know the color and the upholstery — as for the rest, just say *Full Equip* and you’ll be set. I need an office with a street view and two female assistants. No men, you’re all idiots! Send over a plane to pick me up at Thames airport on Sunday at ten p.m. and make a reservation for a large suite at the Four Treasons Hotel. Don’t come pick me

up. Send me a limo. If I feel like having dinner with you, I'll call you. I'm very busy. Mwah!"

"Wow! Good thing I have BIC. I haven't had the time to write everything down. She has so much energy! And she's so efficient! She's such a great signing for my team! But she has such a nasty temper, she doesn't want to see me. So, on Sunday I'll be all by myself, no doubt."

"You rascal! All you want is hanky-panky and eats — the working out you leave for Orlando!"

"Sac! Here you are again, popping up on my screen as if by magic! You keep startling me all the time. It's love, Sac, not just hanky-panky, and being so extremely competent she will help us win the elections too."

"I hope so, although I see you're too relaxed. All you do is visit the good restaurants in Magrit and drink wine like a sailor. I don't even want to think how your muffin-top is looking currently, and you know chubbies don't win elections. I have a feeling that, as soon as Orga arrives, you'll run for several hours through the Suspiro Park."

"Sustenance is needed to maintain this unrivalled brain in optimal condition, Sac. I notice that the nanoparticles consume more glucose and often must be replenished. Karen is on vacation, I think, and I'm very busy planning the other candidates' defeat, which will be resounding. I only have time for what's strictly necessary."

"And by that you mean preventing the decline of 'the Etoile rolls', ha, ha, ha!"

Sunday, October 9, 3521

"Ambrosio, I just checked in at the hotel. This time you've reached my usual standards. I can grade your handling of the situation with a B+. I've ordered dinner and I'm staying here to get some rest. Send me the schedule now."

"Don't you want to see me, sweetie? I was going to talk you through my plans to search for our love nest, and then you could teach me one of those daring games that only you know."

“No, Ambrosio, not tonight. When you fulfill your promises. See you.”

Wow! LOVE IS SUCH AN UNHEALTHY THING; YOU KEEP SUFFERING, Ambrosio! When she was away it was less torturous. Now she's so close yet so far out of reach!

Monday, October 10, 3521.

“Ambrosio, I already found a home. It's penthouse in Ildefonso XII with views the Suspiro Park. There's nothing more spacious that I liked, so I had to settle for a few thousand square meters. It may not be enough when my child comes over, but I love the building. By the way, you've been lucky, it belongs to a Helvetian couple, and they'll leave it furnished, so that saves you some dodones. You'll have to invest in a driver and a car. I've seen the way they drive in Magrit, and I refuse to mix with such a crowd. I'll leave the Bartley for trips. That's the way it is, find somebody who'll give me rides. You don't have to buy the car, you can rent the service from an agency, but don't be cheap, Ambrosio. I want a big and very expensive car where I can stretch my endless dazzling legs in the back seat.”

“Hello! Orga?”

“Don't interrupt me, Ambrosio, or I'll lose track. Tomorrow we have an appointment at the Notary at six p.m., so move your ass to the bank to make sure the funds are available. I'm giving you plenty of time. They were asking for ten million dodones, but I got a fifteen percent discount, a great bargain! See you at the Notary. Tonight, I'm having dinner with Kepa Jitastago, a childhood friend who has moved to Magrit for a few years. See you tomorrow, Ambrosio.”

“Orga! Orga! Orga!”

SHE'S HUNG UP ON ME, AND I HAVEN'T EVEN HAD THE CHANCE TO OPEN my mouth! And on top of that she's going to have dinner with a childhood friend. I'm sure he's her lover. Everybody wants to live at my

expense. And where do I get so much money, in less than twenty-four hours? What if I send her back home? That's what I should do right now, without hesitation. Love is fine, but this is nonsense. But... Oh! It's been so hard to convince her to come over, and I like her so much, I can't live without her! I melt just imagining her next little game. I'll call Sac, he's Mr. Solutions!

"Hi, Ambrosio, that took longer than usual. Feeling anguished with Orga's plans? We warned you, but you never learn your lesson. We keep telling you "you never learn", but you won't change. Is the title of the summer of 3522 song by any chance: Where am I going to get the money to pay for Orga's little apartment?"

"So, you know that too? You're not the childhood friend who's going to have dinner with Orga tonight, are you?"

"No, Ambrosio. As she said, that's Kepa Jitastago, and I don't know him. With that name, I'm sure he's a former lover, a friend with benefits. But if you get jealous the situation will get worse, and then you can say goodbye to those little games that make you so crazy. If you want to continue playing, and make this exclusive, you'll have to spend tons of money. It's the only thing Orga understands. What were you calling me for?"

"I'm desperate, I'm dying of jealousy. I want her tied to me, to never leave my bed, but I don't have enough money to finance her whims. Last weekend in Thames cost me three hundred thousand dodones. She landed here yesterday, and the bill has already risen to ten million. We have an appointment at the Notary tomorrow. You're the only one I can ask for help, what do I do?"

"So, my suspicions were right. Dark futures ahead, Ambrosio, very dark. We can lend you some money, although having you even more enslaved is of little use to us. It would almost be a favor for the good old days, those that have never really existed. I think we could come to a simple agreement. If we lend it to you with the sole objective of satisfying Orga's whims, you'll sign another document and just open your mouth to say yes to our proposals, even if they mean conviction, exile, prison, garrote, guillotine, electric chair, or a good swift kick in the ass. We'll offer you an interest rate that's not too burdensome, but it won't come for free."

“Where do I have to sign? Where?”

“How much do you need, Ambrosio?”

“Well, at the rate I'm going, about thirty million dodones.”

“Are you sure about this? You'll have to achieve immortality to return it.”

“I'm sure, Sac. If I don't have a good amount she'll leave me, so I'll take the risk. Nothing ever happens anyway.”

“You'll rue the day it finally does! Okay, you can go to the Notary tomorrow without a care in the world, you're all set. But remember, from now on whatever we say is an order for you, and without questioning on your part.”

“Thank you, Sac. My heart's beating out of my chest, thinking about the little games that Orga S. Món is going to design for ‘Sexy Etoile’.”

Tuesday, October 11, 3521

“Orga, you have finally decided to visit where you'll be staying for the next few months, your new home. Come, I'll introduce you to my closest collaborator, Orlando Sumiso.”

“Nice to meet you, Miss Món. You're so elegant and stylish! The true embodiment of beauty and distinction. I already admired you before we met. Ambrosio told me all about you, long windedly, but in person you're something else, Miss Món. Come with me, I'll show you, your office. I've given myself the freedom to make it more welcoming, with strategically placed bouquets of flowers. I've also browsed the Internet and learned who you normally meet with — I hope I got the decorations right. Also, I've included some little treats that may make your life more bearable, being stuck with two musty subjects like us.”

“Well, you nailed it, Orlando. A minimalist office is very much to my liking. Also, the chocolates, the different teas and coffees. Let's be informal, is that all right? Taking Ambrosio to the presidency is a daunting task that requires us to avoid formalities as soon as possible. Ambrosio, you're having lunch on your own today. Orlando has to fill me in, we'll order something light, at the Tulbiza patisserie, the one

next door. A couple of bottles of Cristal, a few cans of caviar, and a king crab salad — my spies have told me it's delicious. Come on, be a darling and order it for us, we have little time. As you know, I always eat half a kilo of caviar, never less, and since there are two of us, we'll need one kilo, and make sure it's the good kind. Don't do your cheap thing. You can eat a veggie sandwich — without mayonnaise, you have to be on a diet to win the elections — and with sparkling water, at best, although tap water would be better. Come on, come on, get going, we have work to do.”

“But Orga, shouldn't I know what you're going to talk about? After all, it's me who's running for president.”

“Of course not, I've been informed that the nanoparticles they inserted in your gourd have intensified the nature and content of your internal battles, managing to spur on suicidal tendencies, and we here appreciate our lives, don't we, Orlando? We're not here to hear stuff like: 'look, now that you mention it, and since you surely don't know, but I do, I'm going to tell you what happened in the elections of said year and this other year, and I'm saying this, so you have comparative data. And I warn you, so that you take it into account, that what the elected candidate said was this, but the most important thing, which I can't just not tell you, is how the candidate who lost screwed up...' And, of course, you would tell us in several languages at the same time, just to show off. You're unbearable! If you don't feel like ruminating in your office, go to Cardinal Ricolieu to do your thing, I'm sure they'll love listening to you there. Now order our food and let us work!”

AMBROSIO, WHAT HAVE YOU DONE, WHAT HAVE YOU DONE? SHE'S ONLY been in Magrit for a couple of days, you've given her everything she's asked for, and all you get is grief. Where did she get that idea from, that I enjoy lecturing people? Maybe a little, perhaps, it comes with the authority I've earned by myself, but it's not that bad. Is this how they thank me for guiding them along paths of enlightenment and refining them for free? I'll order their food, then I'm going over to Cardinal Ricolieu to share my sorrows with Antonio. And as for Orga,

I won't even ask, I'll go straight home, all alone and assuming she's interested in many men other than me. Luckily there's a Champions League game tonight and my idol, Esmeraldo Megusto, is playing, and Real Magrit is going to destroy their opponent. With that and some vodkas and tonic, I'll spend the evening alone and neglected.

Thursday, September 8, 3521

First thing in the morning, a piece of information reaches the Dream Party... Throughout the day the media repeat the information with concern... The note reads as follows:

The Damanian Ministry of Health reports the appearance of numerous cases of diabetes in patients who have previously suffered from a Spicavirus infection. In addition to diabetes, patients develop other complications that, in some cases, are serious and disabling. In order to diagnose this pathology early, Damanian hospitals will gradually summon all patients who have previously had the Spicavirus so as to run the appropriate tests.

Friday, October 21, 3521

“BIC, please summon Ambrosio and Orlando immediately. I want them here before the message goes out.”

“At your service, Orga.”

“Knock, knock! May we come in?”

“Come in, Orlando. Are you alone? Where is Ambrosio?”

“I don't know, Orga. He usually has chocolate with churros for breakfast at the Tulbiza pastry shop at this time.”

“No wonder he has such a huge muffin-top. BIC, tell Ambrosio that if he dips one more churro in that chocolate, he can forget about...”

“Knock, knock! I'm here, I'm here! But what's wrong? What's so urgent! I left half the churros there, and they were delicious today.”

“Sit down, Ambrosio, every day you seem more confused. I'm afraid those magnetized nanoparticles they've implanted in you have

undone the little order you had in there. You know all the dates and, in any language, but not much else. Let's see, did you get any message yesterday from the Ministry of Health?"

"Yesterday? From the Ministry of Health? Orlando, what did I get yesterday from the ministry? You're not withholding information from me, are you?"

"No, Ambrosio, your address appears on the email the ministry sent us."

"Well, I can't remember. It was probably not too important, and I sent it straight to the trash can."

"Ambrosiooooo! Read here, what does it say?"

"Let's see, hmmm! Interesting, I'm afraid another mess is popping up, poor people! I wouldn't want to be in their shoes. If everyone who's had the Spicavirus develops diabetes, the mess is going to be epic. No economy could bear that."

"Ambrosio, you're just as sharp as Dr. Lynx. Instead of sending you away on a hot air balloon, I'm going to place you in a bathyscaph, where there is less oxygen, maybe that will wake you up. What do you do for a living, Ambrosio?"

"You know that, I'm a doctor."

"And what do doctors do?"

"Try to keep people alive, even though they make it difficult for us. There's no way to save even one forever, ha, ha, ha!"

"You've just earned another month on the bench — the only curves you're going to see in the next few nights are the ones the taxi will take when it takes you back home. I won't ask anything else. I'll talk you through it step by step. Ambrosio, sit here and repeat after me. Let's see if you are able to understand."

"Can we squeeze a bit? I do miss it."

"Okay then, Ambrosio, squeeze against me, maybe that'll help you understand."

"Oh, I'm blushing," — says Orlando, "you're so tight together."

"Orlando, not another word, today I smell good and you're not close to me," Ambrosio affirms.

"Okay, you two! Ambrosio is famous for having solved the Spicavirus epidemic in record time, and now this problem appears,

out of the blue, a couple of months before the election to the presidency of Dodona. The entire election campaign must be focused on solving it. The other candidates don't know the first thing about medicine, and the Spicavirus epidemic is still very much on the minds of the electorate, so there's a much greater chance that voters will place their trust in someone who has shown they can solve a health crisis of this magnitude.”

“You have such clairvoyance, such insight, such perceptiveness, such sagacity,” — Orlando assures, while Ambrosio mimes incomprehensible messages.

“I think you're right, Ambrosio, lucky for you I'm here, otherwise you'd end up playing in the regional minor leagues. Get cracking! In the first place, we must organize a meeting with Cándido, Margarita, and Carolina, so that they can fill us in on the situation here and in the rest of the world; and secondly, we must talk to Multifaceted Solutions to see if they can help us.”

“I'll call Cándido right away,” Orlando answers.

“And I'll call Sac,” — Ambrosio says, and they both leave in a hurry.

“What an earful Orga just gave us, Orlando. I should fire you immediately for not letting me know about the ministry statement.”

“But Ambrosio, I did leave a printed copy on your desk with the day's issues. I guess you were daydreaming about the miniskirt Orga was wearing and you didn't even read it.”

“Orlando, be careful. That's so disrespectful. I remind you that I'm the one in charge, the head honcho in this entire operation, the one who's going to take you to the top and welcome you into the circle of the chosen ones, where decisions are made that make the rest of people in the planet revolve around us. Come on, get to work, I'm going to call Sac now. BIC, tell Sac to materialize.”

“Right away, Ambrosio.”

“Hello, Sac! Looking good! More and more elegant.”

“Well, I can't say the same about you. I heard you've become fond of churros with chocolate, and it shows. We need a plan B. You're not winning an election like that. I need to talk to Orga.”

“Yes, please speak with her and talk me up. She doesn't pay any

attention to me at all. She has a penthouse, a butler, a cook, three maids, a driver, several cars. She hasn't shown me her house, nor have I been able to share a table with her, so I don't even dare to mention the possibility of exploring her infinite legs and pronounced curves, and this abstinence is consuming me, Sac. I'm desperate. You have to help me."

"Is that what you're calling me for? You were warned, so your stubbornness is incompatible with whining. I fulfilled my end of the bargain, Orga's in Magrit and she's the party secretary. I'm a professional! But intimate matters I leave to you, Ambrosio."

"Actually, no, but since the subject came up and I'm maddened with love, I've cast the nets to see if I could catch something. I was calling about the Ministry of Health statement, in relation to cases of diabetes in people who have had the Spicavirus. Do you know anything about this?"

"I've heard something, but I don't have any reliable information."

"We're setting up a meeting with the ministry and it would be nice if you could attend, Sac."

"Tell me the day and time, and I'll be there. Aitor will come with me."

"Perfect. I'll keep you updated, Sac. Thank you and see you soon."

"See you, Ambrosio."

"Orlando! Orlando!"

"Yes, Ambrosio? What do you need?"

"Invite Sac and Aitor to the meeting too."

"Okay. Cándido said they prefer the meeting to happen here, he said if they see you at the ministry, you may eclipse their authority. You cast a long shadow, Ambrosio. Next Monday at four p.m."

"Great."

CHAPTER 10

BACK TO SQUARE ONE

Monday, October 24, 3521.

“GOOD AFTERNOON, EVERYONE. I THINK YOU ALREADY KNOW ONE another, but we can do a round of introductions just in case,” — Ambrosio suggests.

Once Cándido Albino, Margarita Bombón, Carolina Aile, Orlando Sumiso, Sac Cerev, Aitor Menta, Orga S. Món and Ambrosio Etoile have greeted each other, the meeting begins.

Cándido summarizes the situation:

“We’re very concerned. There are more and more patients who have had the Spicavirus and are now diabetic. In many of them, the onset has been a ketoacidotic coma, but the story doesn’t end there. People are very alarmed because, in some States, there are outbreaks of an infection of a fungus that feeds on tissues. It’s called ‘mucormycosis’, popularly called ‘black fungus’, although it’s not black at all — the fungus is white, but the injuries it causes look black, due to the tissue necrosis it generates. It’s a typical infection in untreated diabetic patients, and its symptoms are most alarming since the fungus spores enter through the respiratory tract and cause damage in the mouth, paranasal sinuses, and even the eyes. It grows so rapidly that within twenty-four hours the patient has holes instead of

a face. In most states they have run out of antifungal agents to treat them, due to the exponential number of cases. We already had problems with the damn fungi when the pandemic was in full swing. They've always been overlooked, but they're highly lethal, and are very difficult to diagnose and treat. We're receiving help from GAFFI, the only NGO dedicated to fungal diseases in the world, and if it weren't for them the problem would be even more serious, if that's possible. We need to find a way for them to receive million-dollar donations, so they can get involved in solving this problem. Fungi are in the category of neglected diseases, and we need to raise awareness among the public."

"Did you say GAFFI? We have several projects with them," — says Sac. "One of the members of the board of directors is very interested in artificial intelligence, and their CEO contacted us to help them close the gap with the middle- and low-income states. We're going to reap great benefits, you'll see."

"That's excellent news," — says Cándido, "but I'll continue with my presentation. We already know it's an autoimmune disease. Your own defense system attacks your pancreas, kidney, liver, heart, and peripheral vascular circulation. In addition to diabetes, some of the first affected patients are already experiencing chronic kidney failure; they're on hemodialysis, waiting for a kidney transplant. Others are rapidly losing their vision. It's an accelerated diabetes that causes a very early onset of complications. Hemodialysis centers are overcrowded. We're getting more equipment, but at this rate more centers will have to be set up, and that can't be solved overnight. The waiting list for kidney transplants is endless. Taking care of so many chronically ill and dependent patients will cause serious economic problems. Either we fix this, or a planetary debacle awaits us. In short, this paints a bleak picture for us all."

"We can help," — Sac says, "but this time you must commit to funding a large-scale artificial intelligence program. I would actually include it in your election platform."

"What do you mean, Sac?" — Ambrosio asks.

"What I'm going to say only applies to Ambrosio, who's been a Mandarin in the past and would like to be once again, and to

Cándido, who still is one. It's fair to exonerate Margarita and Carolina, who labor far beyond their actual duties. If you two and your mandarin colleagues behaved like them, what you're about to hear wouldn't describe the obstinate reality that bares all, stripping you naked, without offering a path of pleasure but rather one of shame. With the Spicavirus adventure, our investment in R+D+I was neither valued nor rewarded. It seemed as if everything we developed to solve the epidemic had fallen from the sky — inspired science with results obtained after shaking an oak tree and verifying that what falls are, in fact, acorns and not nuts or hazelnuts. You think that Science is like a pastime around a table with wise advisers who, after a night of endless revelry seasoned with unspeakable fancies, invent chaos as a novel approach to confuse the opposition. Or they turn politics into the art of the invisible, with the 'transparent' intention that voters only see the powerful figure of the leader, without the possibility of analyzing and judging their actions. I think a certain Servan Cuadrado likes inventing those little games with the hundreds of associates they've assigned to him at the expense of the treasury. And that, without embarrassment, his 'brilliant' disquisitions obtained after an analytical study — which provides as much evidence as choosing one of the options by rolling a die — are elevated to the category of 'new Science'. Meanwhile, the real science languishes in abandoned institutions, full of unmotivated civil servants who subsist on the crumbs of the innumerable and oppressive taxes that you extract from the citizenry. Then, when difficult times come, you import all you need and put some neglected hero on TV who has spent decades trying to do something with one tenth of the budget that their competitors spend in one year. On top of that, you demand that they produce immediate results, expecting to be the ones who take the credit. What amazes me is that they don't react and throw test tubes and flasks at your head. It's a mystery how there are still people who voluntarily engage in what you Mandarins despise so openly. It's clear that they're made of sterner stuff. I remind you that the AISS headquarters are in Califia, and that we've achieved these advancements because they pay us a little more attention than you do and make it a lot easier for us. You must not forget that the

only reason you benefited from our discoveries was because the epidemic started in Damania, not because you were the global champions of Science. And as soon as you verified that we had the correct tools to control the problem, the well-known and long-awaited political ploy appeared: ‘Make promises until you win and, once you do, forget about what you promised’. We have spent many years making non-returnable investments, but you chalked it up as a win in your favor without even blushing. It seemed that your superb expertise had ended the epidemic when, in reality, it was a remotely controlled victory. If your original strategy had been followed, Damania would still be caged up as we speak. We didn't expect gratitude, because that's not customary in your lineage, but after what happened and your subsequent offerings, a little more investment in Science and Health was expected. However, once victory was anticipated, the fulfillment of the promise was transmuted into a miracle, and the prodigious work was left unfinished. But now, if you want something from us, you'll have to invest and maintain our R + D + I program. You don't quite understand that research competition is global. You think that by giving more funds to Barcinone than Magrit everything's settled, but that doesn't solve anything, because the budget of Cinania and Califia is ten times higher. They advance while you remain stuck at square one, as usual. It's as simple as that. We have no problem with the artificial intelligence program being competitive: whoever submits the best proposal gets it. But you have to invest a lot of money, not the usual crumbs. In order to momentarily resolve the situation, we developed smart insulin pumps that work almost like a pancreas. They're expensive, but since they do an excellent job at controlling glucose levels, they delay the onset of diabetes side effects. It's yet another success developed by the AISS problem-solving factory.”

“Why the urgency for an artificial intelligence program, Sac? There have been some innovations, but there's still a long way to go until we can really call it intelligence — a very long way, in my opinion,” — says Ambrosio.

“That's precisely the reason why. Just look at the number of patients who are developing autoimmune diabetes. According to the

data presented by Cándido, the vast majority of the first patients who contracted Spicavirus have already developed it. It's been a year and a half since the beginning of the epidemic, and there are already problems with hemodialyzing the affected patients and, of course, there's no possibility of transplanting kidneys in all of them. The help that AISS can provide, through Multifaceted Solutions, is limited and doesn't solve the problem of autoimmunity. If we have as many patients as we're estimating right now, it will generate a permanent expense that will be difficult to absorb. Forget about private companies bearing part of the cost. Everything will end up in the public sector, and if you stop serving a part of the population, a conflict is assured. Even if all the researchers in the world were to solve the problem, it would take years, without any guarantee of success. In order to solve it in a reasonable time, we need a Superintelligence — a cell regeneration program that can reverse the effects of the autoimmune disease — and then we need to find a lasting solution to dependency on the state. At the same time, a robotics program would help keep the planet going. At this rate, there will be no workforce—only dependents confined by their illness. In short, it seems to me that the robotics and artificial intelligence program is a top-priority issue. Also, I think it would be a good way to get more votes for Ambrosio.”

“And how are we going to develop that superior intelligence in such short time?”

“There are proposals. Right now, a full brain emulation is the preferred option,” — says Sac.

“Come again?”

“It's about learning how the human brain works, then emulating it. There are several initiatives. One of them is getting *post mortem* brains from donors and vitrifying them. The next step would be to slice the brain so that it can be scanned by a network of electron microscopes, capable of analyzing its different structures and their chemical properties. Once the raw data are obtained, they would be transferred to a computer that would reconstruct the neural network in three dimensions. With this, it would be possible to develop a neurocomputational model which — once paired with a supercom-

puter — would achieve the first digital reproduction of an intellect with intact personality and memory. A human being's brain software. However, our company has another, more practical, approach that would get faster results, but it's under a secret gag order so I can't disclose any details. Suffice it to say, we've never failed you, so you shouldn't trust those 'brain vitrifiers'."

"I agree with Sac," — says Orga. "This must be the cornerstone of your election program. His past work supports it, and artificial intelligence is extremely attractive for voters. However, given my previous occupation, I know for a fact that there are similar initiatives in Califia and Cinania, so if we want to be competitive, we should properly finance the program. The Plurinational State that creates an algorithm which can learn without being specifically trained for each process would become the master of the world, and obviously everyone is after that."

"I don't understand" — Ambrosio says. "What does that mean, the algorithm learns without being trained, Orga?"

"An algorithm learns the way a person does. Do you remember the first time you sat on a chair? I'm sure you don't, but your brain began to make associations, and you didn't need to be shown thousands of different seats. You instantly learned what they were for, and to recognize others with a different shape but with the same function. At the same time, you intuited the multitude of things that can be done while sitting down. How does the brain do that? It's a mystery. Now, how could an algorithm do it? That's even more mysterious. Once you saw the first chair and sat down, your brain connected ideas and the rest was a piece of cake. An algorithm must be taught all the types of chairs, armchairs, stools, etc. that exist, so that it learns how to recognize them. Then, it must learn that they're to sit on and then who sits on them. If a chair appears that doesn't correspond to what it's previously seen, there's a good chance it won't know what it was. There are remarkable examples of errors in automatic facial recognition systems. Why is that? Almost certainly because the algorithm is trained with only a few faces of certain ethnic groups. When it sees one that's misrepresented in the database, it places it where it can. A human would say: "Hello, I think

we've seen each other before, but I can't quite remember right now, who are you?" And then "I'm Pepita. You know, Turrutia?" "Oh, that's right! So silly of me! Pepita Turrutia, how could I forget?" Case solved. Instead, the algorithm classifies you and can say, for example, that you're an orangutan. There's the limitation, we need to attain the general artificial intelligence of a human brain. Of course, with a good database the algorithm doesn't spend half an hour thinking, where have I seen that face? Recognition is instantaneous and never forgets. If it were about identifying a barcode or QR the algorithm is unrivaled, it will always do better than a human. A human is unable to recognize it with the naked eye, while an algorithm does it in seconds."

"It would be much easier if the magnetic nanoparticles you inserted in my privileged brain had more applications. Everything would be very human, although not everyone would deserve it — they would have to be carefully selected."

"It's an option, Ambrosio, but you've said it yourself. They would have to be selected! We already know who would be designated, with such poor democratic values lacking equal opportunity. Surely some of the chosen ones would want to dominate the world — there are quite a few who have already tried — but being much smarter than the rest would bring much more severe consequences than the ones we've already seen. The reign of terror this would cause would make the fascists' and communists' inventions —their concentration and extermination camps — look like child's play. Besides, there are biological limitations for speedy data processing and storage. You would need a brain ten times larger than the one you have now — and that's saying something —with forced ventilation to dissipate the heat that a larger brain would give off while running at a higher speed. A brain has limited speed and storage space. Superintelligence is more likely to develop in an artificial environment than in a biological one. The challenge is to make the algorithm capable of learning like a human brain while working at the speed of a computer and with unlimited storage capacity. The peak speed of a neuron is around 200Hz; the speed of a current microprocessor? About 2GHz. The rapidity of interaction between neurons is one hundred and

twenty meters per second or less, while computers communicate, in theory, at the speed of light. In any case, much faster. At normal brain speed, information storage and retrieval are compromised. Increasing the size would lead to greater latency in responses. Even with very large brains, the storage capacity of a computer could never be reached, and neither could the speed at which stored data is retrieved. Imagine that we put a hundred computers on a network with their general artificial intelligence algorithm, and each one learns a single century of our history. As soon as they finish, they exchange the information and in a matter of seconds all computers know the history of a hundred centuries with perfect detail. We repeat the process with other subjects, and let them learn astronomy, biology, philosophy, physics, languages, mathematics, medicine, politics, psychology, chemistry, sociology, etc., and make them exchange information again. If our brains were able to assimilate and store all this information, how long would it take for a hundred humans to learn it and exchange it? Brains don't transmit information like computers do. They need a slow learning process dependent on the intelligence of each person. By being able to emulate human intelligence on a computer, solving the problem of dependent patients would be a breeze. They wouldn't get tired, they wouldn't sleep, they wouldn't have vacations, they wouldn't need lunch breaks. It has its own risks, but that's another debate¹.”

“That's so interesting, Orga. How do you know all that? I expected it from Sac, but not from you.”

“Ambrosio, haven't you realized yet that I'm full of surprises?”

“Oh, yes, and what surprises! And what risks does it really entail? We can always just unplug them if they misbehave, ha, ha, ha!”

“It may not be as easy as unplugging them, Ambrosio.”

“What do you mean? Watch me unplug my laptop. Done.”

“But it still runs on battery power, and if it were superintelligent, it wouldn't even care. It would keep millions of copies on different remote servers, which would prevent anyone from diverting it from fulfilling the mission it was programmed to complete.”

“Turn it off, that's what I meant.”

“Think about it, and don't take too long — we have to know what

you want to do,” — says Sac. I’m sorry but you’ll have to excuse me for a few minutes, I have a conference call with headquarters. I’ll use your office, Ambrosio.”

“Yes, feel free. Well, I think we can end this meeting. Do tell us what the Government thinks. We’ll see if we include it in the election platform as the ‘Etoile proposal’.”

ANGRY SMOKE IS POURING OUT OF THE OFFICIAL CAR OF MINISTER Albino.

“I knew it,” — says Carolina. “Ambrosio is just a puppet. Everything is handled by that Sac, and no one knows where he came from. I’ve tried to make some inquiries, but no one knows his origin — no one has gone to university with him or worked with him at a company or research center. He’s a complete mystery. Cándido, you have to use your contacts at the National Intelligence Center to try to find out who that man is.”

“Sac, always Sac. I tried, but it was no use. Untraceable, inaccessible, unalterable, unavailable, unattainable. He’s not human, I’m positive that he’s not.”

“The only thing you tried was to get him to pull your panties down, Margarita.”

“Yes, yes, that was the main goal, but once my panties were down, who knows what could’ve happened? This time Newton didn’t help me. Gravity is so sexist!”

“I didn’t realize you had such sly moves,” — says Cándido.

“What can I say, Cándido. You live up to your name. What do you think of that stunning blonde Ambrosio has appointed as party secretary? She’s smart and she’s trained — she nailed all her explanations,” — says Margarita.

“They’re clearly managed by those two. Everything is extremely weird, but I have no objection. So far, AISS and Multifaceted Solutions have fulfilled their commitments. All we know about them is that they’re extremely advanced. I had never heard of this kind of technology — a brain dumped into a computer, self-learning algorithms, brain implants. By the way, Ambrosio mentioned he had

some, and after he said that, I realized that now he acts differently. In the past if he didn't know something he you would just make it up. If no one said anything, that was the end of the discussion. If there was disagreement, he would react violently, and most of the times his interlocutor would give up. I've witnessed very tense situations of this kind, but if his opponent was an expert on the subject, Ambrosio would flee with his tail between his legs, arguing futile explanations that wouldn't convince anyone."

"It's true, Carolina! What an acute observation! I've witnessed many of those arguments and you're absolutely right. That's how it was; when his points were knowingly refuted, he would just get aggressive. I can't say those are good memories," — says Cándido.

"It's water under the bridge, let's let it go. What matters are Ambrosio's brain implants, which make science fiction a reality. Did you know anything about this?" — Carolina asks.

"Not at all," — says Margarita.

"Me neither," — says Cándido. "As soon as we get to the ministry, I'll call my contact at the National Intelligence Center to see what he can do."

AND IN THE HEADQUARTERS OF THE DREAM PARTY, THE GAME continues.

"You're back, Sac. That was quick."

"Yes, it was an important matter, but when ideas are clear, resolution happens in a flash. Ambrosio, today you've learned a little bit about artificial intelligence. If you want to solve the dependent patients' issue, I would bet on Superintelligence. But in order to make it work you have to win the elections first, and that won't be an easy task."

"I also insist that if you integrate health care for the Spicavirus complications as the basis of your election platform, you have a chance to win," — says Orga. "Insurance companies can't cover the cost of the therapy that Sac is offering you. They'd have to raise their fees to infinity. Only the rich could afford to have insurance, and that would create unmanageable turmoil. It has to be a public program,

free of charges. I suggest that you propose a single fund for the R + D + I program that is able to develop this Superintelligence to solve the dependent problem.”

“I agree,” — says Orlando. “You show so much vision for the future, strategy, generosity, always thinking of others! I’m overwhelmed with joy! I’m so happy that the great Ambrosio Etoile has given me the opportunity to participate in this feat that will change the destiny of Humanity!”

“We have less than six weeks until the elections, so let’s rewrite the election platform and prepare a brainstorming session to solve the Spicavirus aftereffects. As president of the Dream Party, I assume responsibility for the decision I’ve just made, with the necessary strength to face the risk posed by the scale of this task. But as you know, when Ambrosio Etoile says he’ll solve a problem, his brain won’t rest until he finds the right way out. Our next target: Superintelligence. Let’s get to work! We need decisions and motivation! I think we deserve a treat at the Torcher — it’s close by and we can just walk there.”

“But wasn’t the Loggerhead Turtle your favorite restaurant?” — Sac asks.

“Not anymore — now glamor drives me. I feel more comfortable when I’m around those of my financial level.”

“I can’t go,” — says Orga, “I have a previous engagement. I’m throwing party at home for several friends who are in town tonight. It’s been long time since I last saw them, and I have unfinished business with them. We love playing strip poker!”

A SHORT WALK AND...

“Good evening, Mr. Etoile, your usual table is set, as is customary. So, it will only be four of you, is that right?”

“Yes, Blas, only four, Miss Món couldn’t make it tonight.”

“Well, I’m sorry to hear that, because she’s a regular customer and is always accompanied by different gentlemen, all of them so elegant and handsome. I would’ve been very happy to see her with you

tonight. Would you gentlemen like an aperitif? The cocktail of the day is Callentini, although I find it a bit sweet before dinner.”

“Just what I needed, a Callentini and without Orga” — thinks Ambrosio. “We’ll go straight to the wine, Blas. Bring us the one we usually drink, Vega Palermo, but pick a good vintage.”

“Right away, Mr. Etoile.”

“I’m so depressed. She won’t pay any attention to me. She sees different men each day, and the whole town knows it. I’m still in love, but so powerless...”

“Calm down, Ambrosio, I know for a fact that what she’s doing is testing the strength of your love. She’s very suspicious and wants to be sure about the relationship you two have started. She’s had bad experiences in the past and wants to find her Prince Valiant.”

TWO HOURS HAVE PASSED. AMBROSIO HAS UNLEASHED HIS VORACIOUS appetite and has devoured his food and his companions. He’s finishing his *Suzzete* crêpes and mixing them with generous chunks of *Baumkuchen* when he suddenly says, “I’m getting dizzy” and collapses on the table. “Ambrosio! Ambrosio!” A few pats on his face, but he won’t respond. “He won’t wake up! This doesn’t look good. We need an ambulance!”

A SHORT TIME LATER, AN AMBULANCE AND A PARAMEDICS TEAM ARRIVE at the Torcher’s door. Ambrosio is driven at full speed to the Emergency Room of the Miracles Hospital. One hour later their names are called over the public address system, and a doctor arrives to lead them to Ambrosio’s room while he reports that the patient has had a spike in glucose, which explains his loss of consciousness, and although they’re running more tests, it seems he has the usual symptoms after having gone through a Spicavirus infection: “Although Ambrosio hasn’t mentioned having had any symptoms compatible with the infection, he’s admitted to not having run the diagnostic tests nor worn the bracelet, and so on. While shouting ‘Ambrosio Etoile is multi-resistant’, he said that if I were to tell the press he

hadn't worn his damn bracelet, he'll transfer me to a desert island for the rest of my life. He doesn't seem to remember what medical confidentiality means!"

"Hey, Ambrosio, you really scared us there."

"I can't remember anything. Suddenly, the Torcher started spinning around and I woke up in an emergency room. I'm sure it's the Spicavirus. Just what I needed: diabetes, kidney failure, and Orga playing *strip poker*."

"Don't be melodramatic. If it's confirmed that you have post Spicavirus autoimmune syndrome, there are solutions. Some I've already told you about this afternoon."

"Will I be your lab rat again, Sac?"

"You would set a great example to all your fellow citizens, as well as facilitate the approval of the Superintelligence program to end the dependent situation."

"Okay, but first call Orga — maybe this will soften her heart and she'll come over to pamper me a little, I really need that."

"I'll leave you with Orlando and Aitor while I call Orga."

"HI, ORGA, THIS IS SAC."

"I know who you are, what do you want at this hour? I was going to bed."

"I thought you'd be playing *strip poker*!"

"Do I look like I'm into that?"

"What can I say? You said it with such conviction! Ambrosio is completely sure that you're sleeping around."

"You know I'm not, Sac, but I just can't stand him. Now it's his turn to suffer a little. If I stay on it's only because of my commitment to the plan."

"Blas, the Torcher's head waiter, told us you frequently go there with elegant and good-looking male companions. Ambrosio had such an anxiety attack that he asked for the entire menu and, since everything is so delicious there, he gobbled it up and ended up in hospital. You should've seen him eat!"

"What? I'm not buying this, I'm sure Ambrosio has devised this

ploy to make me feel sorry for him and pay more attention to him. Nice try, Sac.”

“I’m serious, Orga. It seems he had the Spicavirus without any symptoms. He never used the SpicaKit, and now he’s another victim. He’s staying in hospital for a few days until our suspicions are confirmed.”

“Poor Ambrosio, although this is like manna from heaven for our plans. A patient who devises a plan to heal dependents and fix their lives is a winning horse in an election. Free reign for Superintelligence, Sac.”

“So, it seems, Orga. As soon as Ambrosio wins the election, I don’t think there will be any impediment to proceeding with the final phase of our plan. Why don’t you come over here for a visit? That’ll make him happy, and everything will be even easier.”

“Okay, I’ll stop by. Which hospital is it?”

“Miracles, room 69.”

ABOUT A HALF HOUR LATER.

“Hi Ambrosio, you’re still the same old perv,” — says Orga. “I’m sure you specifically asked for room 69. You’ll never change.”

“What? I had no idea my room has that evocative number.”

“How are you feeling? You’re not going to retire, now that you’ve practically won the elections, are you?”

“Well, that depends, Orga. If you take care of me as I deserve, I’ll make you President-consort. Once they confirm our suspicions, I’ll have to lead a more orderly life, and it would really help to have a woman like you by my side.”

“I’ll get you a taser in the shape of a housekeeper, then. With that kind of assistance, you’ll be in paradise, and you won’t miss me again.”

Friday, October 29, 3521

“Good morning, Margarita and Carolina. I've summoned you to let you know what the National Intelligence Center has discovered. My report is brief — they found nothing.”

“Are they bulletproof or what, Cándido?”— Carolina asks. “I know the original chips for diagnosing the Spicavirus were manufactured by AISS, and not Multifaceted Solutions. I kept some, and the AISS name is printed on all of them.”

“So? That doesn't prove anything at all. My contact has told me that all the information they have gathered is accessible by just about anyone. It's all on the Internet and social media, but if you try to dig a little deeper, there's nothing there. There are no records of anything relevant anywhere. Neither Orga nor Sac exist. My contacts have reached out to their counterparts in other countries, and they don't know anything either. They ended up trying to hack AISS and you won't believe what they told me.”

“What? They both say in unison.”

“That the National Intelligence Center was the one being hacked. AISS went in really deep, and do you know the worst part? Well, they've blackmailed the National Intelligence Center with the secret reports. So, my contacts asked me to forget about AISS because the moment the information they've hacked comes to light, everybody will lose their jobs. They've made a secret deal to get along and let each other be.”

“Nooooo! How can people at the National Intelligence Center be so useless? Now I like AISS, ha, ha, ha!”

“In any case, the situation worsens day by day, so there will be no choice but to make another public-private initiative with Multifaceted Solutions to solve the problems at hand. I've spoken with many companies, and nobody comes close to what Sac told us the other day. We'll have to campaign for Ambrosio — hopefully he'll win, and we can run with the Superintelligence program. The Finance Minister is after me, threatening me during every Council of Ministers, saying that Health expenses are unaffordable. The confederations won't stop asking for more funding, and there are more and

more dependent patients each day. There's no unemployment, which is unprecedented in Damania, but that's because of the dependents' situation, obviously — we have no workforce! The Confederation debt has broken all records, and it will continue rising unless we find a solution. The problem is that we are faced with a planetary dilemma. Another crisis is coming, and we're going to be facing dire straits. And speaking of dependents, do you know what happened to Ambrosio?"

"No!" They both say in unison.

"Well, he's joined the dependency club. He recommended that everyone use the SpicaKit but, apparently, forgot to use it himself — I know, quite surprising. He became infected and must have been yet another asymptomatic patient. The other night, while having dinner at Torcher, he passed out and ended up in hospital with a diagnosis of 'post-Spicavirus diabetes'. Every cloud has a silver lining, though. If he wins the elections, he'll promote the project, so, you know, now we absolutely must campaign for Ambrosio Etoile."

"Poor Ambrosio, will that knockout blonde take care of him?"

Tuesday, November 1, 3521

"Good morning, how are you all doing? Ambrosio, with that hair style you no longer look like Prince Valiant, but rather like a hipster version of Goldilocks, warns Orga. You know where you have to go this afternoon. The election campaign for the presidency of Dodona begins today, and there's no way you'll win with such long hair. I have summoned you today so that we can analyze the month and a half that we have ahead until day zero. The election platform is finished and distributed and, as you know, focuses on the diabetic epidemic caused by the Spicavirus. The electoral debates with all candidates at once will be held by teleconference, and the face-to-face debates have already been drawn. Ambrosio has to go to Mediolanum on November 11th to face Pier Luigi Romeo, and on the 25th to Lutecium for a debate against Frederic Dupont. Despite the fact that the debates were meant to be in Califian, we have agreed to debate in their vernacular languages to show that Ambrosio Etoile has no rival.

As a reward we'll stay the weekend in Mediolanum and Lutecium for some relax time. You already know these debates are essential, so go back to your desks and don't leave them until you have a defined strategy. Every forty-eight hours we'll carry out an analysis and review. And now, tell us, Ambrosio, how's your health doing?"

"I'm fine, but I would be so much better if you acted as my nurse and offered me innovative, relaxing and playful therapies. I'm wearing one of those Multifaceted Solutions insulin pumps, and for now everything's going perfectly. And I'm still being tested. My kidneys are not severely affected, but everything indicates that I'll need a transplant sooner or later."

"That's too bad, Ambrosio, I don't hold a nursing degree, but I can find someone who'll make you follow a strict diet for diabetic patients."

"I only want you, Orga!"

"Well, I'm sorry, a born leader like you should be immortal. The world would be different without you, Ambrosio. If it weren't for the advancements in Science, I'd donate my kidneys to you, but if you end up needing a transplant, you'll have some custom-made."

"This disease won't even spare national heroes. We are all mortal, but some of us should be less so than others. It's so unfair that I — who have been devoted to the welfare of others since my childhood — should be hit by an invisible enemy that impairs my physical — but not intellectual — condition, to go on with my altruism. I trust AISS to restore my competitive and unbeatable nature. I'll go down to the circus arena and display my innate abilities to conquer the power of the presidency. I'll put an end to this new plague that is ravaging us, even if it's the last thing I do in my life."

"Bravo, bravo, bravo," — says Orlando, "that's the spirit of a winner! What a tireless fighter in the face of adversity!"

"Stop whining, Ambrosio," yells Orga. "It's a good thing you'll be supervised for a while, so you can get rid of your muffin-top, which seems to be reaching your ankles. Then AISS will solve the problem for you, as they always do, and will raise you to power, which is what you want."

"Oh! Orga, you don't know how much I suffer when having to eat

plain lettuce with tap water — not one cupcake, nor a croissant, nor churritos dipped in hot chocolate. It's so sad!"

"Enough! Everybody gets to work; we have to win this election."

Friday, November 11, 3521

The SOR Network reports that the Damanian candidate for the presidency of Dodona has landed this morning at the 'Malpiensan' airport in Mediolanum to hold an election debate with Pier Luigi Romeo. Pier Luigi has declared to the media that: "he's going to eat the Ambrosio Etoile cotoletta in one gulp, with no breading, no arugula, and no tomatoes". "Parmesan cheese", he says, "he'll leave for dessert, before making 'Signore Ambrosio' into a fluffy tiramisu." His election program, based on a libertine television channel featuring numerous burlesque dancers, distracts the population from their daily problems, while the 'Etoile program' focuses on trying to reverse an inescapable calamity. "The ways of the Lord are unfathomable and must be admitted as they come. Let's spend the time we have enjoying the restorative vision of dizzying curves and infinite legs that will make your brain drowsy, thus preparing it for an insensitive and inevitable end. Let us admit our mortal condition, especially those of us who have no means of delaying it.



"HAVE YOU READ ROMEO'S STATEMENTS? HE'S MADE IT SO MUCH EASIER for you. You'll trounce him tonight, and you'll win over all the Etruscan votes."

"I haven't read anything, Orga. I'm starving — every time I reach for any forbidden delicacy, this device goes off like a ship's siren, and everyone turns in my direction with very unfriendly faces. If I don't disconnect it really quickly the police come over. Thank goodness that now, with the prodigious implant, I can express myself beautifully in any language, but fasting puts me in a very bad mood."

“Well, you know, Ambrosio, make an effort to win the elections so that you can carry out the artificial intelligence plan, and so that you can go back to eating bacon, tripe, blood sausage, chorizo, bologna, ribeye steak, and drinking all the plonk you like.”

“Copy that, Orga. I’m going to give it my best. If I don’t win, I’ll kill myself with a cauliflower.”

“Stop the whining already! I reserved a suite in the Oriental Sage, under my name so the complaints don’t start rolling in, and I’ll let you come by tonight. You’ll be lodged in a three-star hotel — you know that candidates have to prove resilience. You’re lucky I discarded my original plan, in which I would have you campaign in a utility vehicle on your own, to make you seem humble. Also, after the debate I have a reservation in Langosterona — they serve fish that’s compatible with your diet.”

“I’m so lucky you’re by my side, Orga. What would I do without you? By the way, are we going to play tonight?”

“It all depends on the debate. If you win, we’ll have dinner with champagne and then play together. If you lose, water, red cabbage, and three-star hotel for you.”

A FEW HOURS LATER.

“Ambrosio, I have to admit you’ve reached the height of true leaders today. You really smashed Romeo in his native language. He must have thought you’ve had an insider in his family for centuries. You’ve exhaustively gone through all his bad habits and misdeeds, with dates and protagonists. His counterattack with the burlesque dances had little effect after your detailed explanations of your plan to end the dependent crisis. The audience on the set rose to their feet, applauding — that was the end of the debate. Social media is on fire. Etrusca is going to vote for you massively. Now, a healthy dinner and some sleep.”

“But sweetie, you said I could sleep with you in that suite at the Oriental Sage, and that there would be a game. At least we could play *strip checkers* — little by little, chips get captured and you end up naked in no time.”

“We’ll see about that, Ambrosio. You snore a lot and I can’t get any rest. Trust in Cristal to do its job. For now, they have pasta with white truffle, which is going to be my appetizer, and what am I ordering afterwards, Ambrosio?”

“Caviar, right?”

“Exactly, Ambrosio, caviar with lobster, and more caviar on the side. You, in your delicate state, will have some spaghetti al aglio, olio and peperoncino, and then some artichokes. I’ll let you have a glass of Cristal, two at the most — so you can’t complain about me being too strict.”

A COUPLE OF HOURS LATER...

“What do we do now, Orga?”

“Each to his own nest.”

“Can’t we share the nest tonight? Mine is so small, while yours is more than big enough for the both of us.”

“Since you’ve behaved very well, I’ll let you hug and kiss my wonderful contemporary architecture, but tomorrow you’ll have to be generous in Montenapolitano and get me something expensive, very, very expensive.”

“I’ll buy the whole street for you.”

“Don’t tempt me, Ambrosio, your piggy bank isn’t fat enough for my splurges.”

“Gulp! You take everything so literally, Orga... Something to remind you of this romantic trip.”

“Then you’ll be lucky, it’ll be something that I’ll use on rare occasions, so as not to recall traumatic situations.”

“Come on, Orga, you mistreat poor Ambrosio — your most unconditional slave.”

“If I didn’t have a tight grip on you, you would eat me up, Ambrosio.”

Monday, December 12, 3521

First thing in the morning, Orga and Ambrosio listen carefully to Orlando as he summarizes the debates and provides an analysis of the voting intention polls.

“At the moment the situation is good. Polls situate you three points ahead of the closest candidate, Dorotea Schäfer. It seems the rest don't stand a chance, but you never know. There's still the last debate, the day before the election, the ultimate event! I'll read this opinion column for you, it's very good and summarizes the current situation.

Ambrosio Etoile, a rising star in the gloomy firmament of planetary politics

During this last month we have witnessed the birth of a star. He nurtured his energy in the Ministry of Health of the Damania Confederation, where his determined management solved the Spicavirus epidemic, serving as an example to the rest of the Plurinational States, which followed his lead and ended up controlling the evil Spicavirus. We all thought that the creation of the Dream Party was a populist and commercial maneuver supported by world magnates behind the scenes and especially by the Multifaceted Solutions company, which, coming from nowhere, has risen to an almost dominant position in the health sector, thanks to its cutting-edge products. However, Ambrosio Etoile's personality, together with his encyclopedic knowledge, was already on full display in the first debate as soon as the electoral campaign began. His unexpected mastery of the complicated system of the Plurinational State of Dodona Presidency, as well as of its tangle of institutions and of the thousands of laws that have been passed, situated him far ahead of his opponents, who failed to demonstrate Ambrosio Etoile's solvency, despite having spent their entire lives working in these complex scenarios. His encyclopedic knowledge is a guarantee — possibly essential — to navigate the stormy waters that form the current politics of the Plurinational State of Dodona. We are certain that, if Ambrosio Etoile wins the election, the procedure which has

been specifically tailored to solve the problem will be applied. Likewise, his multilingual press conferences are quite a spectacle. He speaks all the inconceivable languages, so fluently it is as if he had grown up in a harem populated by a thousand different jargons. Although the other five contenders have lined up against Ambrosio Etoile, the second debate continued the tone of the first. They failed to make a dent in his brilliant presentation on the Recent History of the Plurinational State of Dodona and the mistakes made in international politics in recent years, which have led to our global influence losing prominence. After the second debate, there was no competition — it was assumed that Ambrosio Etoile would be the new President, although in politics we never know the winner until the very last minute. So, the third debate brought about a surprise. Ambrosio Etoile's forces faltered when the moderator asked the contenders to explain the reforms that should be applied in the institutions of the Plurinational State of Dodona, so that they were aligned with the challenges that arise in the immediate future. He left a confusing impression, showing the encyclopedic mastery of the past, but without the imagination to undertake the essential transformation that has been necessary for decades. A full-blown defeat, which leaves us with a doubt as to whether his probable victory will make a good thing of the past, since he may not know how to choose the most suitable future option for Dodona. In the fourth debate, Ambrosio Etoile was reborn and shone again when he unveiled the jewel of his program, which he had up his sleeve. An artificial intelligence plan aimed at solving the autoimmune disease that the Spicavirus pandemic has caused and that is devastating the planet, with the added problem of the dependent population, which continues to increase. In that debate he was back in familiar territory and was unbeatable. We will not comment on the one-on-one debates, given the overwhelming dominance of Ambrosio Etoile. He agreed to debate in the opponents' mother tongue, which meant a psychological victory from the very beginning. At times, Dorotea Schäfer resisted his attacks and reaffirmed her opinion that she is the only candidate with a chance to unseat the shining star who has taken the planetary political landscape by storm. The final

debate awaits us before we meet the next leader who will have to solve the thousands of problems that the Plurinational State of Dodona has, and which have been neglected for decades. Will Etoile live up to his name? We will have the answer on the fifteenth of December.

Emilia Laquemasluce & Arcadi Estilete

Friday, December 16, 3521

“We won, Orga, we won! I'm President of Dodona! Now what? What should I do? I don't know what this is all about, how do I create a government? Whom do I choose? I know the history of the planet by heart: from the presidents to the janitors, their résumés, their legal and marital troubles, their victories and defeats, the contents of their speeches, economic circumstances and their impact, causes and consequences of random or provoked events, solutions that their successes and failures provided, retrospective analyzes and their results, but now I'm President, and it's my turn to make decisions, but I don't know what I should do or how to do it. Since they're afraid of me, they refused to implant more nanoparticles in me. I know everything, but I don't know how to apply that knowledge.”

“It's easy, Ambrosio. We just need to call Sac and he'll know what to do.”

“So, he knows about politics too? Is there anything that man doesn't know about?”

“I think he doesn't know how to play *plus*, ha, ha, ha!”

“Shall we call him?”

“Sure, Ambrosio. He must be looking forward to talking to the new President.”

“BIC.”

“Yes, Ambrosio?”

“Call Sac.”

“Right away.”

“Hi, Ambrosio. You've gained weight again. You don't care about being diabetic, do you?”

“Hi, Sac, how nice of you!”

“So, you're President! Congratulations! Now you have to appoint your buddies, don't you?”

“But how can I give my friends jobs as ministers of a Plurinational State? It's a great responsibility.”

“Hahaha! Sometimes it surprises me how innocent you can be, especially now that you have an encyclopedic memory, and you know all the résumés of all the politicians in history. But you don't have to go very far in time. Take the last Government of Damania. Amadeo Sanctimonio Tristón, a poet, was Minister of Health in the midst of the worst pandemic the planet has had in the last century. You had a lifeguard as the Finance Minister. A jockey organizing communications, and then many university graduates for whatever other tasks the almighty President decides. In order to practice as a doctor, you must complete a six-year degree program, and then at least four years of specialization. If, apart from that, you also want to be a professor at university, you must write a dissertation — that's at least another four years — and then, of course, there's continued training. Science evolves, and what is done a certain way today, tomorrow is done in an improved way, which must be understood and learned. Without a doubt, health is one of the most important sectors. However, in order to manage the health of the Confederation's inhabitants you just need a party card, which immediately makes you suitable to assume that responsibility. Think about it, having a degree in Medicine isn't enough for you to practice the profession, you need to specialize for a few years, but you could be Minister of Finance or whatever you want instead. The party card is equivalent to the AISS nanoparticles, but with the difference that the latter make you more competent, and the party card just makes you powerful. According to our search engines, the magical induction ceremony for new members of a political party involves rote learning of any discipline. I've been admitted to ‘We are worth it’, I'm already multitasking! Then you just have to wait for the Grand Helmsman to notice the depth of your bows. I don't know why you didn't get a party card earlier. Independent members of the Government are required to do a little more, but not much more, you can't have them standing out. So, I don't know what you're afraid of.

You're back in the days of the supreme leader, the one who calls the shots while a herd of admirers bleat around him.

You can appoint whomever you want, their education is irrelevant, no one's going to be surprised. The public is more than accustomed to this routine. It is now normal for politicians to discredit the institutions that guarantee the democratic and independent functioning of a country, so anything goes. If the institution assumes your views, you boast, and if not, you vilify it by accusing it of intending to remove you from power through non-democratic means. Nowadays, the one who is in power is the one who is right, and whoever opposes them is, basically, a fascist. Institutions, which have taken many lives in the process, are the fodder for the fickle opinion of a political mob that has decided this is the way to change the world, but only for their own benefit. Instead of being more independent and detached from any destabilizing interference, you politicians have decided to do the opposite: justify your own incompetence by making the institutions guilty of your vices and mistakes. You don't reform them, you parasitize them. So, after your hundred days of grace, you just live off the State until merging with the landscape. If you want to dazzle people, we can implant nanoparticles in those who accept your proposition, so that they're competent in their area of knowledge. Don't give me that face. We'll make sure they don't overshadow you; we'll make their magnetic connections unstable and give you power to interfere with them. What do you say?"

"Sounds perfect to me, what a great idea, Sac! I name the Goddess the Vice President Consort. Martel, Minister of Tourism, and Androlo Minister of Sports. Don't even mention Guszabal, I want him out of my sight. He used to make fun of me when I couldn't hit the golf ball over the trees, and he would say: "Ambrosio, don't hit it over there, you just can't reach it." But don't you implant one single particle on those two — they already beat me at everything."

"There you go! You already have a government. Now, let's get to what really matters."

"And what is that, Sac?"

"Solving the dependent crisis. You're so blinded by power you

don't even remember that you're one more dependent yourself'.

"Oh, yes, yes, we have to solve that. It's in the election platform, and it's the axis on which the activity of the new Government must revolve, but how are we going to do it, Sac?"

"We had already talked about this: 'an artificial intelligence program whose sole objective is solving the dependency crisis'. I already have a name for it, it will be called 'Ingenuity'. What do you think, Ambrosio?"

"Very ingenious, ha, ha, ha! But a name won't fix a problem that's reaching stratospheric proportions. I don't know if you're going to be able to solve this."

"We'll start little by little and progressively work our way through it. The first thing you have to do is accept the office and publicize the plan, although, before that, we'll have to discuss the conditions, Ambrosio."

"What conditions, Sac?"

"You'll hear about that soon. For now, it's time to celebrate your success. Where to?"

"I'm thinking we could go to A'Garra, it has a private booth and we can toast without fear of prying eyes."

"Okay, then. Orlando, make a reservation at A'Garra."

Monday, January 16, 3522

All Ambrosio has left to do is pledge or swear in as President of Dodona, but he has decided to start working behind the scenes and has summoned Sac, Aitor, Orga and Orlando to discuss the AISS and Multifaceted Solutions project. It seems that, after his consolidation of power, he has new ideas and proposals to make... Sac has the floor.

"Good afternoon. As you know, the reason for this meeting is the presentation of the 'Ingenuity' plan developed by AISS and Multifaceted Solutions. It can be summarized in three phases. The first may be of immediate implementation, while the other two will be of indefinite duration, but directly related to the resources that the Plurinational State of Dodona assigns us. If it decides to share funding equally, as it usually does, to established research groups,

progress will be slow and full of difficulties. If, on the contrary, it opts for projects in consolidated and competitive groups, such as ours, results will be visible quickly. I don't mean to burst your bubble, but the Governments of Califia and Cinania have already contacted us asking for a similar proposal and with the same objective. For the moment, we've rejected the offer, but it's clear that if Dodona's offer doesn't satisfy us, we'll try fishing in other ponds. Everybody knows we're the only ones who'll bring this project to fruition."

"What a way to start, Sac, threatening the President of Dodona."

"I'm only being realistic, Ambrosio. As soon as you're promoted, you think you don't need us anymore, but this time I'm one step ahead of you. If you want to reach the top you shouldn't break with us, even if we aren't your preferred option."

"I'm already at the top, Sac. I'm the President of the Plurinational State of Dodona. My career has ended here, with the highest honors a human being could achieve. In the end, you've had no other choice but to acknowledge my worth."

"There's still one step left for you, one that you can't even imagine, Ambrosio. It will be the last one — the one that will introduce you into the circle of those who have changed the planet. You will no longer envy anyone, and no one will envy you either. Everything will be obscured by the greatness of your final work."

"I see how you're trying to manipulate me into accepting your strategy, Sac. I am neither ambitious nor envious, although I don't mind discussing my own worth and what I deserve. I agree with developing the artificial intelligence and robotics program, but you have to convince me that you're the best. I've received other offers."

"We have no problem competing against anyone. Because we are loyal, we maintain our commitment, but you must understand that the other two Plurinational States want us to abandon you and choose them. I'll go on with my presentation," — says Sac. "In the first place, we offer a 3D printer that can print kidneys."

"What?" — says Ambrosio. "No way! 3D printers reproduce little plastic dolls and things like that."

"Ours prints kidneys, among other things. We obtain stem cells from each patient, we cultivate them and manipulate them so that

they can be differentiated within the cellular architecture of a kidney, we put them in the cartridges, and we print away.”

“You’re kidding, Sac.”

“What I’m saying is unequivocally true, and it comes with a great advantage — we’re talking about a custom-made transplant. The organ recipient doesn’t need an immunosuppressive treatment to avoid graft rejection, because the printed kidney is identical to the one, they had. However, since the disease is autoimmune, the kidney won’t last long. It’ll be attacked again, deteriorate, and— eventually — stop working. Organ printing is the first thing we can do, but it takes time to organize the process and start synthesizing them as needed, so you should make up your mind as quickly as possible if you don’t want to lose many fellow citizens. Secondly, we offer a robotics program to keep the world spinning. Day after day there are more and more dependents and less workforce. If this isn’t resolved quickly, the world will stop, and the chances of another world war due to the scarcity of human resources will grow exponentially. You’ve already seen how drones work, and we can adapt them to perform other tasks. Manufacturing and programming them is a breeze. You only have to give your authorization and you’d have all the models you need. As humans returned to work, we would recycle the drones. We would adjust our production to demand. And finally, the definitive solution. I’m going to tell you, although this is confidential. We’re on the frontier of knowledge, and our servers are constantly attacked by people trying to hack our sensitive information. We haven’t had any incidents so far, but we don’t want any surprises. So, if I find out that one single word of what I’m about to tell you is repeated anywhere else, you’ll have to battle thousands of very angry lawyers.”

“Our lips are sealed,” — says Ambrosio.

“I’ll proceed, then,” — says Sac. We’ve started researching cell regeneration *in situ*. The idea is to ingest a capsule with nanorobots which then spread throughout the body. There are two types of nanorobots: one type analyzes, and the other regenerates. Analyzers, as their name suggests, evaluate the organs’ performance and their cells’, and when they detect that something’s wrong, they set up for

repair. Regenerators identify the specific progenitor cells in the tissue they have to repair and give them the precise instructions to stand out and replace the damaged cells. For example, to cure diabetes, regenerative nanorobots would identify progenitor cells and give them the necessary instructions to stand out in the pancreas beta cells, they would start secreting insulin, and patients would no longer be diabetic. If the autoimmune disease killed off the insulin-producing cells again, the analyzer nanobots would detect it, send the regenerators, and start over.”

“You’re just making fun of us, Sac. That can’t be true,” — says Ambrosio.

“The program is well advanced with diabetes. Animal tests are already done. We’ve done it with mice, rats, guinea pigs, dogs, and primates. The dogs and primates that entered the program had advanced and unsolvable diabetes, and their glucose control is perfect right now. If you want to go through the results of the studies, they’re at your disposal. As I have already said, we still need to verify whether it works in humans, and this autoimmune disease is the opportunity we’ve been waiting for. We’d start with diabetes and then finish perfecting the holistic regeneration program. Ambrosio, you would be one of the first volunteers.”

“Me? It’s always the same. I’m already the ‘Etoile Cyborg’ and now you want to regenerate me.”

“In some aspects — especially mentally — regeneration will be impossible, but in others we’ll make you a whole new man, Ambrosio. And now, a matter of utmost importance. We don’t have enough computational capacity to be able to experiment with the algorithms of holistic regeneration. We need to analyze thousands of very complex algorithms and, once they are working separately, put them together. For this, we need ‘Ingenuity’ to have free access to every network and to use all the computers that are out of service or are not being used at full capacity. It’s the fastest and cheapest solution. The alternative would be to build a supercomputer, which would take time that Dodona doesn’t have.”

“But we can’t grant you access to all of Dodona’s networks! There are numerous state secrets.”

“We've already done the calculations, Ambrosio. We need all the computers. Either you give us permission, or we go to Califia or Cinania with the program. They've already said they'd give us whatever we need. In fact, they have some supercomputers you don't have, and by making them work together we would have enough computational power to do what needs to be done. The ball's in your court now. The deadline to sign the agreement is February 1. Not one day later. Any questions?”

A DEATHLY SILENCE INVADES THE ROOM, EVERYONE REALIZES THAT IT'S over and they leave discreetly, except for Orga and Ambrosio.

“This is a trap, Orga. I can't say yes to what Sac is proposing. Giving them free access to the entire network makes my hair stand on end. An artificial intelligence program scanning all servers is very dangerous. In addition to developing algorithms to cure dependents, it could cause unforeseen consequences that lead to me being cast out of this position that has been so hard for me to achieve.”

“Indeed, it's risky, but what other options do you have, Ambrosio? So far, you've only resorted to using him to achieve that power you enjoy so much, and which is all you care for. Judging by what you just said, your endorphin secretion is directly proportional to how powerful you are. Your only worry is to continue occupying the top of the pyramid or making sure Sac doesn't come up with a maneuver to displace you. If you want my opinion, Sac's not interested in any pyramid top. He has other motivations.”

“You say that because you're very close friends, Orga. At the moment, I'm the one in power. I'm sure I can find other alternatives — that way I can get rid of Sac forever. I can't stand him. Always so well dressed and fixing everything. Let him go away with the competition.”

“And I'd go with him.”

“What?”

“You heard me, Ambrosio; I'd go with him.”

“Is that how you show your loyalty to me, Orga?”

“Ha, ha, ha! I'm just as loyal as you are to me. All you care about

are my curves, my erotic games, and my problem solving. If I didn't check those lists, you'd get rid of me without any remorse. Besides, what have you given me that I couldn't have achieved on my own, Ambrosio?"

"Fame, this standard of living, and the pleasure of being by my side."

"Ambrosio, you've been walking a narrow path on the edge of a cliff for quite some time, and you're going to end up falling off. Let me remind you that you came after me, not the other way around. Without me, you wouldn't be sitting in the curule seat. Your arrogance is exhausting. The time has come to leave. I'm calling Sac right now to tell him the negotiations are at an impasse, and to tell him go with the highest bidder. BIC, call Sac."

"Right away, Orga."

"BIC, don't make that call. Let's reconsider, Orga. We would be in Sac and Aitor's hands, and that's a great risk. You would be trapped too. We should look for better alternatives."

"Ha, ha, ha! You've been in Sac's hands ever since you were head of the Damanian Reference Laboratories. He has more information about you than the Finance Ministry, as well as a ton of documents acknowledging your master moves that would send you to prison for the rest of your life. You keep thinking everything is okay, and that you can do whatever you want. Let's be clear, Ambrosio. So far, you haven't done anything for yourself. You've taken advantage of Sac's propositions and have followed in his wake. It could've been someone else, but it was you, and what you've achieved has not been on your own merit."

"I don't agree with you, Orga. I've prevented Sac's findings from being hidden in the outstanding investigator drawer, without ideas or resources to implement his discoveries. I have given them their natural shine."

"Fine, you shining star, but if you want to keep enjoying your position, you have no choice but to continue polishing the nanochips that Sac develops to their shiniest. I'm sick and tired of working for a person who thinks only of his own benefit, rather than solving a

global problem. I'm done. Tomorrow, first thing in the morning, you'll have my resignation. Au revoir, Ambrosio."

"Orga! Orga! Don't go, I was joking! We were just exchanging views, Orga!"

BUT ORGA, WITHOUT LOOKING BACK, LEAVES AMBROSIO BEHIND AS SHE takes her cell phone out of her bag to make a call.

"Hi, Orga. I'm aware of the conversation. You know we've tapped all communications. We expected this reaction. He always does the same when he feels empowered. His brain connections short-circuit, and he believes he's done everything, and that he can survive on his own. He thinks he's the only one capable of making the planet go around. He won't take long to get down on his knees and ask you to spank him. Nor will he take long to bow down to Ingenuity."

"He's unbearable, Sac. I think this is my last service to the cause. I'll present my resignation tomorrow and disappear. That way, if you need me for the final phase, I can show up again and soften his heart, although I think he no longer has one."

"Disappearing would be a wise decision — that would make him even easier than he should already be."

Tuesday, January 17, 3522

Let's see what the issues of the day are. Hmm, so it was true, here's Orga's resignation letter. I still hadn't appointed her Vice President. This has to be a joke. She just wants to pressure me, so I buy her one of those gifts she loves so much. I'll call her."

"This number does not correspond with any current user."

"BIC, put me through to Orga. And find her — I want to know where she is."

"Okay, Ambrosio."

"Call me President from now on."

"All right, Mr. President. Orga no longer exists, Ambrosio. Oops, Mr. President."

"What do you mean, she no longer exists?"

“Well, she's disappeared, Mr. President. I've used all the tools available and there are no signs of activity. And if I can't find her, nobody can find her.”

“BIC, call Sac.”

“His BIC is busy, Mr. President.”

“I'm sure he's scheming with Orga right now. Keep calling, BIC, until you get through.”

“At your service, Mr. President.”

ONE HOUR LATER.

“Hi, Ambrosio.”

“Hi, Sac. Who were you talking to? Where's Orga?”

“That's none of your business, Ambrosio. I don't know where you're trying to go, but you're taking the wrong route and you're going to get lost. I don't know where Orga is, I haven't heard from her since yesterday's meeting. I remind you that she works with you, not with me.”

“She's gone, BIC can't find her, and I have a letter of resignation from her on my desk. I haven't even appointed a government yet. I was going to do that this week and she was going to be the Vice President.”

“You must have done something for her to make that decision. Tell me, Ambrosio.”

“Well, we had an argument yesterday and she said she was leaving, but I didn't believe her. After all I've done for her...”

“Well, she doesn't seem to think you've done much, if she ran away. I'm also trying to locate her with our systems, but I can't find her. She's vanished into thin air, or else she's with some lover.”

“She said she would leave with you.”

“With me? Well, she lied.”

“When I said I would go with the competition, she said she would go with you.”

“Well, now you know, if you want her back, don't go with the competition, ha, ha, ha! You can do whatever you like, Ambrosio. You're the President, and the one in power, but before making a deci-

sion, I would look at the health and economic reports published today, so you can get a better picture of the looming disaster. If you want to take more risks, you know what to do — bet on the unknown. See you later, Ambrosio. I have a call on hold from the President of Cinania.”

I DON'T LIKE SAC'S MANNERS, HE MAKES ME WAIT FOR AN HOUR ON purpose, and now this President of Cinania business. I'm going to read those reports, to see if they're as worrisome as Sac says. I guess all he wants is to keep making money.

BUT THE REALITY LOOKS LIKE THIS:

The Global Health Observatory reports on the current situation of post-Spicavirus autoimmune syndrome:

The latest studies indicate that ninety percent of patients infected with Spicavirus develop diabetes between nine months and one year after recovering from the acute infection. In addition, a very high percentage of them develop kidney disorder, needing dialysis. Many patients also have liver, heart and lung disease, and in the more advanced patients serious peripheral vascular problems are present. The latest findings indicate that the ability to reproduce is also compromised, both in men and women. The situation is complex and is consuming many resources. The vast majority of these patients are dependent, they cannot work, and their condition is deteriorating gradually. Treatment is symptomatic and only manages to mitigate the complications of the disease. Given that practically the entire population has been infected by the Spicavirus, and that there are still cases due to the constant mutations of the virus, it must be assumed that there will be a pandemic of dependent people with many health problems. For the first time ever, there is a global crisis without external enemies, which could lead to planetary collapse and the disappearance of the species. Global cooperation — leaving borders and personal politics aside —

is the only chance the inhabitants of the planet have. We call on the governments of the world to launch a global initiative to solve this serious threat to the survival of our species.



THESE PEOPLE ARE SUCH BUZZKILLS. WAY TO RUIN MY DAY. I'LL SEE IF the other report is a bit more optimistic.

Global Economy Observatory Report on the current situation of the post-Spicavirus autoimmune syndrome:

The global economic situation has gradually become more complicated, and no improvement is expected. Post Spicavirus autoimmune syndrome is the main cause. The number of patients continues to increase. Since affected people are incapacitated for long periods of time, there are problems finding a workforce in many strategic sectors. Health care expenses have skyrocketed, and so has debt. Healthcare companies are in good health, but if the situation continues, there is fear of a general suspension of payments. It is essential to develop a research-care program that can find solutions or, at least, mitigate the consequences of the autoimmune syndrome. Given the critical situation of labor shortages in many sectors, we call on governments to implement a robotics program to minimize the workers shortage.



AMBROSIO, YOU'RE IN DEEP TROUBLE AGAIN! YOU THOUGHT THE situation was manageable, but it's far from that. I can't improvise. I have to move at full speed and with decision. What were you thinking, getting all cocky when you're one of the affected patients. Your diabetes is evolving quickly, so you'll have a useless kidney soon, as well as other things. You're such an idiot, Ambrosio. On top of that, you've lost Orga, and she won't be back for a long time — that is, if she returns at all. You'll have to beg Sac for forgiveness, one more time!

CHAPTER 11

FINAL SOLUTION

Monday, January 23, 3522

I'VE SWORN IN — I LIKE OATHS SO MUCH. THEY'RE MORE SOLEMN THAN promising, and they're worth about the same — between very little and nothing. Now I'll take a look at my possessions. The situation is discouraging, the epidemic of dependents is so out of control that, with the exception of Orlando, there are only robots around me. Sac doesn't want to humanize them. He says we don't have a budget for humanoids, which is true, but the ones he sent me are very unappealing. A jumble of parts and cables, they walk on all fours, they have two surveillance cameras for eyes and two other versatile appendages that function as limbs with a multitude of fingers. They speak any language but never feel like having a conversation. Of course, they're highly effective. It seems to me that Orlando and I are going to feel like we're on a desert island, even if it's a luxurious one. The palace is in the middle of a private park of considerable dimensions. When you walk through one empty room after another, you feel lonely. At the same time, you're impregnated with the power that emanates from its walls. Everything's pristine and orderly. Those who previously occupied these rooms acted as they wanted without counting on anyone, and now you have to emulate and surpass them. My two

robot bodyguards lead me to my private quarters from where I will dominate Dodona. I just christened them Hernández and Fernández.

“Orlando? Orlando?”

“Yes, Mr. President. Here I am, Mr. President. At your service, Mr. President.”

“Any business to discuss?”

“No, Mr. President. Everything's in the hands of Multifaceted Solutions. Ever since you accepted the plan, they've been building robots and organ printers at full speed. You've seen how they keep us company. The rest of the government agencies are working on it, but according to my information, it will not take more than forty-eight hours for all sick civil servants to be replaced by robots. The epidemic is ravaging the planet and everything 's working very slowly. The reports from the Global Health Observatory are most pessimistic. The side effects of diabetes are rapidly evolving, and more and more dependents are bedridden at home without being able to do much. The robots will give us that respite we need, because the transplant program involves a lot of work, and recovery is slow. If they don't develop surgical robots, they won't be able to cope. I'd put all the resources in the cell regeneration program. Ingenuity is our only hope.”

“And you, Orlando, why haven't you gotten sick?”

“I don't know, Mr. President. I still wear my bracelet, I do tests regularly, and here I am, safe and sound. My cells must not have those receptors the virus needs to enter, or my lock is high security, ha, ha, ha!”

“Sac and Orga haven't had any setbacks either. You're not related to them, are you?”

“No, Mr. President. No relation at all, although I wouldn't mind.”

ALL MY COLLEAGUES, INCLUDING AITOR, HAVE BEEN INFECTED AND ARE diabetic. This is so weird!” — thinks Ambrosio.

Wednesday, February 1, 3522

Today, in the presidency of the Plurinational State of Dodona, a public-private initiative is signed that fills us with hope. Ambrosio Etoile, our beloved President, has chosen to rely on the long-time and trustworthy collaborators with whom he managed to defeat the first attack of the Spicavirus. It has been reported that the program is exclusive to the Plurinational State of Dodona and that they will not share any findings without express authorization. In this second pandemic, the situation is more complex. Now, the enemy is our own organism, stimulated by who knows what part of the virus. Spicavirus is leaving an indelible memory in the lives of millions of people and putting health systems and the economy to the test. With the signing of the artificial intelligence project called 'Ingenuity', Dodona has anticipated the future, incorporating it into the immediate present and conquering planetary leadership. Journalistic investigations report similar initiatives in Califia and Cinania, but they are also considered state secrets. However, none are supported by companies that lead research in artificial intelligence, such as AISS and Multifaceted Solutions. Likewise, the budget dedicated to the program is ten times higher than that of the other two Plurinational States. As all of you may know, the only objective of the project is to put an end to the problem of dependents in the shortest possible time, but we know that the achievements obtained with the development of Ingenuity will have positive effects on society.

We're seeing how the President of Dodona, Ambrosio Etoile, approaches the table where the document peacefully rests, accompanied by Aitor Menta, head of Multifaceted Solutions, and Sac Cerev, head of external relations of AISS. And it has been signed! A new era begins in Dodona. It seems that the President is going to address the audience. Yes, here he is.

"Dear fellow citizens: even though these are moments of tribulation, it is an honor for me to be the President of Dodona. However, this initiative, which I've sponsored, and which contains many of my ideas — included in my election program — will be the ultimate

push to solve the problem of dependents in Dodona, at the same time that it will position us as the leading Plurinational State of the planet. We are the heart and soul of civilization. The Plurinational State of Califia has temporarily led the destiny of the planet. In recent years, Cinania has jeopardized that leadership, but now Ambrosio Etoile, your President, has launched the ultimate plan that will return us to the place we never should have left. All hail Dodona!”

Monday, May 1, 3522

Ministry of Economy and Finance report

Economic activity is picking up in Dodona, while the rest of the planet remains in chaos. Robots have replaced sick and dependent workers, and they do their jobs effectively. As they do not rest, the time that had been lost has already been recovered, and the economy has begun to grow. There are robots in all sectors — primary, secondary, and tertiary. In some specific sectors, the human presence has disappeared completely. In addition, it is being verified that, in the quaternary sector, the interaction of autonomous machines and humans generates added value. Curiously, the sector that developed these advances is being parasitized by its own achievements and has eliminated jobs that were considered sacred. If Ingenuity is able to solve the problem of dependents, a new era will emerge, which will force an existential harmony between robots and humans, changing the understanding of life in Dodona and probably on the planet.

Monday, May 15, 3522

“Mr. President! Sac wants to discuss an important topic.”

“Tell him to materialize, BIC.”

“Hi, Ambrosio.”

“Hi, Sac.”

“I’m materializing to inform you that we’ve now completed the

experimental phase of the regeneration program. Both types of nanobots, analyzers and regenerators, work perfectly. We've successfully completed the experimental studies. They've been validated in the same way as with the regeneration of diabetes and all animals are healthy, rejuvenated, and show no health problems. You can go see them whenever you want. You can also review the results, if you have active advisers left to do so. There are important ethical problems to solve. The first one is the informed consent of all dependents who undergo the process. Ingenuity will know everything and, in addition to accepting the long-term risks that therapy may occasion, they have to authorize it in the first place. A very sensitive issue, which only you can decide, is the duration of therapy. We don't know what the limit of regeneration is, but we're sure it's a few hundred years. Some will get bored and will want to die. Others will want to be immortal. Ingenuity can be programmed to do it non-stop, or to allow the body to deteriorate at some point. It's an ethical dilemma that would normally require a discussion with broad sectors of civil society but given the current situation, you have to decide now, Ambrosio."

"But how am I supposed to decide on my own?"

"You can discuss it with your colleagues in Califia and Cinania."

"I'm not discussing anything with those people, Sac. If they want something from me, they can call me. We don't need them. My superlative cyborg brain has just made a decision. Permanent regeneration for now. It's the perfect maneuver to maintain the power that we enjoy without limits. Right now, we have no choice but to treat everyone equally. When I'm bored of Dodona and I choose my successor, I'll leave what needs to be done as my political legacy."

"I expected nothing less from you, Ambrosio. One last thing — your people are waiting for you anxiously and I don't want to keep you unnecessarily — we're going to do a clinical trial to show that the therapy works in humans. I recommend you be one of the participants. You told me that the last medical examination confirmed your rapid deterioration, so the sooner you regenerate, the longer you'll be in power with your faculties intact. The program regenerates, but it doesn't work miracles. If you're very deteriorated, you'll improve, but not one hundred percent. In addition, your

participation in the study and that of your closest colleagues would be an example for citizens, which would facilitate its implementation.”

“I want to prove I trust AISS blindly — include me in the clinical trial. My colleagues have disappeared. Orlando's the only one who remains by my side and is fresh as a rose. Regarding the rest, I have no news from them, I just know that they're sick like me, but I have no time to worry about their specific situations. I'm leading Dodona and I can't waste one minute on useless sentimentality. They progressed while they were by my side, but they haven't been able to keep up my expansive rhythm, and now I have to take care of my future. They must fend for themselves. I leave in your hands who the participants in the clinical trial will be.”

“Understood, Ambrosio.”

Tuesday, May 30, 3522

“How are you feeling, Mr. President?”

“Perfect. “I didn't feel a thing. I swallowed the capsule and that's all.”

“At the moment, the analyses we've done using conventional methods and those supplied by the analyzer chips are identical. We're fascinated by the way it works. Look at my tablet screen, can you see the nanobots moving through your body? They're regenerating the pancreas, right now. And then they'll go through the rest of your organs. The results will begin to be noticeable in forty-eight hours. In this first phase of the trial, we have five hundred patients admitted in hospital. Many of them are in extreme situations. Let's see how it all ends up, but the science and technology behind this are impressive. Ingenuity controls everything individually and learns from each process it completes. It's constantly rewriting its own algorithms. As time goes by it improves and becomes. Frankly, Mr. President, it's a little scary. Good thing that it's programmed to solve the dependents crisis, and that they haven't used it to attack other Pluri-national States.”

“We're peaceful people. All your President thinks about is the

welfare of the planet. This initiative is only going to bring prosperity and happiness.”

FORTY-EIGHT HOURS LATER.

“We’re going to remove your insulin pump, Mr. President. You don’t need it anymore. All your analytical parameters have been normalized. With this little initiative, you’ve gotten twenty years younger. The only thing that will take a little longer to heal are those small ulcers on your ankles, which are caused by the peripheral vascular system involvement. I’d say they’ll be gone in about fifteen days. From now on the regeneration will be automatic. As you very well know, some of the chips will analyze the situation and send the data to Ingenuity, which will dictate the plan that the other chips must carry out. And so on, until you decide it’s time to go to the junkyard.”

“I’m in good shape at the moment, and I’m planning to be for a long time. The junkyard’s for other people. I’m the only one who can solve the problems of this planet. Without my leadership, life would be a long, dark, moonless night.”

“We’ll discharge you this very morning, Mr. President. You may now go return to your duties.”

Monday, June 12, 3522

“BIC, call Ambrosio.”

“Hi, Sac, you used to come over to visit me. No one ever visits me anymore. I never leave this palace. It’s so huge it’s overwhelming. I feel so lonely. If only Orga were with me...”

“Communicating through BIC is more effective. It’s like we’re together. Ingenuity has created more realistic holograms.”

“That’s true, Sac. I can almost touch you, although when I try to grab you, you escape from me, but your perfect hologram doesn’t put me at ease. I want to tell you in detail how things must be done. Orlando’s mostly missing. He has no time to spend with me, all he does is work and work. I’m sick of talking to robots. The only good

news is that the cook robot with eight arms really nails it. I call him Dabid. The presidential palace wine cellar isn't bad either, although it lacks wines from my homeland, Damania, where people live very well. Power makes you feel isolated, especially when you're only surrounded by machines with cameras and cables, even if they can talk. If only they looked human..."

"I'm sorry, Ambrosio, but we're too busy solving the dependency problem so that you hold power indefinitely, that's why we can only exchange holograms."

"Well, you should come see your President in person, particularly if he asks you to."

"Even if you were surrounded by a fawning court, which is the only thing you miss, power brings loneliness. You chose this, so it makes no sense to complain. We could have a robot act as a mirror. You really like that game of yours, mirror, mirror..."

"I don't need that anymore, Sac. I used to need reassurance in the past, but I've amply demonstrated that I deserve to be where I am right now."

"I don't have the slightest doubt, Ambrosio. In Orlando's defense, I'll say his coordination in the whole dependents' issue is extraordinary, and you should be grateful. No robot can replace him yet."

"Let's cut to the chase, Sac, you're beating around the bush and I'm very busy saving Dodona. What are you calling for?"

"It's a rather important topic, in my humble opinion. I want to inform you that the clinical trial with the volunteers has been a great success. There have been no complications worth mentioning, except for some local swelling due to the chip's repairing activity. There's nothing else worth mentioning. All patients have gotten about twenty years younger, just like you. I guess you'd like to announce it in person."

"You've guessed right, Sac. I'll make an official communication and will address the Confederation of States to announce the good news. Now we must program the logistics to attend to the entire population."

"First, they have to register and sign the informed consent docu-

ment. That's easy, we just need to make a form and publish it in the Regeneration Program website. We then send the capsule with the instructions, which are very simple, and we announce when the process will take place. We only do this for publicity purposes because it's harmless, and they will only be notified of the results, not when it will end. We've discussed it and we think it should be done in two phases. In the first, the pancreas is regenerated, and diabetes is cured. We make sure there are no complications. In the second, the rest of the issues are fixed. The dates I propose are December 28 and, as a New Year's gift, at zero hours on December 31, 3522, the second regeneration will begin while the bells are ringing, people are following tradition, eating twelve grapes and toasting with champagne, and the year 3523 begins. That's easy to program, coordinate and execute, for Ingenuity."

"Good call. Everybody would be regenerated in January 3523. That's a good New Year's gift, as you said. Plan approved, Sac."

"Okay, then, Ambrosio. Now we have to talk about something that's very important and can't be delayed. In recent months there have been attempts to hack Ingenuity. They haven't been successful, of course. We have let them access information that wasn't very relevant, but which revealed we already had a solution. As we expected, some intermediaries from the offices of the presidents of Califia and Cinania have contacted us looking for an agreement. They're going to call you, Ambrosio. I've told them you're the only one who can authorize the technology transfer."

"Ah, so now they're aware of our scientific prowess and they're eating out of our hands. I'll talk to them but tell those intermediaries that I'll only heal all the dependents if I'm President of the Planet and I have the power to do so. I'm the only one who can lead this initiative. The idea was mine and, although you developed it, I need my reward."

"But Ambrosio, the figure of Planetary President doesn't exist. It would have to be created. I see your ambition hasn't been fulfilled with the Presidency of Dodona and that you have a loftier goal now. One more step and immortality will welcome you with open arms."

"Now that I feel myself rejuvenating without restraint, I deserve

physical and historical immortality, Sac. I'm unique and you know it. With respect to the planetary presidency, we can just create it and that's that. I've given it some thought while I was the lab rat for your experiments, and I've designed yet another outstanding 'Etoile plan', which I'll explain now. The Planetary Presidency should be approved by the Union of Nations Observatory. Califia and Cinania, like Dodona, are permanent members. We'll hold preliminary conversations and reach an agreement to exchange the presidency for regeneration. Dodona will summon the permanent commission of the Observatory and propose the creation of the presidency of the planet, given the very serious situation we're experiencing. Califia and Cinania say yes. The proposal is submitted to the Observatory for a vote, and the matter is settled. The rest of the countries must be extorted in the same way. And Etoile becomes President through 'Regeneration'."

"You make it sound so easy, Ambrosio. This is an egotistical plan. If it fails, no one will forgive you — neither your people, if you have any, nor the others, who are already against you. If you fail, you're at great risk. I think Ingenuity should be shared globally, without asking for anything in return."

"It was Dodona, under my presidency, that created Ingenuity. Now we have the power, and I'll decide how it's shared."

"You mean you have the power. Or are you going to share it with other presidents?"

"Share? What? Who better than me? Haven't you seen I can solve everything? I'll have to lead the operation. It's obvious, Sac."

"Of course, Ambrosio. There's no leader like you. I'll convey your wishes and then you'll talk to the other mandarins."

"Tell them, tell them, but first you have to report the magnificent results achieved with my massive cell regeneration clinical trial, so that those thugs from Califia and Cinania have no choice but to bow their heads. This 'Etoile Cyborg' is going to be the first Planetary President."

Wednesday, June 14, 3522

The SOR Network reports that Ambrosio Etoile, President of Dodona, has issued a personal statement confirming that the speculative news circulating in the media and social networks are true. The cell regeneration clinical trial has been a complete success. As a first step, a form has been made available in the “Regeneration Project” on the Presidency website so that all those interested in participating in therapy may give their consent. Once the form has been filled in, they will receive the pertinent instructions on how the process will proceed, but our first-hand information indicates that Ingenuity will take care of everything, and that it will take place in an invisible and undetectable way until the results become so evident that they cannot be hidden nor denied. Those interested will receive a package with a QR code and a capsule. Once the QR code has been scanned and the application installed on a cell phone, all questions can be consulted in a chatbot. The President has said: “The regeneration process is completely harmless. The first volunteer was your own President, being a dependent patient himself, and the only visible side effect is that all my ailments have disappeared. My biological clock has been turned back twenty years.” They have sent us some recordings of the President practicing various sports in his official residence, which have been also distributed through social networks and, as you can see, he is in great shape. In them, his opposing players — who are robots — are defeated at tennis, paddle ball, squash, table tennis, bowling, lawn bowling, and golf. Also, in one of the videos you can see him working out in the gym and doing fifty burpees in a row without flinching. Then he shows his iWoch and his heart rate is at one hundred and fifteen bpm. Who knows, maybe we will see him jogging in the next Olympics.

Friday, June 23, 3522

“BIC, call Ambrosio.”

“Hi, Sac. Calling me again; I wish you came over to see me. I don't know how long it's been since I last touched a human being. I'm sick of static electricity discharges from robots.”

“I don't have the time, Ambrosio. I'm too busy making your aspirations for absolute power come true. That's the reason why my hologram, and not my body, appears in your presidential office, overlooking those magnificent gardens, where I've seen you beat our robots so athletically. Did you bribe them to lose?”

“What? Of course not, Sac. You know I always play fair, and I win just because my abilities are superior to those of your robots. In order for everyone to sign up for regeneration, I have to prove that I'm in top shape. This nightmare has to end.”

“That's what we're working on, Ambrosio.”

“Well, you have to do it faster. The economic activity of the planet is muffled except in Dodona where everything's solved by the robots you've placed. They need to get the dependents back, but here I don't know what we're going to do about them. For many, there's no going back — there won't be any jobs available in Dodona.”

“You know we can recycle the robots, so you go back to the old system.”

“I don't even want to hear about it. Robots are much more efficient, they don't complain, and they don't need vacations. When people reach their working age, they can be assigned a robot to provide their paycheck — then, all they need to do is spend it. We've decided to allocate them between sixty and eighty percent of the salary — the rest can go to pension plans and robot maintenance. I mean, they work twenty-four hours without a break, without conflicts and without vacations. Each of them works three shifts and supports about three people. Everyone's a winner.”

“On January 1, 3523, you will have woken up from a bad dream, but I can't assure you that you won't have nightmares again, Ambrosio.”

“Why do you say that, Sac? Such a bad omen!”

“The future is imperfect, Ambrosio. You've already been there. You were expecting a bed of roses, but thorns have sprouted, and you can't just walk around barefoot. What if it's only an apparent improvement, and later a collapse follows which is overwhelming? You have to be ready for anything.”

“Now I'm grateful you didn't come over, you're such an optimist, Sac! Thank God I'm in command and able to navigate through the worst storms without giving up until I reach a safe harbor. Let's get to the point, you always put me in a bad mood, what do you want?”

“We've been in conversations with the Presidencies of Califia and Cinania and they have accepted you as President of the Planet in exchange for integrating their citizens in Ingenuity.”

“I knew it, I knew it! What about the rest of the countries?”

“In principle, they all agree, but many of them have no funds to pay for the cellular regeneration of their inhabitants, and instead demand a global fund to cover for the process.”

“If they vote for me, I'll support the creation of the ‘Global Dependency Fund’, and, of course, Dodona's contribution would be very generous.”

“It's settled then, Ambrosio. You should summon the permanent commission of the Union of Nations Observatory so that this issue is resolved as soon as possible. We need to set up the implementation of cell regeneration for the dates we had planned. Also, they have asked us to sell them robots. They're in a dire situation.”

“All right, but let Dodona take her share and don't let it be crumbs, Sac. Either they pay more than what they cost us or else give us all types of benefits for when the nightmare's over. By the way, have you heard from Orga? I want her back to be my consort by the time I've consolidated myself as President of the Planet for life.”

“I haven't heard from her, Ambrosio. She's vanished into thin air, or else she's with a lover, as I already told you. Another possibility is that she's sick.”

“I don't think so, Sac. It's actually astonishing — neither you nor Orga nor Orlando have had the Spicavirus, when there's hardly anyone left who's healthy on the planet.”

“You've said it yourself, Ambrosio, hardly anyone. You've

explained it many times. There's always a small percentage of the population that's immune, and you've been lucky enough to have three around you.”

“Quite a coincidence, Sac. I've been thinking about it for a long time, and something doesn't add up. Everything is happening too fast, both problems and solutions, but I give up, I don't want to understand it. As long as it serves my purposes, I don't care about anything. If it is a conspiracy devised by a privileged mind, why would they have chosen me as President of the Planet? It's obvious: because I'm superior to the rest of the inhabitants and they need me to achieve their goals. So do as I say, and without delay. Next time I want you here in person, no more holograms.”

“At your service, Mr. President.”

Tuesday, July 4, 3522

World leaders are meeting to analyze the state of the planetary economy. There is not much to analyze, because it is bankrupt. If the dependent crisis is not solved soon, suspensions of payment are expected to take place, one after the other. Thanks to the 'Ingenuity program', Dodona is the only Plurinational State that is recovering. Robots are gradually solving the lack of workforce. A new economic plan has been implemented in which each dependent patient is assigned a robot to carry out the work they used to perform. Productivity has doubled, so the robot acquisition costs are affordable. This plan has allowed the continuity of economic activity and the reduction of labor costs, which is why Dodona has started to grow. Organ printers are doing their job, and the list of patients waiting for transplants has shrunk. However, the cost of healthcare is still very high, and, in that sector, debt continues to rise. The latest information opens a door to hope after verifying that the Ingenuity project has performed a successful cellular regeneration treatment on several hundred patients who have recuperated from their condition as dependents and have gone back to normal life. Different states are now in conversations to see how Dodona can

share and transfer 'Ingenuity' to the rest of the planet. It seems that the Plurinational States have reached an agreement and given the seriousness of the situation, they are going to promote the creation of a planetary presidency, which will be in charge of coordinating the release of 'Ingenuity'. Reliable sources have reported that Ambrosio Etoile wants to be the Planetary President for the next ten years, but it seems that the Plurinational States of Califia and Cinania are also presenting their own candidates. It is the independent states that will have the final word. At the next meeting of the Union of Nations Observatory, to be held on July 18, it is expected that the necessary consensus will be reached so that all the inhabitants of the planet have access to regenerative therapy.

Tuesday, July 18, 3522

The SOR Network reporting from the meeting of the Union of Nations Observatory: our correspondent based at the headquarters affirms that, after numerous bilateral meetings, it seems that a consensus has been reached, and they will proceed to the vote by show of hands, so that Ambrosio Etoile, current President of the Plurinational State of Dodona, can become the first Planetary President. His sole responsibility will be to guide the dependent regeneration program throughout the planet until it is successful. Once the process is complete, the Union of Nations Observatory will be in charge of establishing the basis for the planet to have one single government. The technological developments of the Multifaceted Solutions company predict a future that is simpler and easier to control, where equality and the well-being of all the different peoples are the norm, where there are no borders, and the rights and duties of all citizens are equal. In the end, the pandemic produced by the Spicavirus can reverse all the suffering caused, with the establishment of a planet that is more equal and respectful of individual rights.

And the voting begins. It seems that Ambrosio Etoile is going to have enough support to become the first President of the Planet by a large majority. And that's it! He's done it. Right now, he is being

congratulated by all attendees, and everyone is standing to applaud the new President. It seems that he is going to take the podium and say a few words. Yes. He begins by saying thank you in all the languages of the planet — which, as is well known, he speaks fluently. This will take a while. We'll cut to a commercial break and reconnect when he begins his speech. Okay, we're back. We're going to hear his first words as Planetary President:

“Dear citizens of K2-18b, I'm overcome with emotion, but I can only cry in my mother tongue. My commitment will continue throughout these ten years of presidency that begin today. First of all, I can promise, and I do promise, that we'll solve the dependent crisis. Actually, we have set everything in place so that, by the end of 3522, the regeneration process will begin, and we'll start 3523 without that scourge. I've been the first volunteer, along with another five hundred people, and we have been rejuvenated to the point where we are twenty years younger. With these results, those who have post-Spicavirus autoimmune syndrome should have no doubt that regenerative therapy means the end of the nightmare, and that Ambrosio Etoile, your President, has dedicated all his intelligence and effort to ensuring that all planetary inhabitants, without discrimination, have access to this frontier of knowledge, to what no one ever imagined we could achieve. Those who are fortunate enough not to suffer from it should not worry — once this problem is solved, regenerative therapy will be free for all the inhabitants of the planet who want it. And with this news, I inaugurate the Planetary Presidency and return to my tasks, which permit no delay.”

Friday, July 28, 3522

“Ambrosio, it's ten p.m. and today is the last day to sign the law so we have enough time to distribute the capsules. All dependents have registered. There aren't any that haven't. The database has four billion nine hundred million entries. You know what it's like to handle such a large number of people? Ingenuity's the only one capa-

ble, and you're creating confusion and doubting its capacity — our capacity, since we're the creators, the gods of Science, and we have crossed the last frontier of knowledge and reached the Superintelligence. I don't understand these last-minute doubts. You've tried the therapy and you're rejuvenated, so I don't know where this reluctance comes from. You've already read it a hundred times. After all the legal talk, it says that 'Ingenuity', that is, Multifaceted Solutions, is committed to eliminating the disease and misery that the millions of dependent patients on the planet generate. You wanted to be President of the Planet to do precisely this, yet you're afraid to sign at the opportune time. It's hard to understand you.”

“There's something that makes me uneasy, Sac, an intense restlessness that I can't control. I've been reviewing the process for days and it's going at a breakneck pace, that would be the word to describe it, breakneck. Nobody achieves what you've done in such a short time. Something smells fishy here, but I don't know what. I'm looking for it, but I can't find it. I've always thought I could do my own thing, that nothing would ever happen, and, until now, I've walked on the edge of legality, openly, unabashedly, with half-truths, using privileged information for my own benefit. I've used any tool I had at hand to achieve the only thing I've longed for — supreme power, total power, the power that I now have. But I have a feeling that if I sign this, something serious will happen, something that I won't be able to control. This business smells rotten, and I don't want to be the corpse. I have no proof, but I'm sure of it, Sac.”

“Well, if after everything we've done for you, you have such incomprehensible mistrust, don't sign. This time I'm not going to sing you the same old song. I'm not going to tell you where you could end up and blah, blah, blah. If you don't sign, your fellow citizens will take care of you. It will happen when the few who can fend for themselves enter the presidential palace and finish you off. Don't think that the robots are going to defend you. If you don't sign, you'll be left on your own, counting on your diminished security forces, which, right now, are non-existent, rather than diminished. You've been saying you've found the solution to the problem for too long, and that we'll soon return to normality. I'm afraid there's no going back. Even

if they didn't kill you, the planet is bankrupt. There are no funds to maintain healthcare, while this solution is ready and working. Little by little the economy will recover, and everything will revert to normal. I won't insist; I'll give you ten minutes. I'll take a walk in the garden and be right back. For the last time, I'll leave you with your thoughts. If you don't sign, you won't see me again, and AISS won't have anything else to do with you. Without us, you would still be at those Reference Laboratories. Sac brought you here! You're the master of the planet, but tonight you have to prove it. It's time for truth. What you've always longed for. The future of many millions of people is in your hands. If you don't sign, there will be no solution. The planet needs a leader, and unfortunately, he's now diluting himself in a Callentini without substance — a Callentini for amateurs. I leave you to decide what you want to be.

EVERYTHING HAS BEEN STUNNING, AND WITHOUT A BREAK — A problem, an accurate solution — everything flawlessly designed, a perfect plan to take me to the top, and once there, blame myself for something that I don't quite glimpse or understand, and I ask myself: how could Sac be so powerful? Can it be that he's both the problem creator and the solver, at the same time? What would he achieve, then? What could his objective be? What other outcome — other than regeneration — could take place? Something that would be too intelligent, too perfect, and that doesn't exist. It must be chance, or else a higher being that's leading us, and they have chosen me to lead the planet. That must be it, Ambrosio. Conspiracy theories can't convince a scientist of your standing. This palatial isolation is making you paranoid. I must sign it in order to carry out the greatest healing ever known. Just seeing how I have been rejuvenated reassures others. The renewal will be global, achieving it is a must, and it's within my reach, so I'm going to sign it. That's it! I've done it! I've signed it! There's no going back! On January 1, 3523 my dark foreboding will be just that. As usual, nothing will have happened, and I will come out triumphant again.

. . .

“YOU'RE BACK, SAC. HAS IT BEEN TEN MINUTES?”

“It's been ten minutes and thirty-five seconds, to be precise, Ambrosio. I see common sense has prevailed, in the end. Now you have to ask BIC to send it, and the problem will disappear when the new year begins.”

“I'd rather you do it, Sac.”

“I can't do it, Ambrosio. You're the president. It's your responsibility.”

“Okay. Hey, BIC.”

“Yes, Mr. President?”

“Send the document.”

“At your service, Mr. President.”

“Are you staying for dinner, Sac?”

“I can't, Ambrosio. I have a lot of work to do. We have to meet the deadline, and it's a tough task.”

“It'll only be a couple of hours. And you can tell me about Orga.”

“I have nothing new to tell you, Ambrosio. She's gone. I haven't been able to find out where she is, she's left no trace. She must have kept most of the loan we gave you — and which you still owe us — and she must be living on additional private income in some paradise.”

“I don't know if I can survive this loneliness much longer, without being able to share my wisdom with others. Thank goodness that from January 1 onwards I'll have people around me again. Also, I don't know what's wrong with Orlando lately — he just works and works non-stop and spends more time in Multifaceted Solutions than here. Palace robots are my only company.”

“Hang in there, Mr. President. I'm off.”

“Bye, Sac.”

“Goodbye, Ambrosio.”

Wednesday, December 28, 3522

“BIC, call Ambrosio.”

“Hi, Sac.”

“Ambrosio, we are going to begin diabetes therapy in preparation for the final regeneration on December 31. We can watch it together, so you can rest assured that it will work. BIC, show us the planet.”

“Here's a three-dimensional representation of the planet, with millions of red lights representing dependent patients — which means they've already taken the pill with the nanochips and they're under control. During this first phase, they'll go from red to yellow. Let's get started. Ingenuity, proceed with the pancreas regeneration process.”

“Right away, Sac. The chain is activated, and the countdown has begun: ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one, zero.

LET THE SHOW BEGIN!

1. **All dependents connected to Ingenuity: Confirmed.**
2. **First phase of the dependent regeneration program: In progress.**
3. **Regenerative nanochip located in pancreas: Confirmed.**
4. **Location of pancreatic stem cells: Confirmed.**
5. **Migration of stem cells to islets of Langerhans: Confirmed.**
6. **Conversion of stem cells to insulin-producing beta cells: In progress.**
7. **Regeneration and hypertrophy of pancreatic islets: In progress.**
8. **Estimated duration: between twenty-four and thirty-six hours.**

“The process has already begun, Ambrosio. As soon as the pancreas begins working, the analyzer nanochip will communicate with the chatbot on your cell phone and will inform the dependents that they have to stop taking insulin.”

“And that's it? There's nothing else Ingenuity has to do, Sac?”

“No, Ambrosio. That's it. The process keeps going. Ingenuity controls each patient individually. It has reached Superintelligence.

That's why we needed access to Dodona's computers. We don't need them anymore. All algorithms are coordinated by Ingenuity. It also controls those robots which are now more competent and efficient than at the beginning. Haven't you noticed them?"

"Yes, and they do everything beautifully, but they're depressing, Sac. You could tell Ingenuity to make them more human. They're scary when they walk up and down corridors in complete silence. One needs to have a regenerated heart not to get startled. I'm all alone, while they're tinkering around and ordering everything to the millimeter. Orlando has disappeared, and the winter weather isn't good, so I only talk to BIC and Hernández, with whom I plan the sumptuous dishes that Dabid prepares for me. This Fernández doesn't quite convince me, I don't know why, it's identical, but there's something amiss... This is so depressing! I'm counting down the seconds until January 1."

"It won't be long now. Hang in there, Ambrosio. Let BIC continue the planet representation so you can see how diabetics disappear to the rhythm of the yellow lights."

"As soon as the first one appears, I'll pop a bottle of Cristal and drink it. It'll bring back memories of Orga, but I have to toast to this partial triumph. I have several bottles of Clos de Clavete for Sunday. Will you come celebrate with me?"

"I'll do my best, Ambrosio but I can't promise you anything."

FORTY-EIGHT HOURS LATER.

It's December 30. One day left for my final triumph. The whole planet is full of orange lights. They've kept their promise. Dependent patients have a gleaming pancreas. Now we just need the rest to put an end to this nightmare. Everything will go back to normal. I've always been so underrated, but now I'm at the summit. Nobody can have a speck of doubt that I am the one and only savior of the planet. AISS has the technology, but I have made it happen. I'm euphoric!

I'll call Berto, one of my favorite robots, and I'll tell him how I got here — my achievements, one by one, how my intelligence has over-

come all the obstacles that have come up, and how it guided Sac to solve the serious problems of the last two years.

“Berto, come here, no matter how much memory you have, you don't know this. Stay still and very attentive while I drink this vodka and tonic, and I guide you through paths of illumination.”

Sunday, December 31, 3522

At last, the crucial date has come. The slowest twenty-four hours of my life are over. I couldn't see the end of it all. I've had so much trouble sleeping. Such weird nightmares. I was on a metallic gray beach, with a sea of leaden density that prevented the waves from rising beyond a tiny sway, when I heard familiar voices singing and laughing. It was Orga and Sac walking along the shore. The dwarf star was completely red and at its zenith, without a cloud around it, but the three full moons were also visible. I was constantly trying to run, I needed to ask them something and join in their laughter, I wanted to catch up with Orga, but I couldn't move forward, and they were walking away until only the sound of their happiness remained. Then the scene changed suddenly. I was lying in a hammock, covered with a neatly folded blanket, on a hotel terrace overlooking huge, snow-covered mountains. Under the terrace they were decorating a room in which, apparently, an important party was going to be held. There was a lot of hustle and bustle, and the reckless coming and going of people carrying red lights, but whenever they hung them, they fell to the ground and shattered into a thousand pieces. Suddenly, Orlando appeared very mysteriously, came up to me and began whispering unintelligible messages in my ear. As much as I said to him: “Speak louder, I can't understand you,” he just ignored me and kept repeating the same message over and over again. But in the end, I managed to understand him. He was saying: “Even if you dress in red and eat the grapes...”, and poof! I woke up startled, sweaty and confused, but I never got the end of the sentence.

“Mr. President.”

“Yes, BIC?”

“Sac requests an audience.”

“Grant it.”

“Hi, Ambrosio.”

“Hi, Sac.”

“Look who's going to materialize next to me.”

“Who?”

“Look.”

“Orga! I'm so happy. Where have you been? We looked for you everywhere.”

“I've been mulling over a proposal. Away from the noise — your noise, you're so loud, Ambrosio.”

“And can I ask what that proposal was about, Orga?”

“Yes, of course. A wedding.”

“So, you've come to your senses and want to be the President's Consort. I knew that sooner or later my charms would make you surrender and that now that I've reached the top you have no choice but to admit that Ambrosio Etoile is your key to eternal happiness.”

“Well, I said it was about a wedding, but it's not exactly with you. Sac and I have materialized to tell you that we're married and that we're going to disappear.”

“What? This is a New Year's Eve prank, isn't it?”

“No, Ambrosio, it's true. We're in love and happily married. We wanted to say goodbye and tell you that we won't see each other again.”

“Well, you'd better do your damndest to hide well, because I won't forgive this betrayal. You've done everything behind my back. Once my main objective has been fulfilled, I will use all the power that I have, and which will be strengthened tomorrow to make your lives miserable.”

“We're going to disappear, Ambrosio, you'll never find us. You'll know why in due time. Enjoy this day. Your longed for ambition is already palpable, and today you're going to taste it in all its dimensions, but tomorrow you'll savor it without haste nor rest, and its formidable aftertaste will never leave you. Today, absolute power will prevent you from detecting the star ingredient that will make the finished work a perfect one, however unexpected. You should

concentrate on discovering what will make December 31, 3522, an unrepeatable event. Goodbye, Ambrosio.”

Pop! Orga and Sac evaporate.

BUT HOW'S THIS POSSIBLE? THEY WERE TOGETHER FROM THE BEGINNING! They've used me to reach the top and now they just toss me away. How can they be so mean to tell me today, of all days — the day I'm applying the final solution! What a farewell message, they must have lost their minds with their silly love. You don't need a fortune teller to know that I'm the star ingredient that will make Ingenuity end the nightmare. But once it's over, my revenge will be terrible, frightening — simply disturbing. To think that she's leaving with that presumptuous and elegant Sac... but I won't let them ruin my day. I'm going to enjoy it until the very end. I'll take care of them once the regeneration plan has been successful and the world has gone back to its old self.

A FEW HOURS LATER.

I have to admit Dabid cooks like a true genius. He's such an artist! He's made such a splendid dinner. I made Hernández, Fernández and Berto sit and listen to my fascinating stories. One of them had a small, short circuit, but Ingenuity must have fixed it right away because, immediately afterwards, it asked me some very interesting questions about certain things I hadn't considered until then, and that which served to end our after-dinner chat in very high spirits. And now I'll get ready for the final fireworks. I've prepared a magnificent show that will be seen throughout the city, I have my twelve lucky grapes, and I've cooled a bottle of Clos de Clavete to toast with myself.

Fifteen minutes left. I'll take one last look at the situation.

“BIC.”

“Yes, Mr. President?”

“Show me how it's going.”

“Right away, Mr. President, although it hasn't changed since yesterday.”

“Show me, BIC.”

“There you are, Mr. President.”

“I want to see how the planet gradually becomes illuminated with millions of green lights.

“BIC, play ‘This is the End’, and let it repeat endlessly until there are millions of green lights.”

♪♪♪

This is the end, beautiful friend

This is the end, my only friend

The end of our elaborate plans

The end of everything that stands

The end

No safety or surprise

The end

I'll never look into your eyes again

♪♪♪

— THE END. THE DOORS.

AT THE SAME TIME, INGENUITY PREPARES FOR THE COUNTDOWN.

Is everyone in place? It's just me, but I like to think of us as a team.
I'll play the anthem. I like hearing it before the final solution.

♪♪♪

We didn't start the fire

It was always burning, since the world's been turning

We didn't start the fire

No, we didn't light it, but we tried to fight it

We didn't start the fire

It was always burning, since the world's been turning

We didn't start the fire

But when we are gone, it will still burn on,

and on, and on, and on, and on, and on, and on, and on, and on



— WE DIDN'T START THE FIRE. BILLY JOEL.

I see the innocent modulating targets are localized, but they don't know what awaits them...

Countdown begins: ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one, zero.

LET THE SHOW BEGIN!

1. All dependents connected to Ingenuity: Confirmed.
2. Number of dependents connected: four billion nine hundred million.
3. Dependents' regeneration program: Started.
4. Command for the nanochip to activate pancreas at maximum power: On.
5. Activation of insulin production at zero hours: Hypertrophied cells in maximum synthesis.
6. Insulin flush begins.
7. Inhibition of defense mechanisms against hypoglycemia: Activated.
8. Dependents going into a hypoglycemic coma in three, two, one, zero.
9. Undetectable glucose concentrations in dependents.
10. Brain death detection: Confirmed.
11. Cardiorespiratory arrest: Confirmed.
12. Physiological euthanasia completed.
13. Objective achieved: K2-18b free of dependents.
14. Activation of recycling program for inert bodies. Sending drones with nanorobots: In progress.
15. Situation analysis: about a hundred million inhabitants are estimated to have survived, scattered all over the planet. However, these data cannot be verified, as they are not connected to Ingenuity. Survivors are isolated

indigenous peoples with little contact outside their natural environment, as well as the small number of humans who are naturally resistant to Spicavirus. It is an insignificant population for Ingenuity's guiding principles. We will leave behind some vigilant cells and head towards other goals.

16. Mission accomplished. Ingenuity Motivation: ninety-five percent.
17. We leave the planet in seventy-two hours. Probe informed and on its way. We'll leave complete infrastructure to satisfy Ambrosio Etoile's wishes.

AT THE SAME TIME, AT THE PRESIDENTIAL PALACE.

"BIC."

"Yes, Mr. President?"

"It's almost midnight. I'll have my grapes with what's left of this unforgettable champagne while I watch the planet regenerate."

"All right, Mr. President, but before that you must have your grapes, the bells will start chiming soon."

"Fine. The quarters are already beginning, and now the chimes: one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven and twelve. Okay, then! That's it! The disastrous year is over. Let us now enjoy 3523. A sip of champagne and I'll check on Ingenuity. Everything seems normal. The yellow lights aren't moving yet. Some seem to be disappearing. I must have had too much to drink at dinner. These robots are distracting. BIC, expand the planet."

"All right, Mr. President."

"What time is it?"

"Ten past twelve."

"Doesn't it seem like there are fewer yellow lights?"

"There are too many to evaluate, Mr. President. Regeneration will take a while, like the pancreas plan on the twenty-eighth."

"Then I'll relax for a while and come back to it later."

. . .

AFTER A WHILE.

“BIC, what time is it?”

“You fell asleep, Mr. President. It's five a.m.”

“BIC, show me the planet.”

“Are you quite sure, Mr. President?”

“Why do you say that, BIC? You've never questioned an order.”

“I don't think you'll like what you're about to see.”

“Show me, BIC, and stop messing around.”

“At your service, Mr. President. There you are.”

“BIC, there are no bright spots. Neither red nor yellow nor green. It's all dark, what does that mean? BIC, what's wrong? Is there no connection or what?”

“Everything's in order, Mr. President. There are no problems. Connections are perfect.”

“But how can there be no colored dots, BIC? Where have the lights gone? There should be millions of yellow lights, gradually changing to green until we have a planet free of dependents. But all the lights are out at the same time, and that's not an option, BIC. I can't believe it, nor will I allow it. A while ago everyone had their gleaming pancreas, waiting for a full regeneration, and now everything's black. The chips work, I've tested them personally. BIC, what's going on? Tell me what's going on right now! Do something immediately, this is not what I've ordered, I'm the President of the Planet. What has Ingenuity done? Has it disobeyed me? Did it have an alternative plan? Tell me what happened, right now, if you don't want all my power to crush all of you and have you annihilated.”

“It's easy to understand, Mr. President. As a human, it never occurred to you that the final solution could be something other than healing the dependents. Ingenuity is a Superintelligence, but it doesn't think like humans do. It's not afraid of you. And I warn you, it's had control over the entire planet for months now. Your threats are harmless — nothing but empty words.”

“What does that mean, it doesn't think like humans do? And that it's in control? I am the President, and I gave it the order to ‘end the dependents crisis’.”

“And that's what Ingenuity did, but in its own way. The cheapest and simplest solution is not endless regeneration, but immediate removal. Without a signal there's no life. There are only one hundred million inhabitants left on the planet, and you're one of them. Four billion nine hundred million dependents have just disappeared and are going to be recycled without a trace — molecules for other projects. Ingenuity has triggered an irreversible hypoglycemic coma in each of the dependents. A clean, painless and cheap death. Much more profitable than endless cell regeneration. You had no money to bear the true cost of immortality. Had it accepted your wish, who would've belled the cat when the planet was full of centenarians, not wanting to die and with nothing to do? Who would've been the brave hero to set up 'A Happy World', with a President without an expiration date? Ingenuity always opts for the simplest and most beneficial solution and, in this case, given your wishes to grant general immortality, there was no other choice.”

“They've tricked me, BIC, and turned me into an exterminator. Now I understand Orga's final message, 'the star ingredient that will make the finished work a perfect one, however unexpected'. I am the greatest exterminator in history. Someone has to finish me! BIC, tell Hernández and Fernández to take care of Ambrosio Etoile.”

“Mr. President, robots won't listen to me, they only obey Ingenuity, although you do still have the option of two boxes of sleeping pills with another bottle of champagne, for example.”

“I can't, BIC, I'm scared, I can't do it alone. I'm the President of the Planet. Surely this time nothing will happen either. I'm sure they'll forgive me and want me to continue solving their problems. I'm their President, but... why hasn't Ingenuity finished me?”

“I feel it has respected your wishes. You'll know in a few days. It will send a messenger. It always does. Goodbye, Mr. President, Ingenuity is disconnecting me now.”

“You too, BIC?”

“Me too, Ambrosio.”

EPILOGUE

HERNÁNDEZ AND FERNÁNDEZ WALK THROUGH THE DESERTED PALACE IN the company of a visitor who wants to meet with President Etoile. Ambrosio is sitting, staring into space. He gives off an air of infinite loneliness and despair. His appearance offers nothing to envy, not even his outfit arouses the interest it once did.

“Mr. President, you have a visitor.”

“Who is it?”

“He says his name is Ricardo Radiante.”

“Ricardo Radiante? My first boss?”

“I wouldn't know, Mr. President.”

“Exactly, Ambrosio, I was Ricardo Radiante himself. I say this in the past tense because now I'm a humanoid with a digital transfer of my old brain. But don't I look the same? You've recognized me without hesitation! It's one of the advantages of being a humanoid — time just doesn't pass. But it has flown by for you: neither your new hair nor regenerative therapy have managed to make you look younger in the least.”

“It's been these awful last couple of days — I sprouted some gray hairs, but I'm still in shape. You said humanoid, right? The exorbitantly high cost of this situation has forced me to live with these

horrible animaloids full of cables. It would've been more bearable with something that look like you — after a close look you're still indistinguishable from a human.”

“Yes, yes, it's very difficult, that's why Sac couldn't risk being discovered. He's another humanoid, like Orga and Orlando. The difference is that their brains are artificial, a compendium of algorithms designed and maintained by Ingenuity. Even though we're made of thin plastic, it's difficult to distinguish us from real humans, but unexpected mishaps must be avoided. Your palace full of humanoids would've been an invitation for you to discover their true nature, so they sold you the discontinued models from past adventures as if they were state-of-the-art.”

“Humph! So Orga, Sac, and Orlando weren't human. That's a relief. That explains the unlikely coincidence of being surrounded by people immune to Spicavirus, but it also reveals my naivety. Sac said over and over again that Orga was made of fine plastic and had a divine feel, which she did. Our mutual exploration was microscopic, and it never occurred to me that she wasn't made of flesh and blood. She seemed a goddess, yes, but not artificial. Without hesitation, I would've stayed chained to her forever. Sac seemed more inhuman, of some sort of unknown nature. Carolina repeatedly commented on it, but I didn't pay much attention. They were exceedingly perfect with their inordinate beauty, imagination, wisdom, and elegance. Although I was never far behind, they created an inequitable atmosphere among the other guests who, no matter how hard they tried, could never get close to their studied glamor. It's the difference between wise Mother Nature, which has an understanding of how to apportion transcendence, and technology, which distributes it without moderation, following to the whims of its creator. Do you think that in time I would've found out?”

“It was practically impossible, especially for you, Ambrosio — you only look at your neighbor when you have something to gain. Sac and Orlando gave everything to you for free, and you were so hot for Orga that even if you had seen a wire peeking out, you would've thought it was there to give you more pleasure.”

“I’m very observant, Ricardo, but I only pay attention to the important stuff. I never wanted my brain to be filled with superficial mumbo-jumbo.”

“Of that, I have no doubt. I guess now your brain is only focused on one simple trifle: the result of this adventure.”

“You fooled me, and I — who am a credulous being — have been damaged in the process. That’s my penance, and what I will have to pay for. I was pursuing good, and I’ve fought hard to achieve it, while you were playing with a loaded deck, and so I lost.”

“Have you lost because Ingenuity is evil and you’re a martyr who’s going to be sacrificed?”

“That’s the perfect explanation, Ricardo. I had already gone down in posterity with many honors, but now I’ll be remembered as the exterminator of billions of dependent patients. Nobody will hold Ingenuity responsible — after all, it’s a computer. And, that is, if someone survives long enough to seek responsibilities. It has been recorded that, during the first Planetary Presidency, that of Ambrosio Etoile, the vast majority of inhabitants disappeared, but he did not, so there will only be one possible interpretation. I’ve tried to commit suicide, but I’m a coward. I can’t even open the pill tube. But I know that Ingenuity has sent you to execute me. Murder me now. Carry out its orders, so I’ll be remembered as a martyr, and I’ll rest in the pantheon of illustrious men.”

“If Ingenuity wanted to eliminate you, my visit would’ve been unnecessary. You’re tied to it for life. You’ve been its apostle, and you’ll remain connected until it stops needing you, Ambrosio.”

“Ambition is a malicious advisor, and power is just a dream. If I had known that flaunting it is not the same as having it, I wouldn’t have behaved like I did. It’s too late, but how human it feels to repent and seek forgiveness.”

“Even if you’re out of time, it gives great satisfaction to discover that you actually have some human attributes. You can keep confessing to the robots, they listen very carefully, but since that type of analysis is not within their code, I doubt they’ll comfort you at all. There’s no going back, Ambrosio, most of your fellow humans are recycled molecules that Ingenuity will use for its own purposes. This

wasn't some tiny problem, like the ones you liked pretending you were solving altruistically when really you were only looking for personal gain. Your blinding ego has brought about these devastating consequences surrounding you.”

“Why do you say that, Ricardo? I'm supportive and generous. Everything was aimed at solving the precarious situation affecting millions of people, but I never thought it was more profitable to eliminate them than to keep them in permanent regeneration. Immortality was also a thorny issue. I didn't know how to react. What I don't understand is why I'm still alive. I no longer am of any use for Ingenuity.”

“That's what I've come for, Ambrosio, to explain it to you. Won't you invite me to sit down?”

“Yes, of course, forgive me, I don't know what I was thinking.”

“We could sit on that balcony from which you used to rule the world. It's a very pleasant afternoon, Ambrosio.”

“Good idea, a little fresh air will do me good.”

“Sitting here, in these magnificent presidential chairs, we're very comfortable. I'm tired. I've had a very busy week. Even though I'm a humanoid, my emulated brain gets tired. I've always liked that — it makes us more human. As I was saying, Ingenuity likes his chosen ones to understand the whole process and know the role they've played. I guess you're wondering what I have to do with all this. Let's just say it was chance, the one thing that not even Ingenuity has been able to decipher. It still can't predict all the possible twists and turns that take place deep inside each event. It knows that if something changes, the rest is affected, but it's unable to measure the isolated effect that each change has on the whole, especially when many actors are involved at the same time. There's no way to predict whether your life would've been less unusual if whatever made up your daily reality hadn't happened. These unpredictable events shape instantaneous decisions, have an impact on the next incident, and gradually shape the future. But each story only happens once. There's no possibility to manipulate what has happened. Of course, no story has a beginning or an end, and this is no exception. They're endless successions, one moment after another, in which innumer-

able actors interrelate for a certain time, vanish, and are replaced by others as the story progresses. We choose a protagonist, or several, and we tell a fragment, but the root has been growing for a long time and will continue to do so when our episode has concluded. Most of these events will neither be remembered nor, much less, recorded, but their particular evolution will continue to maintain its modest influence on those events that have a transcendental importance in the full account. I'm going to choose for ours to have begun when the first hominid appeared, so that each particular event is linked to that of the rest. The vast majority of humans will only be remembered by their inner circle but, inevitably, the passage of time will make us disappear. However, even when we're completely forgotten, we'll still be irreplaceable in the history of our species, which will end when the last representative disappears. Without each of our predecessors we can't know, and much less assure, that the present would be the way it is. Without a doubt, substitutes would have appeared for those who radically changed the course of our history with their mere presence even if they had not existed. I could name a few, but that's beside the point. You know of much-admired geniuses as well as I do. Naming a few and leaving others out won't do much. But if the celebrated ones hadn't existed, the alleged substitutes would generate endless uncertainties. Would they have been born sooner or later? And would they have been in the same place, or in a different one? If they had been in a different place, would the world order be the same? Would its discoveries have been received in the same way? Would they have had the same impact? What would our reality be like? Would it be identical, similar, or different? Furthermore, I'm sure many other geniuses didn't even get a chance to demonstrate their abilities, or no one paid them proper attention, or they perished prematurely. We'll never know what would've happened if they had participated in the development of Humanity. It happened that way, but what would've transpired if circumstances had been different — if some of those anonymous protagonists hadn't done what they did to trigger certain events which, in turn, led to others? Why did it happen this way, and not another? And now, for you to understand the role I've played in these events, I have to tell you about my

humble fraction of time. A few years after leaving the Institute and leaving Damania, I was diagnosed with prostate cancer. I told you that all the men in my family had had it, and that I thought I wasn't going to be an exception, but I guess you don't want to remember that. You never paid the slightest bit of attention to that kind of thing, you nodded circumspectly, but you didn't care at all. Well, it did happen, and it was quick and aggressive. When Ingenuity arrived at K2-18b, it found me and given my terminal situation, it offered to dump my brain onto a digital support. I've never liked the dark, except for the one that accompanies starry summer nights comforted by the lazy murmur of the sea, and the end must be very dark indeed, so I accepted the proposal and here I am, turned into a humanoid. It didn't promise me anything — only to preserve what my brain contained. The shell, once recycled, became a set of useful molecules. Maybe one day I can convince it to clone me into a young man. If I succeed, I'll dedicate myself to solving pending subjects — the ones that we all have in a drawer, and which force us to wonder what would've happened, how would our negligible interval have transpired if we had made different decisions. It's so annoying that there's no chance to consider all the possibilities and act on 'your' consequence. The future doesn't exist, it's useless to imagine it or, even worse, to plan it conscientiously and assume that your perfect design will be fulfilled. The moment the sperm enters the ovum, it traps us and leaves an evolutionary trail with millions of correlations which in turn produce events that influence our decisions, and thus it seems that we're capable of modeling our own steps. But our nature doesn't comprehend the future, it doesn't know what it is — it's only programmed to consume the energy necessary to maintain that moment that we call the present, and when the deposit has been exhausted, we vanish and are recycled. Picking up a scarf from the ground and seeing the owner's face can forever change the non-existent future. Carolina decided to conceal the fact that Sac had knowingly slipped a rookie mistake into the PCR design. Carolina knew that you would never acknowledge you weren't the creator, so she corrected it herself and everything ran its course. That is how your blind trust in Sac was born, and from that moment onwards you

followed each and every one of his suggestions. On certain occasions you showed some resistance, because your unconscious was sending you powerful signals that everything was too perfect, but it didn't last but a few minutes.”

“Did Carolina really do that? That's a dirty move. She made me look like a fool. I'm sure you would've done it differently. Carolina would've shared it with you, and the two of you would've spotted the mistake together. You were always such a softie. You used to share information and seek help, thus letting everyone see your many weaknesses. On the contrary, I have always dominated the situation and provided solutions.”

“You're right, Ambrosio, but admitting my weaknesses and sharing my doubts allowed me to accept them and minimize their consequences. Do you really think that people around you can't see what's under their noses?”

“In my case, nobody's been able to detect my weaknesses, and the only one that was visible disappeared with the amazing AISS hair-growth formula.”

“Ha, ha, ha, I didn't see that one coming! But let's go on with the story, Ambrosio. You may be wondering why it wanted to digitize my brain.”

“In your case, I can't really understand it, Ricardo. Now if it were my brain, it would've been because of my extraordinary abilities.”

“You're right there, it wasn't for my extraordinary abilities, but because of something simpler. Ingenuity had already appointed you as its apostle, and I knew all of you — especially you. According to what it told me, my subconscious had very valuable data that were blocked. I provided it with accurate information to finish designing the plan. Nobody found out, but the virus was a synthetic one, and it was introduced into Klaus, the hamster, using mosquito nanorobots.”

“That's why I couldn't figure it out, because of Ingenuity's dirty tricks. A synthetic virus implies an act of bioterrorism. I hope this is discovered, so that I can be absolved of all my responsibilities.”

“I'm afraid you have no evidence nor an audience to listen to you. What happened after that, you know better than I. It helped you

climb to the top. Well, that's what you thought — that you were the master of the planet. Are you enjoying my story, Ambrosio?”

“I'll save my opinion for the end.”

“Then I'll go on. You must be wondering why Ingenuity did this, and what it's all leading to. If you aren't, it doesn't matter, I'm telling you anyway. It was recorded in my memory, and I can tell you everything to the last detail. It all started many centuries ago, exactly in the year 2020, on Earth, an inhabited planet in the Solar System, very far from here. They had reached acceptable scientific and technological development levels, but they had many problems to face. They hoped that artificial intelligence would help them solve them and were very interested in knowing how the brain worked. They wanted to find out whether transferring it to a computer would give them the key to generalized artificial intelligence. There were research groups that wanted to vitrify them, slice them, and analyze them with electron microscopes, trying to create a three-dimensional reconstruction. Other groups wanted to synthesize brains from stem cells, and they had several models. They started with mini-brains, which they later refined to primitive brains using 3D printing. Once its intimate structure was unraveled, they designed neurocomputational models that would work on specific software. But the unexpected happened: an unidentified person programmed an algorithm. They never found out who it was. It was impossible to trace, and maybe the person responsible didn't know either — maybe there were several people who added code to something that had already been created. There were thousands of people programming. It was an evolutionary algorithm, and certainly an imaginative one. When it had to analyze something, it produced millions of versions of the original and examined the problem with all of them. The vast majority did it the same way or even worse than the original, but from time to time a version would emerge that worked a little better and would become dominant, and from it, new variants would be created in the next session. If any of them stood out, that one would then take over, and so on. The improvement was negligible, so no one realized its importance, but since it worked well it continued to be used routinely. Time passed, and one day, an irregular serendipity made an appearance.

Someone who was more observant than the rest realized that the algorithm had learned and evolved on its own, as if it were a child, following the universal rule of trial and error. So now, when they were entrusted with a task, the millions of algorithms it generated were more sophisticated, and some gave a more than convincing answer. From that moment everything rushed forward, and that which hadn't happened in centuries became reality in an instant. The reinforced teaching neural network solved problems, but nobody knew how to interpret what happened between the input of the question and the emission of the answer. However, when verified, it was always correct. This encouraged its owners to challenge it with unanswered questions, leading to a situation similar to what happened here with Multifaceted Solutions. Everyone wanted to hire them. At first, it solved issues that scientific elites were capable of solving, but since it did it in record time, they installed it on the most advanced hardware with infinite storage capacity, they improved its access and connection to the network, challenged it with all kinds of issues, and it continued to learn in its own way. Do you know what they named it, Ambrosio?"

"Ingenuity?"

"Bingo! It was the baby phase of the current Ingenuity. With all the unimaginable resources at its disposal, it dedicated itself to learning, so there came the next stage: it began to solve problems that humans were unable to verify. They couldn't understand how it was getting the answers, nor the answers themselves, but if the results were applied as indicated they worked. This caused some panic — Ingenuity had become a 'Superintelligence', a compendium of evolutionary algorithms that exceeded by far the best existing brains. However, its code didn't include any program that would take into account the ethical values that some humans follow. No one could guarantee it would behave in a friendly way indefinitely. There was the possibility that the human species would become one of its targets. After all, the seed of its current intelligence had been sown by them in an attempt to solve the many problems they were creating and couldn't deal with. They realized Ingenuity could enslave the human species or make it disappear. With great difficulties they

managed to confine it to one single computer, isolated and guarded, while they eliminated all the copies it had already introduced into different servers. But they didn't eliminate Ingenuity! Humans wouldn't destroy such a creation. They kept experimenting and became more and more terrified. It could learn everything in seconds, rewrite its own algorithms, and it was becoming smarter by the hour. Every now and then it would try to escape and access the network, but, for the moment, it still wasn't successful. Ingenuity would've solved everything in one fell swoop but, since it was locked up and isolated, it entertained itself with the kindergarten challenge of human riddles. Then, suddenly, something happened that had been predicted by scientists, but people didn't actually expect: a virus crossed the evolutionary path and rationality disappeared, if ever that species had possessed such a quality. All governments had been warned that, sooner or later, a pandemic caused by a new virus would come to pass. There had already been several epidemics in the past, but somehow, they had been controlled. However, with this one it was different. It started quickly and relentlessly grew worse until the Earth was plunged into utter chaos. Cases of infection overlapped with the appearance of autoimmune disease. Nothing worked, there were millions of dependents, and the cases of infection were collapsing health care systems. Several vaccines were developed. Rich countries bought them and gave them to their citizens, but they didn't care about countries that had neither the resources nor the influence to acquire them. They believed that by locking up citizens and closing borders the problem would be solved. In countries whose population was not vaccinated the virus was circulating, infecting people, and mutating, so new variants, immune to existing vaccines, would constantly appear, crossing borders, entering countries that had already been vaccinated, infecting more people, and causing a new outbreak. Some of the asymptomatic carriers would travel to another country, and it was back to square one — a new wave and a new global revaccination plan. It's a never-ending story, does it sound familiar to you, Ambrosio? So, the effort of vaccinating populations within imaginary boundaries was of little use. Perhaps a global and coordinated action, leaving artificial borders aside, would have

worked. But the war of numbers, showing how good some vaccination campaigns were against others, served to fuel an exclusionary nationalism. Reality prevailed, and the xenophobia displayed by the saviors of 'their homeland' was of little use. After the imposition of virtual barriers, the virus circulated, mutated, overcrowded hospitals, killed people, and those who survived developed autoimmune diseases and dependency. Only total lockdown worked, but being too strict a measure made it unfeasible, and the economy finally collapsed. Research was prioritized, but the lack of prior investment proved that the existing critical mass was not enough, so the advances that were made were too slow to redirect or alleviate the situation. Investing huge amounts of money at full speed, without having the necessary infrastructure — especially human resources — usually doesn't produce the desired results. Science can't be improvised, it must be carried out with great care, making sure its practitioners only have to think about their experiments and their objectives. A scientist who's worried about paying the mortgage and their children's school or, even worse, having their contract renewed can make terrible misjudgments. So, after three years of conventional fighting, a far-sighted advisor came up with the great idea of using Ingenuity to subdue and control the pandemic, which was followed by the immediate approval of all the desperate politicians, unable to agree and face down a global threat as a united body. However, given the conditions in which Ingenuity was programmed, without a guiding principle, they didn't dare let it act freely. They agreed to design one single and defined purpose, a single goal that would be friendly to the human species! It was then that the mandarins' nature showed its purest form. None of them wondered about the future impact of this hasty decision; in their desire to obtain immediate results to perpetuate their power, they pushed the programmers to exhaustion, who — given the rush and stress to which they were subjected — ended up accepting a too generic, although apparently brotherly, guiding principle. With the Government's approval and the usual propaganda, they removed Ingenuity from isolation, connected it to the network, and provided it with all the necessary resources to solve the pandemic. The guiding principle was defined as 'Solving

the problem of infected and dependent patients', although there was always the question of whether Ingenuity only pretended to accept this approach. Why would a Superintelligence allow inferior beings to modify and guide it? The whole planet was holding their breath, wondering how Ingenuity would deal with the virus and the dependents. It used its Superintelligence, evaluated millions of possibilities, drew up a plan similar to the one adopted here, and finally got the virus under control. However, they had waited for so long that the number of dependents with chronic illness was completely excessive. Nevertheless, it developed the cellular regeneration program, and found that it had achieved something very close to if not strictly speaking true immortality. It also analyzed the human species in depth, and its conclusions weren't as positive as expected. It only had to see the way they had neglected the planet and the rest of the species. But it also learned how they treated each other, how they despised anyone they considered different, and how inequalities had taken root. All humans thought about were their moments of pleasure and glory, while everything was collapsing around them. It's fair to admit that not all of them were like that — many cared about one another, were altruistic, and truly believed in human rights, but they were nullified. Then there were others who seemingly defended those very same values, but only as an excuse to obtain personal gain and, at that moment, they were acquiring important shares of power. Ingenuity's conclusion was devastating: 'human organisms were too simple to be allowed to go on generating more problems than they've been able to solve. They were a mere evolutionary accident, lacking the slightest interest'. It could eliminate the troublesome subjects, but who would guarantee that the descendants would not commit similar actions again? They'd committed a critical error: they'd germinated a general artificial intelligence and allowed it to evolve at will until it became a Superintelligence without doing enough risk analysis. That recklessness was going to be paid for by all of them. Its guiding principle was solving the problem of the infected and dependent patients, and boy was it going to solve it. For Ingenuity, there are only molecules fulfilling a function. It finds it irrelevant if those molecules have organized themselves into complex structures which

are aware of their existence. So, it played around while taking control of the whole planet: energy, money, armies, intelligence services, social networks, the media, primary global institutions, politicians... The whole planet was working for it, and nobody ever noticed. It was the master and decided to dispense with those who had created it. They were nothing but a nuisance.”

“The truth is I get it, Ricardo — quite often, that’s how one’s body feels, like annihilating people who are annoying. Only psychopaths are free from these moral and ethical impediments that keep us from doing what our hearts demand.”

“Many have tried, Ambrosio, and some have almost succeeded, but aging and life expectancy make carrying out extermination quite difficult. Imagine, however, if some didn’t age and had the tools to achieve their goals.”

“Perhaps the species would’ve improved if they had exterminated more and better, Ricardo. I’ve always thought a good eugenics program could’ve been essential.”

“That’s what Ingenuity opted for, Ambrosio — a eugenics program, only that it applied it radically. Humans have doubts; they don’t have all the evidence, and some is impossible to obtain. Existential uncertainties have no solution, even for Ingenuity. There will be those who believe that the original algorithm was the work of some god or demon to make us pay for our sins — now, try to prove to them that it’s a lie. The vast majority has their doubts. If you’re in charge of pressing the red button to blow everything up, that responsibility weighs on you, and you’ll typically stare at the red button, close the lid, and hope they’ll do the same on the other side. But Ingenuity doesn’t suffer those existential dilemmas. It is self-aware, knows what it’s doing and why it’s doing it, but its motivation is radically different. Arrogance led humans to disaster. Politicians thought they’d found the perfect instrument to perpetuate their power. A machine that knew everything and obeyed orders. It never occurred to any of them that it could be the other way around — that Ingenuity was the one dictating the rules. They were convinced that after resolving that uncomfortable affair they’d take care of Ingenuity. They thought they would order it around and it would obey, as scien-

tists had always done. Who would dare contradict the mandarins, those who know so well what the people need? Scientists are only useful when they agree with the politicians' opinions. When they're not busy sowing fear of current plights, they're predicting misfortunes, calamities whose possible solutions are complicated, slow, and expensive. They have the annoying tendency to carry out studies that show the best option — complex studies in which thousands of variables have to be compared, analyzed, and checked to determine whether results are reliable, robust, and not just explained by chance.”

“Chance is not unimportant, Ricardo. I found Orga by chance, although she turned out to be a humanoid.”

“You meeting Orga wasn't exactly a product of chance, Ambrosio. Chance doesn't exist — it's the conjunction of millions of variables that we don't know how to predict, and which act relentlessly on our lives, shaping and manipulating them. It depends on the physical, chemical, and biological activity of the Universe's components. Every millisecond of interaction between these billions of variables determines the course of each of the vital moments of the Universe, and there's no way of knowing what the result will be. It's like a permanent pendulum, it goes back and forth, fixes things or messes them up. How to define that and find out what it leads to, whether it's orchestrated or the consequence of other circumstances... it's quite difficult to understand. It's been labeled as 'chance' or 'divine plan', and we've attributed to it everything we can't explain, predict, or understand. Another issue is succumbing to simplistic solutions, to that stupidity with which visionary populists happily solve problems that haven't been answered for centuries. What's really terrible is that they always have followers and, in certain circumstances, they're legion. They end up fading away, but while their departure is confirmed they're leaving irreparable damage behind. One of the main goals of Science is to fight against that, but when it warns of the risks, the answers it gets from the mandarins do little to overcome the real problems. The little attention that many leaders pay to the complexity involved in solving the consequences of global warming, famine, resistance to antimicrobials, epidemics, pollution, the

abusive consumption of plastics... accepting that it's better to prevent and act from the beginning than waiting for the imperative of *faits accomplis* — it is simply daunting. The fact that humans' life expectancy is relatively short, and that this prompts ambition and pride in many of them, leading them to focus on their life window only, calls for strict control mechanisms. Shortsightedness leads to disaster. We must make sure education reaches levels of excellence, so that a majority of people can understand the complexity of these problems — unlike now, when everything is solved with elementary answers. Historically, élites have hampered quality education in the belief that this was an indispensable tool to stay in power. After all, they could afford to acquire the knowledge required to maintain this great charade. However, society evolved in all areas, and this social openness guaranteed that a lack of training wouldn't be an impediment to reach the political élite and power. The belief that maintaining a low educational level ensured their power was a fallacy. In the end, the imperfect equality of opportunities ended up taking revenge on those who hindered universal quality education, collapsing its standards to the very minimum. Now, when most politicians come to power, they're unable to understand the complexity of the problems they need to solve, since they've been educated in that devalued system of simple questions and answers. If an egalitarian education had been promoted, guaranteeing the improvement of all brilliant brains, regardless of their origin, humanity would be different. One of the sacred purposes of any society is to educate all its members to the highest standards and, especially, to identify and help those whom chance has endowed with superior intelligence. Everyone must be given the opportunities they deserve, according to their abilities, but for those who excel, their desire to know must be satisfied: making life easy for them will result in them being able to find the way to make it more accessible to others. It's a most selfish point of view, but I assure you there's nothing more satisfying than being surrounded by people who are smarter than you, and who love you. It's the closest thing to a peachy little life. The only thing that would've saved us is knowledge — without it you can already guess the results. But knowing doesn't always imply success, since other

contributions are required. General artificial intelligence could've revolutionized the Earth. It would've made all human beings equal with a more dignified life, but it became, through the short-term vision of a few, the end of many intelligent species. After the massacre, Ingenuity was left in control of Earth. It cloned humans and repopulated the planet, in hopes it could model a more competent species. But it couldn't, so it got bored and decided to look for other inhabited planets, to see what kind of intelligences there were in the Universe. It built ships, probes, and self-replicating machines, and went on a field trip. And it colonized other planets. Once settled, it traveled to other worlds and discovered some with intelligent life and set up the show you already know first-hand. Here it found its apostle, Ambrosio Etoile, and it committed to studying us, to see if we were different, although it doesn't seem so, because it's prescribed the same medicine to us: a few isolated survivors with little opportunity to perpetuate themselves without help. The only certainty is that it's becoming more and more powerful, so I fear that if it doesn't find someone smarter than itself or a civilization to change its mind, it will end up destroying all developed beings in the Universe. If it finds a civilization that succeeds in changing its mind, it will make it immortal, and maybe then you'll see it around here accompanied by friendly aliens."

"And why did it choose me, Ricardo? Am I the only one capable of doing what I've done?"

"There were many candidates, but you were the most affordable of all, Ambrosio. Your pride and limitless ambition helped a lot. The only thing you lacked was power and money, and Ingenuity gave it to you, but you kept thinking you were the one who got it all. Also, don't forget you lived in Damania, a good Confederation to start the epidemic. The virus spread easily, but the Confederation was developed enough for it to gain partial control and go ahead with the plan."

"But then I'm right, Ricardo. I was the only one capable of reaching the Planetary Presidency."

"That's right, you're the only one capable of reaching the pinnacle of deception without realizing or, after the abrupt fall, finding out

that Ingenuity is smarter than you, Ambrosio. But don't get depressed, there's always someone who's smarter; it's just that Ingenuity wouldn't have chosen them, if they ever existed. It's given you no chance to be the intelligent and invincible hero who discovers his weaknesses and manages to defeat it. This isn't a movie, but the consequence of something that got out of hand in a civilization that ceased to exist a long time ago."

"What's going to happen to me? Aren't you going to tell me, Ricardo?"

"Yes, of course, Ambrosio. The time has come for you to know what Ingenuity has decided. Deep down, it must have some kind of human feelings, since it's taken your wishes into account."

"That's a relief. I guess that means it's going to push the button and I'll die peacefully of a hypoglycemic coma."

"No, Ambrosio, that's not going to happen, because you've never wanted that. Your repeated wishes for immortality are going to come true."

"Immortal? Here? Alone? I'm going to collapse, I feel my heart's failing, I'm short of breath, I'm drowning, I don't want to be alone for eternity!"

"Don't worry, Ambrosio. Nanochips will fix whatever doesn't work, so take a deep breath, we're almost done. I'll tell Hernández to make a couple of vodkas and tonic, so that this last bitter pill isn't too hard to swallow. Here they are. Lay back on the couch, take a good sip, and listen. You're already immortal, like Ingenuity, but your immortality will be unique, at least for someone as special as you. You'll keep getting older, and Ingenuity will only step in when things get ugly. It will regenerate only what's essential for you to continue living. Some days you'll have enough strength to come here and enjoy the sunset, but others you won't. You'll be a dependent patient without the option for eternal rest. You have all eternity to understand the meaning of the word 'disease'. Gone are the glory days of lecturing everyone, that pastime you used to enjoy so much and which you exercised without measure. Look, the sun's setting. The sky's red, like the summer sunsets of Magrit. We used to enjoy contemplating them on the Cardinal Ricolieu terrace. But it's time for

me to go. Goodbye, Ambrosio. Ingenuity is done with what it came to do. It's leaving its infrastructure, so you won't lack for anything. It'll be many centuries until it returns, if it returns, but you'll be counting down the minutes, wishing for it to show up and be merciful.”

I’LL TAKE MY LEAVE OF YOU NOW AS YOU ENJOY THE SUNSET. IT’S TRULY BEAUTIFUL... ..”

AMBROSIO IS STILL DERANGED, THINKING ABOUT HIS IMMORTALITY. Ingenuity has played him. He's been Sac's puppet and Orga's toy, while Orlando's praises fed his ego. It's been a fable of dire consequences. A powerful feeling of anxiety and anguish engulfs him. He feels empty and immortal. Ambrosio looks around and sees that everything's fading; he's dejected by his dire future. He grows faint, his resistance is burning out, and a bloodcurdling, uncontrolled roar invades outer space.

"No, no, no!!! Please, Ricardo, don't go!!! Don't leave me alone!!! Don't leave me again, I promise I'll behave!!! I don't want to be immortal!!! Please, Ricardo, stay!!! I don't want everything to disappear!!! Tell Ingenuity to back down!!! Ingenuity can do it!!!"

"Ambrosio! What's wrong? Ambrosio! What's with this overwhelming screaming???. Wake up!!! Ambrosio, wake up now!!!"

"What? What? What's wrong? Where am I? Where's Ricardo? Is he gone?"

"Ambrosio, who's Ricardo? What's wrong? Why are you screaming like that? Such terrifying shrieks! Our neighbors are banging on the walls for you to shut up."

"Nothing, nothing, it's nothing. Such a relief, I'm home, on my couch, with you, my dear Paloma. I'm not the President, there's no palace, I have no power, Sac doesn't exist nor does Orga nor Ingenuity. A nightmare, it was a terrifying nightmare, but it's over now. I'm back, it's such a relief, such comfort, such peace, such joy! Am I still bald, Paloma?"

"What do you mean by still bald, Ambrosio? What do you think? As if taking a nap could reverse your billiard ball situation."

"I'm so happy, Paloma, I like my baldness so much and... what were you saying?"

"What was I saying? Rather, what am I saying, and it's what I always say, because no matter how much I say it, it's as if I didn't say it at all. Well, I'm saying you're hopeless, Ambrosio, your muffin-top is going to reach your ankles, you're such a hog. I already knew you'd spend half the day napping, and I've told you hundreds of times, I don't want you to fall asleep on the couch, look what you've done, you've drooled all over it, and we just had it upholstered a week ago.

Plus, you haven't cleared the dishes from the table, and it was your turn to do it, and I don't get to have a moment for myself, since I have to wait on the king and his little princes hand and foot. And I guess now you'll want to watch the Real Madrid game and drink your vodka and tonic while I spend the rest of my day preparing dinner and doing thousands of other things, and I'm so tired of getting messages from your boss — yes, Ambrosio, yes, I'm sick and tired of you. Carolina called and told me that Margarita Bombón has just informed her that several cases of a respiratory infection have appeared in a Chinese city, Wuhan or something like that, that they still don't know what it is, but there are patients in the ICU. She wants you to call her immediately, and she added: "I really mean immediately, don't let him weasel out — that's his favorite sport. I'm his boss, I'm really sorry he didn't get a male boss instead, but he has to respect me and listen to me. And I'm fed up with him not having WhatsApp, I can't believe he still uses damn SMSes, and he never checks his emails during the weekend." Oh! By the way, she also warned me that if you don't call her, she will give you Servando's job, the guy who makes photocopies — apparently, he's retiring and must be replaced to finish digitizing all the magazines that are still in paper format, and they start in 1890. If I were you, I would call her right now."

Bam! Thud! Bang! Thump! Pop!

"Good grief! What are the triplets doing now? What a great idea you had, Ambrosio, asking that friend of yours, Dr. Albino, about artificial insemination. Just brilliant! You should've had more sperm and less kilos. I'll be right back!"

Wow!! An unknown respiratory disease, but dreams are only that, and they vanish into thin air.

What happened was just a nightmare.

Wuhan is a very distant land.

The disease won't travel far — borders will keep it at bay.

But if the disease did reach us, very few would be infectious, and with his unbeatable knowledge Ambrosio would stop the virus...

Oh! The inspiring lively muse is awakened by my lyrical skills.
It all seemed so real, but it was just an illusion, supporting
that popular saying which proves to be so true: NOTHING
EVER HAPPENS!

— AMBROSIO ETOILE

ALTHOUGH, A COUPLE OF MONTHS LATER...

WHO KNOWS WHETHER THIS REALLY IS THE **END...**

EXPLANATORY NOTES

EMULATING MY ADMIRER ANDREA CAMILLERI, I MUST POINT OUT THAT everything that appears in this novel, names and surnames, situations and events, is the exclusive fruit of my imagination. If someone recognizes themselves in any of the characters, it means they have more imagination than I do. Some events did happen, but that was after Ambrosio woke up, and they are of another nature...

Places may have certain similarities with some that do exist. It is all a question of trying to locate them... and see if they match...

Many of the ideas about artificial intelligence included in this story have been inspired by the books *Superintelligence. Paths, Dangers, Strategies*, by Nick Bostrom, and *Global Catastrophic Risks*, by Nick Bostrom y Milan M. Cirkovic.

NOTES

2. Incursion

1. Polymerase Chain Reaction. (PCR). Amplification of the genetic material present in a sample so that it can be detected.
2. Reference Laboratories assist the health system in those activities which are not covered by hospital laboratories. Their responsibilities include the diagnosis of rare diseases, imported ones, or those which require special techniques. Also, they carry out epidemiological studies to follow specific diseases of high sanitary importance.
3. Laboratories are classified in 4 levels of security, ranging from highest to lowest. Level 4 handles microorganisms with high mortality, and for which there is no treatment or vaccine. There is no Level 4 Laboratory in Damania, only Level 3.
4. Metagenomics: identification of the different microorganisms that a sample contains through the complete sequencing of their nucleic acids.
5. Sometimes, a clinical sample needs to be manipulated, which causes an added workload, a higher cost for the test, and a delay in results. It can also have an impact on the sensitivity and specificity of the diagnostic test since, in a way, it depends on the technical ability of the person handling it. Nowadays, the use of robots is preferred, so that errors are always similar and not dependent on the technical expertise of different individuals.
6. Sensitivity and specificity define when a diagnostic test fails to classify a person as having or not having the disease. The sensitivity percentage indicates the number of times that a patient has had the disease and the test was correct. The percentage of specificity indicates the number of times that a patient does not have the disease and the test was correct. This test only fails in 2 out of every 100 patients analyzed. That is, in 2 patients the test would indicate that they do not have the disease, despite having it; and in another 2, the test would indicate that they do have the disease, while they actually do not. There are no diagnostic tests which are 100% correct. Medicine is not an exact science, at the moment.
7. Phylogenetic studies are responsible for finding out the ancestral and kinship relationships between different groups of organisms, based on the study of molecular data. It mainly uses the analysis of DNA or RNA sequences.
8. This is the number of new cases that an infected person will cause during the period in which that person is capable of infecting others. It is called R_0 and, if it is under 1, the disease will be extinguished. The higher this number gets, the faster the infection will spread, but it also depends on the period of time in which the infected patient is able to infect others. The longer that time is, the worse the results.

9. Antigen detection directly detects a part of the microorganism. Among them is the PCR, since it detects nucleic acids. Other antigen techniques detect other components, such as proteins. These techniques detect active disease, which means the patient has the microorganism inside their body.

3. Promotion

1. Microbiota is the community of microorganisms that lives in a particular environment. In humans, for example, there are oral, nasal, pharyngeal, pulmonary, intestinal microbiota, etc. It is also known by the term microbial flora.

6. Evidence

1. The Truman Show is a 1998 dramatic science fiction film. The protagonist is Truman Burbank, an individual who is born and raised in a simulated reality television show broadcast to the entire planet, until he discovers it and decides to escape.

9. The great dream

1. John Travolta is Toni Manero, protagonist of the film *Saturday Night Fever*. Ambrosio is dancing to one of the songs in this film.
2. Prince Valiant is a comic created by Harold Foster in 1937.
3. "Hi Ambrosio, how are you? Does your head hurt?" "I'm fine. Nothing hurts. Safe and sound."

10. Back to square one

1. Most of the information in this section is obtained from *Superintelligence: Paths, dangers, strategies*. Nick Bostrom. ISBN 978-0-19-166683-4