



BORIS TZAPRENKO

**LOOK INTO
MY EYES**

Translated from French by Michelle Weston

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To Julie Wayne

1) Sir, you are simply outrageous!

[Fifteen seconds before the Event.]

Lucien walked into the ophthalmology clinic, clueless to the fact that within fifteen seconds he would be experiencing the first manifestation of the Event.

‘The Event’ is the name that, for the time being, we will call the contingency that would both change the course of his life, and bring History to an end. And what we mean by ‘bring History to an end’ is actually ‘decide the ultimate outcome of human existence’.

Lucien was there for a routine check-up and was pleased to see that there were only two other people in the waiting room. A young woman and an older lady looked up at him.

“Hello!” he greeted them.

The elderly lady in the back of the room didn’t respond. The young woman answered with a shy, barely murmured “Hello!” before turning back to her magazine.

[Thirteen seconds before the Event.]

Lucien sat down across from her, near the door, and read a text message from Isabelle on his phone: “Don’t forget the ophthalmologist.” He typed back: “I’m already there.”

[Five seconds before the Event.]

Lucien put his phone back into his pocket, glancing towards the elderly lady who seemed to be surreptitiously observing him over the top of her glasses. He noticed a stack of magazines on a small table but nothing in the pile caught his interest.

[Zero seconds before the Event.]

The Event began when he lifted his head. It actually began at the moment that he laid eyes on a big poster. The image was a rather

unusual one, but what surprised Lucien the most was that he hadn't noticed it until then. It was a rather large picture, about two meters high and one meter wide, hanging above the head of the young woman sitting in the chair across from him on the opposite side of the room. And that's how it all began. This incredible adventure started out in such a simple way that no one could ever have imagined all the insanity that would rapidly ensue.

Why didn't I see this huge picture right above her when I greeted her earlier? he wondered.

The image was an eye-catching close-up shot of a gorilla. Its hypnotic gaze seemed to be staring intensely at Lucien. Across the bottom of the picture, large red letters (partially hidden by the young lady's head) spelled out: 'Look in.....eyes!'

Look into my eyes! he guessed.

That seemed obvious! Checking to see if he was right, he tilted his head to one side then to the other to see the letters behind the girl. Yes, that's what was written: "Look into my eyes!"

Why choose a monkey to illustrate an ad at an ophthalmologist clinic? he wondered. *Besides, it wasn't even advertising anything, nor was it a health advisory poster... 'Have your eyes checked' would have been better... but this? What a very strange picture!*

While these thoughts were flitting through his head, he kept on tilting his head from one side to the other, oblivious to what he was doing, trying to see the letters hidden by the young woman's head. He stopped when he noticed that she was looking at him, embarrassed. She was even blushing slightly, and he almost blushed too.

"Oh, sorry," he mumbled. "I... I was looking at that big monkey right behind you. I wanted to read... but... I really do apologize!"

Instead of reassuring her, the explanation seemed to fluster her even more. The elderly lady, sitting five seats away to the left of the young woman, scowled at him, clearly disapproving. Not only had she ignored his greeting when he had entered the room, she now looked at him suspiciously. Luckily for him, the ophthalmologist walked in and put an end to this embarrassing situation.

"Next, please."

Standing up to follow the doctor into her office, the young woman threw a last partly surprised, partly upset look at Lucien. Across from him, the gorilla that seemed to be intensively staring at him now said: 'Look deeply into my eyes'. He frowned.

Deeply? Hub?

Shocked, he spoke his thoughts aloud. "I could have sworn that it only said 'Look into my eyes'. I didn't notice the word 'deeply'."

The old lady shrugged, shook her head, and let out a disdainful 'pfft'. She was far from understanding that as she was observing Lucien's behavior, she was witnessing the very beginning of the chain of events that would change the world as they knew it.

"Sir, you are simply outrageous! The way you flirted with that young woman was impolite and stupid!"

"But... I... No! I wasn't..."

For the next seemingly endless fifteen minutes, Lucien had to endure the woman's sullen indignation under the penetrating gaze of the gorilla. He longed to escape the confines of the room and light up a cigarette. The doctor finally opened the door and asked for the next person to come in. With one last exasperated shrug, the woman left Lucien by himself in the waiting room.

Finally alone... but not quite. Lucien didn't feel alone at all. The attention the animal seemed to focus on Lucien made him feel like it was sitting right there in the room with him.

*

The ophthalmologist showed him the optotype, or eye chart, which is a traditional series of letters and symbols of progressively smaller sizes that is used to test one's sight.

"What letters can you read on the sixth line?"

Lucien had read the lines above that one easily enough, but this one was a little blurry. He concentrated and read, "L... O... O... K..... I... N... T... O... LOOKINTOMYEYES."

Again! This must be their favorite expression here!

"What?" she asked. "What did you say?"

"I said, 'Look into my eyes.' That's what the sixth line spells out."

The specialist seemed so surprised that he read it once again. “T... A... C... A... G...”

Astonished, he exclaimed, “That’s weird! I could have sworn...”

He rubbed his eyelids.

“I must be tired,” he said.

“Yes, it seems that way.”

Along with the young woman and the elderly lady, and without counting Lucien, the doctor was the third person who had unwittingly witnessed one of the very first manifestations of what would soon rock the future of humanity. Unaware of the privilege, she continued examining him, asking routine questions to which he responded mechanically.

“Place your chin here, please,” she instructed.

He did as he was told. She made a few adjustments and added, “Please look into my eyes. Into my left one first.”

“There we go again! This time, I’m not the one saying it!”

“What? Excuse me, what did you say?”

“Nothing, sorry, I...”

“All right... Let’s start all over again. Look into my left eye.”

Totally confused, he complied.

“Good! Now, look into my right eye.”

2) It captured his attention

Lucien left the ophthalmology clinic at 7:00 p.m. He lit up a cigarette and took two deep puffs. The picture haunted him, and even though he didn’t know it yet, it would do so for quite a long while. He was just happy to get away from it. The evening was cool. Still sucking nicotine into his lungs, he slipped his free hand into the left pocket of his leather jacket and hurried towards the closest metro entrance. The sidewalks were free of the trampling crowds, but the habitual traffic

jams had frozen up the streets. Lucien could not understand why the picture of the gorilla was stuck in his mind.

Nice photo! Still...

The metro's escalator took him underground. He slipped his ticket into the slot on the side of the turnstile and grabbed it as it came out on top. The sliding doors opened, and he walked through them and down to the metro platform. His thoughts had moved on to his job, and he was worried because—barring a miracle—he would probably not hit his sales target this month. Throwing his cigarette butt onto the tracks, he sat down to wait for the train. He stared gloomily at the tracks with a vague look on his face, yawned tiredly, then absent-mindedly picked with his teeth at a hangnail on his right middle finger until he ripped it off and drew blood. From the bottom of his inside jacket pocket, he pulled out a joint that he had rolled before leaving for his appointment. He lit it up and took a deep drag. He found his job incredibly boring, but he did need to work to make a living. Off to his side, two young men were discussing soccer, but Lucien was as oblivious to what his ears were hearing as he was to the images forming on his retinas.

The noise of the incoming train shook him out of his thoughts, and he raised his eyes. There, on the opposite side of the platform, he saw a billboard that captured his attention. He looked to the right and to the left to see if anyone else was looking at it, but no one else seemed interested in the picture. One of the metro cars partially concealed the image of a gorilla, so instead of climbing on board, Lucien waited for the train to leave in order to see it more clearly.

I didn't have time to read what's written at the bottom of this one. Is it 'Look into my eyes' or 'Look deeply into my eyes'?

The train started up, picked up speed and disappeared from sight. The proud and magnificent animal was visible once again. Lucien saw that the inscription on this poster was different: 'Gaze into my eyes!' This phrase was similar, but... it didn't have exactly the same meaning. He sucked in a last whiff of smoke from his joint, threw the roach away, and spat out a small piece of tobacco. He hesitated for a moment, then rushed through the station, almost running, to get to the opposite platform. He came to a standstill right in front of the billboard and

sank his eyes into the gorilla's. The primate's pupils irresistibly drew him in. The words 'Gaze into my eyes!' echoed in his mind like a hypnotic command.

He wondered, *Why was this poster at the ophthalmologist's and why is it here, too? But... wait... It wasn't actually an ad! It wasn't selling anything! Who spends money on a picture of a gorilla saying, 'Gaze into my eyes'? Ha! Maybe it was a series of teaser ads... and we'll find out what they're selling later on.*

He called out to a couple that was walking by, "Hey, have you ever seen this poster before?"

The man turned and said, "It's been around for a while. I've seen it in several different places. Why?"

"Oh!" Lucien was astounded. In several different places... for a while...

The couple walked on without paying him any more attention. Lucien could have stood there for who knows how long, staring into the animal's eyes, if his phone hadn't rung. He brought it to his ear and mumbled, "Hello?"

"Hey! What are you doing?" his wife, Isabelle, asked.

"I'm looking at a picture."

"You're looking at a picture? But... uh... a picture of what?"

"A gorilla that's looking into my..."

Realizing suddenly that what he was saying probably sounded a little strange, he muttered, "I left the ophthalmologist a little late and I missed the metro, but I'll be there shortly."

"Do you know what time it is?"

He looked at the time on the screen of his phone and was astonished to see that it was 9:30 p.m. He had left the ophthalmologist's two and a half hours ago.

How did time fly by so fast?

"I'll be home soon," he replied before hanging up.

On the spur of the moment, he took a picture of the poster with his phone, before returning to the platform to wait for his next train.

3) You said something about a gorilla

Lucien arrived at his apartment building at 10:00 p.m.

During his trip home, he was seated next to a woman who was reading a newspaper, and he had involuntarily glanced at it. Just as he started to look away, she turned the page and a picture of the gorilla caught his eye. He felt as if his eyeballs were going to pop out of their sockets, like in a Tex Avery cartoon. The picture covered an entire page, and it was incredibly realistic. The woman suddenly folded the newspaper and got ready to leave the train, so he didn't have the time to closely inspect it. He hadn't been able to read what was printed at the bottom because the creases in the paper masked the text. Getting into the elevator, he thought, *I should have grabbed the newspaper away from her. I hope I can find one tomorrow. I don't even know which newspaper it was!*

He got out on the fourth floor and chided himself for being so obsessed with the gorilla.

Why am I getting myself all worked up over this animal?

He pulled his keys out from the bottom of his messenger bag but didn't get to use them because his wife suddenly swung the door open wide.

"What in the world made you so late?" she said worriedly.

"Oh, nothing. Just a gorilla..."

"...?"

The puzzled look on Isabelle's face made him realize how odd his answer must have seemed. He racked his brain to find a more reasonable explanation, but couldn't come up with one.

"I'm having a hard time wrapping my mind around what really happened," he said, dropping onto the couch. "I'm afraid you're going to think I'm crazy."

She sat down next to him and laid her hand on his knee.

"I've known for quite some time that you're crazy. That's never been a problem. You know that. Go ahead, I'm listening."

Smiling thinly, Lucien launched himself into vague explanations: a combination of circumstances... too many people waiting at the eye

clinic... losing his keys on the subway platform and having a hard time finding them...

This was the first time he had actually lied to his wife, and it made him even more ill at ease.

How can the simple picture of a gorilla have such an impact on me? he wondered, bewildered.

Isabelle thought he was acting strangely, but didn't want to insist and embarrass him even more.

The evening unfolded as it usually did. They dined on lamb chops and fries, barely talking to each other and watching with little interest a political program on the television. She had lowered the volume, hoping it would make conversation easier, but he kept his silence. Watching him from the corner of her eye, she saw that his eyes were glazed and that he was lost in his thoughts. Something was clearly preoccupying him. Having served dessert, she tried again.

"When we talked on the phone, you said something about a gorilla."

"Look into my eyes."

"Huh?"

"The gorilla was saying, 'Look into my eyes!' That's what I thought I had read at first, but the exact words were: 'Look deeply into my eyes!'"

"It spoke to you?"

"Oh no! That was written along the bottom of the poster."

He realized that he was getting annoyed. That disturbed him, but he rapidly regained control of himself. She stared at him interrogatively.

"The billboard on the metro wall?"

He swallowed two spoonfuls of yogurt and corrected himself.

"No, the billboard in the metro said, 'Gaze into my eyes!'. I'm talking about the one at the eye clinic... But that isn't important, never mind. It's just a poster."

"You didn't tell me about the poster at the eye clinic."

"Forget it, it really isn't important."

He refrained from telling her about the picture in the newspaper.

Lucien slept well that night. He woke up fully rested and restored from his dreamless sleep. For breakfast, he had a big bowl of coffee

with milk into which he dunked his buttered toast before devouring it hungrily. Isabelle was happy to see him like this, but couldn't resist asking more questions. Spreading butter on her biscottes, she tried a fresh approach.

“Have you been having problems at work lately?”

“No more than usual! This job is just getting on my nerves... but there's not much I can do about it.”

“Find another job if you can't stand it anymore.”

4) I don't have a picture of a gorilla in my files

Lucien had been at work for an hour, drunk four cups of coffee and called ten prospects, but had nothing to show for it. He hadn't made a single appointment. One of his regular customers, the owner of a luxury store that sold furs and fine jewelry, had called wanting to make some changes to his insurance policies. That meant that some new contracts would be signed, but it obviously wouldn't be enough for him to reach his monthly sales goal.

“Another lousy day!” he called out to Farrah.

The young woman's desk was three meters away from his. She had the same job as he did, but covered a different part of the city. Peeling her eyes off of her screen, she turned towards him, stretched, and yawned.

“Right! I'm tired! I'm going to get myself another cup of coffee. You want one?”

“Sure! It'll be my fifth, but who's counting?”

She got up and disappeared down the hallway. From where he was sitting, Lucien could see his colleague's computer screen. While waiting for his cup of coffee, hoping it would give him the energy he needed to continue his work, he chewed on his fingernail and watched the regularly changing photos she had set as her screen saver. He liked to watch them every once in a while. They were generally deep-sea shots (Farrah visibly liked them), and as he looked on, images of magnificent corals gave way to pictures of a majestic manta ray.

He jumped when the photo of the gorilla appeared. And when he read the inscription written in red, his heart skipped a beat: ‘Look into my eyes, Lucien!’.

When Farrah got back, a cup of coffee in each hand, she found him sitting there, frozen in place, staring at the hammerhead shark on her computer screen. She stuck the cup under his nose.

“Hey! Are you trying to communicate telepathically with my screen or what?”

He grabbed the hot cup distractedly.

“Could you show me the photo of the gorilla you have in your wall-paper file?”

“Gorilla? What are you talking about? I don’t have a picture of a gorilla in my files.”

“Of course you do, I just saw it!”

She went up to her computer, put down her cup of coffee and moved the mouse.

“I can check that out easily,” she said. “Look, here’s the folder with all the pictures I use for my wallpaper screen. That’s the hammerhead shark. Check it out, there aren’t any gorillas.”

He got up and went over, looked intently at each picture, but couldn’t find any gorillas. She seemed surprised by the worried expression on his face.

“Are you feeling okay?”

“...”

“You seem funny all of a sudden! You look confused, as if the photo you’re talking about was the most important thing in your life.”

She observed him sitting there silently while she drank her coffee.

“Oh, well,” she exclaimed, “Whatever! I have an appointment with a prospect. See you later.”

She slung her purse onto her shoulder, grabbed her attaché-case and left, throwing him one last questioning look.

Once he was alone, he went through her wallpaper file again, checking each picture, nibbling on the thumbnail of his left hand. But he did not find what he was looking for. The printer chirped and caught his attention. He got up to see what was being printed. It was a full

page picture of the gorilla, with “Dive into my eyes, Lucien!” written in red across the bottom.

And that’s what he did, in a state of awareness bordering on fascination. Unknowingly, but not unwillingly, he fell under its spell. He felt captivated by the gorilla’s eyes. The hand holding the sheet of paper shook slightly. After a tense moment, he thought he heard someone say, < Gaze into my eyes... no, better still: concentrate... plunge your eyes into mine. Pay close attention... focus on me. >

He shook his head and rubbed his eyes with the palms of his hands, breaking free from the unsettling feeling and its spell-like hold. He sat very still for a long while, not knowing what to do until he was startled by the sound of footsteps coming down the hallway. He quickly slipped the sheet of paper into one of the files piled up on his desk and looked up to see Georges.

Georges was the representative of LHO, the biggest union in the company. He came to a halt in the middle of the room and called out, “Hey, Lucien! I hope you’ve been working on your speech! It better be good! I was wondering about it, since you haven’t sent me anything to read.”

“Don’t worry, you’ll like it.”

“Gosh, you look terrible! Are you okay?”

“Everything’s fine, really.”

“Okay, okay... I’m counting on you.”

Georges turned around and strode away.

Actually, Lucien hadn’t really been working much on his up-coming speech.

I’ll change around some things here and there in last year’s speech and that’ll be enough. Anyway, I’m pretty sure no one remembers what I said, so...

He took advantage of Farrah not being there to smoke a cigarette in front of the open window. She hated that. “You stink up the whole office when you do that!” she would shout at him. He sucked on his cigarette like a drowning man, trying to absorb a maximum of nicotine into his bloodstream, then threw out the butt and closed the window. Just when he was about to retrieve the picture of the gorilla, someone walked up to the office door.

“Hello! I was told that Mr. Lucien Prérubem’s office was here. Is he in?”

“Yes, what is it now?” exclaimed Lucien.

“...!?”

“Oh, sorry. You are in the right place. I am Lucien Prérubem. How can I help you?”

What is happening to me? I have to get a grip on myself.

Referred to him by another customer, the man wanted to get insurance for a vintage motorcycle. He lived in Lucien’s prospect zone, so the signature of this contract would be for him. However, that didn’t make him any happier, even though his monthly sales were meager. Fifteen minutes later, once the insurance policy had been signed in due form, he had to make a good show of refraining his impatience while his new customer bragged about his ride.

“It’s a 1955 Vincent Black Shadow HRD 1,000 series D. Over 150,000 kilometers on it and purrs like a kitten, you know. If only you could hear its engine! It’s as melodious as a symphony and...”

Luckily for Lucien, the client was cut short by the arrival of Héléne, the executive assistant. She gave the proud owner of the antique motorcycle a commercial smile, looked at the printer and said, “Sorry to bother you, just one second... Hmm, I thought I had printed something out. Ah, these computers!”

She left with an exasperated sigh.

“Well, I’ll be going then,” said the Vincent 1,000 man.

“Alright!” said Lucien with some relief. “Your Florent 1,000 is well covered now.”

“Vincent! Vincent 1,000!” corrected the customer, a little miffed.

“Vincent, right! That’s what I meant to say. I apologize! Rest assured, everything’s in order. You made the best choice for your prize possession.”

Lately he had been saying these scripted phrases with less and less conviction, largely out of force of habit. He was no longer interested enough in his job to invent silly new sales pitches.

Once the customer had left, Lucien opened up the file that he had rapidly slid the photo into but couldn't find the picture. He was standing in front of the open file, thoughtfully holding his chin, when H el ene popped in again. She grabbed a sheet off of the printer, then walked up to Lucien.

"Oh, my goodness, you look lost in your thoughts! Ah ha! Well... it looks like you're the one who had my printout! Why did you take it and put it into that file without telling me?"

She snatched up the sheet of paper with the insurance estimate that she had printed out for a certain Robin Mouassac.

"I must have picked it up without paying attention," mumbled Lucien. "Sorry about that!"

She laid the estimate back down.

"That's okay, but you really look out of sorts today. You can throw that one away, I printed a second one."

She left, in a hurry as usual. Lucien brought the sheet of paper so close to his eyes that it touched his nose, as if seeing it up close would help him find the answer to this mystery. He rifled through the file again, then through the other files, but could find no trace of the photo of the gorilla. That was when he realized that he had strewn piles of paper all over the floor around him. A thought crossed his mind—but only quite fleetingly—and, for the first time, he wondered if he had a mental problem. He did his best to clean up the mess. His files already had the reputation of being a jumbled chaos!

When Farrah returned, she found him sitting on the corner of her desk.

"There!" she called out to him. "Another contract signed. I didn't go there for nothing. What time is it? Already 11:30! Well, enough for today! I'm going to get myself a cup of coffee. Do you want one?"

She saw that he was holding a sheet of paper out to her.

"What? What's that?" she asked.

"What do you see printed here?"

"Uh... An estimate. Why?"

"Nothing. No reason..."

She shrugged politely, as if to say, ‘what’s this all about, again?’ Then she repeated, “So, do you want some coffee?”

Suddenly, Lucien had an idea.

“Wait! Wait!”

Berating himself for not having thought of it before, he pulled out his phone and looked for the picture he had taken at the subway station.

Easy enough! It has to be the last picture I took; I haven’t taken any since then.

“What?” she asked impatiently.

“Alright! Go get your caffeine, I’ll show it to you when you get back.”

While she went to get the coffee, he sat there, meditatively looking at the last picture he had taken. It was indeed a poster... yes, it was. But it was an advertisement for an electric shaver. He scrolled through the pictures he had taken before that, then came back to the most recent one, the one with the shaver. Everything that surrounded the billboard, the tiles, the rounded wall of the tunnel, the platform... he remembered having seen all that. Without any doubt, he had taken a picture of a shaver, believing that he was taking a picture of a gorilla.

“So, what did you want to show me?” asked Farrah when she came back with the two cups.

“Oh... nothing, nothing... I must have deleted the picture I wanted to show you.”

“What was it?”

“It’s nothing, really.”

“Come on, tell me!”

“It was a gorilla!” he answered in an exasperated tone.

“Alright, don’t get uptight about it! I’m telling you, you’ve been really creepy today. Anyway, I didn’t know that you liked gorillas so much. Where did you get a picture of one? At the zoo? Or were you out in the jungle?”

Unable to hide his foul mood, he left the room without taking the cup of coffee she was holding out to him.

5) Lucien swiveled his head

By the time Lucien reached Baie Bleue Avenue, it was almost noon. He wasn't hungry, so he wandered around, his hands in his pockets, and after a while absent-mindedly followed a group of people into a bar. He racked his tortured brain, asking himself the same question over and over: *Am I going crazy?*

"What can I get you folks?" asked a server.

Engrossed in his thoughts, Lucien didn't answer. He didn't even see the interrogative looks that the man and the two women he had followed in were throwing his way. His memory of the gorilla that he had seen on the poster in the metro station—as well as the one he had seen on the printout in place of the estimate—was so vivid! A thought popped into his mind: *What about the one at the ophthalmologist's?*

The clinic wasn't very far. He ran there as fast as he could. Barely five minutes later, he rushed up the stairs and burst into the waiting room, huffing and completely out of breath. He saw (or rather, did not see) just what he had dreaded: nothing was there. Not a single poster of a gorilla in the room.

There's no more a gorilla on that wall than a giraffe in my pocket. That's why that young woman flipped out! I must have really embarrassed her by looking around her that way, trying to read the inscription on a poster that only I could see!

He went back down to the street and walked aimlessly around, not knowing where he was going.

And to think that the animal was talking specifically to me in the last two pictures! This can only be the fruit of my sick mind. How else can I explain my name being in the text?

Just to be sure, he decided to go back and check out the billboard at the metro station. Unsurprisingly, but with a pinch of disappointment, he could see that the billboard that he had taken a picture of was definitely an ad for a shaver. He went back up above ground and walked into Chez Marcel, a bar located near the corner of Dufour Boulevard and Baie Bleue Avenue. After choosing a table in a back corner where he could be alone, he ordered a cup of coffee with a salami and butter sandwich. Out of habit, he started reading the newspaper someone had

left on the table. His phone rang in his pocket and he saw it was Isabelle. He answered, trying to sound as natural as possible, but didn't want to talk for too long.

Once the brief exchange was over, he laid his phone down on the table, and his vacant eyes on the newspaper. He suddenly shuddered: it was happening again. There! In the newspaper! The photo of the gorilla covered the entire page! The red letters at the bottom read: 'Lucien, probe my eyes!' He shut then reopened his eyes, trying to protect himself from what he was seeing, and let out a yelp of astonishment. The gorilla was still there. The newspaper, the table, the bar, everything else had vanished, but the gorilla was still there. It wasn't even on the paper anymore—everywhere he looked, the image was there. Eyes closed, Lucien could see the great ape floating around in the void. Eyes open, the image superimposed itself on his own vision of the world.

How in the world am I going to explain this to a psychiatrist? Hello, sir, I need to come in for a consultation because I see gorillas everywhere I look! I even see them when my eyes are closed. What do you think, doctor, is this common? Is this a harmless symptom?

< You will have to tell him that you can also hear me! >

Lucien jumped. There was no one nearby. Was there a loudspeaker in the wall behind him? No, nothing that he could see. He wondered who had spoken, although 'spoken' wasn't the right word to describe it... 'murmured' would probably be more appropriate, maybe... no, not even that.

< I sense your stress. You have already accepted the fact that you see me... so hearing me too shouldn't make that big of a difference, right? >

He turned and looked all around but couldn't see anyone whispering to him or even making any kind of sound.

Well, doctor, I can also hear it. What should I do? Geez! I'm suffering from a terrible mental illness that I invented just for myself! I always have to be in a league of my own, don't I!

< You cannot actually hear me. I did not use the right verb, because we are not using sounds. Let us say that you can mentally perceive the words that I am thinking when I want to communicate with you. >

I'm definitely going crazy! I'm having a conversation with myself, and pretending that it's a gorilla who is talking to me in my head! How did my brain spin out of control so fast?

“Here you go, sir! Sorry for the wait, I'm all alone in the bar today... Oh, but it's you again! You're back!”

Lucien whipped around towards the server, but the image of the gorilla superposed itself over him from his face to his waist.

“What do you mean, I'm back?”

“You ran out of here earlier today, remember?”

“Uh...”

“5.50 euros,” said the man, putting the cup of coffee, the sandwich, and the bill on the table.

Lucien swiveled his head from right to left, then from top to bottom, rolling his eyes, trying to get a look at the face of the person who was talking to him, trying to use the part of his vision that was clear. He even tried to wave away the image that was blocking his view with his hand, as if trying to chase smoke away. The waiter watched him with curiosity, but stayed silent until Lucien murmured, “What is this thing? Go away!”

“What thing?” the server answered with a perplexed frown.

The hairy primate disappeared.

“I'm so sorry!” Lucien said, putting ten euros onto the saucer that the man was holding out to him. “I wasn't talking to you.”

The barman slipped the bill into his pocket, shrugged, and left without saying a word.

< I hope I am not being too much of a problem, > ‘said’ the gorilla, reappearing into Lucien's field of view. < Next time I will disappear faster. The thing is, you have not mastered how to intentionally communicate with me yet. I can capture some of your thoughts, but they are not very clear because you are not intentionally directing them to me. It is also partly my fault, I have not mastered the different planes yet. I should have projected my image behind the waiter. >

Oh my! How'd I manage to invent a mental illness as wacky as this one! Only I can come up with things like this. Even when I'm going mad, I have

to do things my own way. And in the most ridiculous manner, I must say! What should I do? What can I do? How can I explain this to Isa? What to do? Oh my goodness!

He stopped chewing on his fingernails and lit up a cigarette.

< Stop complaining! Why jump so quickly to the conclusion that you are mad? That is what you are thinking, right? >

What should I do? I'm losing my mind, and tragically, I'll probably also lose my job. It's the psychiatric ward for me. And a straightjacket. What is Isa going to think? Should I even tell her about it? What am I to do?

< You should trust me when I say that you are not going crazy. I really do exist, you know! I am not a figment of your imagination. >

I'm telling myself that I'm not mad in the craziest possible way!

< No, you are not the one saying that you are not crazy; I am. >

Lucien tried to chase these unwanted ideas from his mind. Biting into his sandwich, he chewed without appetite. He stared with blank eyes at the small Formica-covered table in front of him, but he could still see the gorilla on it. The great ape spoke to him once again.

< You should not eat that. >

< Why not? Should I now be taking your taste into account? >

Ha! I am now getting into an argument with myself. My brain must really be in overdrive!

< No, it is not a question of taste. It is because an animal had to be killed to produce that salami. Moreover, an animal that was raised in horrible conditions, provoking atrocious suffering. A cow was also exploited in order to make the butter. >

< That's life! The lion eats the zebra! What do you want me to do about it? >

< The lion? What does the lion have to do with this? You are not a lion, and lions do not eat salami. >

< The lion is just a figure of speech! What I mean is that I'm a predator and therefore I eat other animals. >

< You are a predator? You? >

< Leave me alone! >

Oh my! I'm telling myself to leave myself alone.

< Alright. Just one last question. Do lions suckle cows? >

< That's a stupid question! >

< The butter on your sandwich comes from the exploitation of a cow. So, since you are using the lion as a metaphor to justify your eating habits, I wanted to know if lions suckled cows. >

Moreover, doctor... When I'm in my manic state, I also sometimes wonder if lions suckle cows. Yes, doctor, I'm more than willing to take a double dose morning, afternoon, and evening. Triple dose, yes, even better.

Lucien was beginning to indulge in self-pity.

< You know what we are going to do? I will leave you alone for a while so that you can give all of this some thought. I would like you to consider that I am not an invention of your mind, that I really do exist. Okay? Think it over, please. I will come back soon. >

The image disappeared and the 'voice' went silent.

Lucien noticed that the barman and some customers were throwing him meaningful looks every now and then with knowing smiles.

They're all aware now that I'm as nutty as a fruitcake. I have to call Isa. This hallucination might come back at any time.

He called his wife, told her what bar he was in, and asked her to come pick him up as soon as she could. She asked him why, and he told her he wasn't feeling well, that he couldn't tell her why over the phone, but that he would explain everything once home.

*

3:00 p.m.

Isabelle was self-employed and worked from home. She coded database software using PHP/MySQL for her clients' websites. The freedom she had in her job made it possible for her to pick up Lucien without having to account for her time.

They were both now sitting on the living room couch. She had her eyes fixed on his as he told her everything that he had gone through.

"... and I thought it would be better if you came and picked me up because I'm feeling completely lost. I don't know when it'll happen again."

“And right now, at this instant, you can neither see it nor hear it?”

“No, nothing at all.”

She must think that I'm certifiable, and she's right.

“You didn't try to respond to it, but it seems that you can have a dialogue with it.”

“What do you mean?”

“When it says something like ‘I am the one telling you that you are not crazy. It isn't you. I am not a figment of your imagination.’ That proves that it can respond to your thoughts.”

“Yes, that's true. But as I was saying, it can only be my imagination.”

“If it comes back, we'll take care of it together. I won't let you deal with this on your own.”

“So, you believe me?”

“I think that you believe that what you're experiencing is real. This gorilla really exists for you.”

Lucien's eyes filled with warm tears of appreciation and tenderness. She was the only one who could help him. He noticed she was lost in her thoughts.

“What's on your mind?” he asked. “That I'm off my rocker, right?”

“I was thinking that, if it happens again, we'll ask it to give us proof of its existence.”

“How?”

“We'll see.”

Lucien supposed that she had something in mind and felt reassured because he admired, in spite of everything he had been taught, Isabelle's great intelligence. And what was it that he had been taught? From an early age, his father had told him that women's cognitive abilities were weaker than men's; his father himself had been conditioned to think that way too. He was therefore convinced that he was living with an exceptional woman. He was, on one hand, flattered, but on the other hand slightly self-conscious too, because he had always felt that Isabelle was superior to him, both in her studies and in her career.

6) Her thoughts went to her mother

She no longer had a body. What remained of her was hooked up to very sophisticated machines that kept her alive. All of this was in a secured location guarded twenty-four hours a day by armed men, and only the people working on this secret project were allowed to enter.

She could see, but not through her own eyes, because they had been removed. Lenses had been wired directly into her visual cortex located within her occipital lobe. She could hear, but not through her own ears because they, too, had been removed. Microphones transmitting digitally converted signals had been connected to the auditory area of her brain. These artificial senses allowed her to see and hear what was going on around her, but also elsewhere in the world.

Her other senses had not been linked up to sensors. They had inflicted horrible suffering upon her, but since they had disconnected her nervous system from her body, she could no longer be tortured. However, she could still feel pain from her phantom physical body, like people who sometimes feel fictitious itching from an amputated limb. These exclusively physical torments were much easier to bear than the suffering caused by the numerous amputations and operations that had transformed her into what she was. It would have been extremely difficult for her to describe the psychological misery of having no body, though. No words could depict the terrible ordeal she was going through, because she was the first ever to have experienced anything like it. There was only one way to get an inkling of what she was enduring: imagine no longer seeing or feeling your hands, your feet, or any other part of your body, for the horribly unique reason that they no longer exist.

Her thoughts went to her mother, as they often did. The last memory she had of her was incredibly sad, and every time it came to her mind, she felt heartbroken all over again. Once more, she hoped that her mother had died rapidly without suffering.

7) Good morning, Predator!

Lucien and Isabelle both had a restless night. He didn't sleep well because he was afraid he was losing his mind and that the symptoms would come back. She tossed and turned because she was worried about him. But nothing happened that night. The next morning, Lucien drank a large bowl of coffee, but ate nothing. Isabelle had a couple of grams of granola with milk. She then tried to work on a database that she was developing, but the going was slow because of a problem with variable typing. Her head was a jumbled mess, and she just couldn't concentrate on what she was doing. Lucien called in sick to work. He sprawled out on the couch, searching the Internet for information on hallucinations. It was close to noon when the image of the gorilla appeared on his screen.

He jumped. But strange as it may seem, even to himself, he felt slightly pleased. This strengthened his belief that he was going insane. Why was he only slightly pleased? Because it was also very disturbing. He somehow felt like he was reuniting with a friend. Admittedly, up to then the animal had never been unpleasant. It had even shown consideration by allowing him time to rest and had apologized for having projected itself onto the barman, promising to be more careful next time.

< Good morning, Predator! > said the gorilla. < I waited until you had gotten some rest. I hope that I am not interrupting anything. >

Predator! I am now making fun of myself via an imaginary gorilla, doctor. Should I swallow an entire bottle of pills three times a day? Or put on ten straightjackets, one on top of the other? Doing both would probably be safer.

< No, you aren't interrupting anything, > said Lucien, sending the thought mentally.

His heart was beating so violently that he felt it all the way up to his temples.

< This is the first time that you respond to me intentionally. You do not know how pleased I am. >

< Yes, all I need to do is think that I want to respond and I can do it. This is insane! Or maybe I'm the one who's insane. I'm beginning to believe in all this monkey business! >

< First of all, you are not crazy. I will eventually convince you I exist. Second, you should not say ‘monkey business’, that’s a speciesist phrase. >

Speciesist? Now that’s a good one! I’m presently inventing new words. I’m totally bananas!

< Speciesist? What does that mean? >

< Relating to species. Speciesism is discrimination based on one’s species. Just like racism is discrimination based on race. Look it up on the Internet. That way you will learn what it is and at the same time will have to acknowledge that I am not a creation of your mind: you could not have conceived an actual word that is unknown to you. You have to admit that that would be an unlikely coincidence. >

I’ve already met people who talk to themselves. But since I’m a basket case, I’ve invented an adjective and an imaginary gorilla is defining it for me. Can a mental illness of this magnitude even be treated? It’s hopeless—I’m definitely deranged.

The animal disappeared from the screen and reappeared on the wall opposite the couch.

Speciesist? I’m going to look it up... or am I going to convince myself that I’ve looked it up and found a definition? I’m completely bonkers. It’s pure madness! It’s tragically funny though. Then again... let’s see what we can find...

“What did you say?” asked Isabelle, hearing him murmuring.

“It’s back,” he said casually. “It’s talking to me.”

She seemed surprised by his calm demeanor.

“Where do you see it?”

He pointed.

“There. On the wall.”

“And what’s it saying?”

“It told me not to use the phrase ‘monkey business’ because it’s speciesist.”

< Speciesist! corrected the gorilla. Not speliesist. Speciesist. >

“Speliesist?” she wondered.

“Speciesist! Not speliesist. Speciesist.”

“Right! But what does that mean?”

“I really don’t know; I’ve never heard the word before. It defined it as discrimination based on species. Like racism is for race.”

“I... I think I’ve heard that before. Are you sure you don’t know that word? How could you invent a word that already exists? That would be an incredible coincidence.”

“That’s exactly what it told me when it asked me to look the word up. It also said this would clearly prove that it is not the fruit of my madness.”

Lucien easily found the definition. He then sat there thoughtfully scratching his chin and looking at the gorilla on the wall. It looked like it was animated now. The movements were barely discernible—its eyes blinked and the skin on its face rippled imperceptibly.

Isabelle, who had been watching Lucien for a while now from the corner of her eye, finally asked, “Can you still see it?”

“Hmm? Ah! Yes... of course. You don’t see anything there, do you?”

“All I see is a white wall, as a matter of fact!” she admitted. “You should really try to stop biting your nails, you know.”

“...”

“The definition of the word corresponds to the one the gorilla seems to have given you, right?”

Lucien noted that she said, “seems to have given you”. She was distancing herself from this ‘gorilla’ and he understood why.

“Well, yes... I suppose you’re thinking that I must have already known the word without being aware of it.”

“That’s the most plausible explanation, I must admit. It’s easier to believe that than to believe in an ape that only talks to you and that only you can see. I hope you aren’t angry with me. But, you know, whatever happens, I’m always in your corner.”

He pulled open the drawer in the table and took out a carved wooden box that contained everything needed to roll a joint. Putting a pinch of tobacco on a plate, he answered, “Of course, I’m not mad at you. I’m actually thinking along the same lines as you are, that I’m most certainly schizo.”

“Funny, it feels like you’re not as scared of it as you were before.”

He warmed up the lump of hash with the flame of his lighter, then began to crumble it and mix it in with the tobacco.

“True. I don’t know if this is the normal evolution of the illness as it gets worse, but I’m feeling pretty good about myself at the moment. Believe it or not, to my surprise, I was happy to see it again when it appeared, whereas just a couple of hours ago, I was dreading its return. I was terrified of it coming back.”

He rolled his joint, wet the sticky adhesive with his tongue, lit it up and puffed on it with a meditative expression. Three drags later, he handed the cone to Isabelle. She smoked on it for a while and declared, “Alright! I’m starving! How about you?”

“Me too. I’m starving. There are leftovers from the veal blanquette and some rice. I’ll go heat it all up.”

He took the dishes from the refrigerator and put them in the microwave oven.

< I think I heard you say that you are going to eat, Predator. >

< Yes, I am. >

< And what are you going to eat? >

< Veal blanquette. >

Lucien set the microwave oven’s timer to six minutes, pushed on the start button, and started pacing, hands in his pockets.

When the oven was about to shut off, he mentally asked, < Are you still there ? >

I am so far gone that I’m asking myself if I’m still here. How crazy is that!

< Yes, I am. >

Lucien felt that this terse reply was staving off a terrible, barely repressed anger. He sensed that this ire was potentially and frightfully violent. What he felt was not reflected in the tone of the words, for they were not being said—their communication was nonverbal. But Lucien could still clearly feel it, and it struck him suddenly straight to the heart.

“What’s the matter? What is it now?” asked Isabelle, seeing him as white as the refrigerator.

< You are going to fill your obscene stomach with the flesh of a baby cooked in the milk of a cow who is crying over her own child. A baby

that never even tasted the milk of its mother! Such cynical cruelty! Your spirit cannot feel compassion! Your saliva flows faster than your tears, and your voracious stomach speaks louder than your barren heart! >

Intense fury accompanied these word-thoughts. They touched Lucien's soul as if she had unleashed the fires of hell upon him.

Isabelle carried the two plates over to the table. Since Lucien remained standing in front of the oven, she repeated, "So, are you coming? What's wrong?"

"I'm coming, but I'm not really hungry anymore."

8) Engrams

No longer having a body was not the only change she had been through. They had also made numerous experiments on the gorilla's nervous system, with probably the most significant being synaptic amplification. Synaptic amplification had only recently been tested on living beings; trials up to then had been made using computer simulations. This discipline was so new that the experts in the field themselves were far from imagining what the outcome of these tests could be.

The impact of the synaptic amplification on her brain had been progressive. The animal remembered when she had felt the first effects of the experiment. The experiences of entire lives had suddenly been fed into her brain, along with extraordinarily vivid memories. The first life had been the life of a racehorse. One hour was all that had been needed for all the contents of the poor animal's memory, from the moment of its birth to its dramatic death in a slaughterhouse, to be subsumed. Two days later, the same events repeated themselves, this time with almost the whole life of a dairy cow. The next day, she had absorbed a human being's entire existence. She had read on the Internet that the bioelectric traces left by memories in the brain were called 'engrams' and that they were believed to be the material basis of memory. Nothing could explain, though, how, or why she was the one

stocking all of these engrams, if that was what was in fact happening. At this point in time, she chose neither the source nor the moment. All of these events occurred through no will of her own.

Then, something new occurred. Someone she hadn't noticed before was about to try a new experiment. She did not know what this person's intentions were, but she knew the person was thinking about her and was planning on doing something to her. This was way more than an intuition—she had collected this information and knew that it was as accurate as if she had actually seen it herself.

*

Colonel Elijah Floyd was a man with a mission: to protect and maintain the secrecy of the SACI project. What was SACI? The mystery surrounding it and propagated by the Army was so impenetrable that he himself knew nothing about it, other than that they were doing research into the brain, and more precisely into synaptic amplification. He also knew that other countries were doing the same and that their intelligence services and counterintelligence agencies were all on full alert. It was the Manhattan Project era—when the first nuclear bomb was being developed—all over again. It was true that operational synaptic amplification would give the first army to possess it a definite military advantage.

Despite the considerable efforts and resources being implemented so that nothing would transpire, many rumors circulated. One of those rumors was that they were developing weapons that could remotely make someone lose their mind.

When the colonel came on duty, he barked out his orders.

“I want fifteen of our best men appointed to surveillance twenty-four hours a day! Four of them will be in faction in front of this fucking door! I want them armed to the teeth and ready to shoot the first unauthorized person to come near. I also want to get rid of this damned Internet.”

“Get rid of the Internet? That's impossible, Colonel!”

“Okay, well, I apologize, I’m a little on edge. In that case, I’ll need the best experts in computer and network security.”

“I assure you that we have hired the best in the world, Colonel.”

Two days later, an event occurred that shocked them all. Albert Mauras, one of the brain wave interface experimenters employed by SACI, committed suicide by slitting his own throat with a scalpel. It was so unexpected that it took everyone by surprise. The investigation established that no one could have foreseen this tragedy. The man had everything in the world to feel good about, and all the witnesses confirmed that he seemed happy.

Colonel Floyd was in a terrible state. He suspected that this was a murder disguised as a suicide, aimed at undermining SACI.

9) I’ve never heard of anything like this!

Isabelle didn’t know what to do. From her point of view, Lucien showed all the signs of a strange mental illness. She had discreetly contacted a psychiatrist to ask for advice. The psychiatrist had listened to her description of the symptoms. Frowning, she had rubbed her forehead and breathed out a disbelieving and baffled sigh.

“Over the course of my twenty-year career, I’ve never heard of anything like this! Could you convince him to come in and see me?”

“I’ll give it a try... I’ll try... But in this instance, what do you think it is?”

“For the moment, I know no more than you do. Most certainly a form of schizophrenia. Will he at some point remember that he already had heard the word ‘speciesism’ before? That remains to be seen... I’d like to have a conversation with him, and, if possible, with both him and his gorilla.”

“I’ll do my best to get him to come to your office. But whatever is happening in his mind just pops up unpredictably.”

“Yes, and if it happens while he’s at work, you won’t know about it. Unless he calls to tell you about it.”

“He hasn’t been going to work. He’s been lying on the couch all day lately. I can keep an eye on him that way because I work from home.”

“Ah! That’s a good thing. To facilitate this three-party encounter, I’d be willing to see him at any time of the day or night. If it happens while I’m having a session, I’ll interrupt it and ask my patient to come back later because of an unforeseen emergency.”

“Thank you so much, Doctor!”

The psychiatrist took one of her business cards and wrote on the back. She handed it to Isabelle.

“Here’s my cell phone number. Call me as soon as his strange imaginary contact appears.”

10) Like cash cows...

Sitting at his desk, leaning on his bent elbow with his chin in his hand, Lucien stared at Farrah’s screensaver without seeing it. Farrah was at the coffee machine in the hallway. He had come back to work because he needed the money, but he couldn’t get himself to concentrate on what he was doing. His mind was elsewhere. The morning had been spent filing paperwork, and he had called two clients early in the afternoon with no results. He began working on the speech that Georges had asked him to write, figuring that even if it wouldn’t help him reach his sales goal, at least it would allow him to clear his head. Opening up his word processor, he made a copy of his last speech, reading it with the same amount of interest that a pyromaniac would have for a fire extinguisher: ‘Not only is the Government not our ally, but it is our enemy! The Government is the one provoking the so-called radicalism that it accuses us of. Repression has caused us to intensify our fight against...’

< Hello, Predator! What are you doing? >

< I’m reading one of my old speeches, hoping it will give me inspiration for a new one. >

There I go again! My brain is running wild once more!

< Oh, really! Interesting... Do you want to read it to me? >

Lucien read the text to it.

“Here you go!” said Farrah, setting down a cup of coffee in front of him.

“Thanks! That’s nice of you.”

She threw him a scrutinizing look.

“Are you feeling better than the last time I saw you?”

“Yeah... yeah... I’ll be fine.”

“Okay!” she responded skeptically. “If you need to talk, I’m here for you. Is everything all right between you and Isabelle?”

“Yes, it is...”

“Help me move my desk over a little. I’m tired of turning my back to you.”

They turned the piece of furniture so that it almost faced him.

“There,” she said, satisfied. “This way, I can keep an eye on you. Now you’re on my right instead of hiding behind me. We should have done this a long time ago.”

They both went back to work on their respective computers. Lucien picked up where he had left off, reading ‘out loud in his head’.

< ...the intensification of our battle against oppression. We are being exploited, treated like cash cows by the owners of our production and distribution tools, in other words those who... >

Gosh, I’m so sick and tired of this...

The gorilla interrupted him.

< When you say, ‘like cash cows’... >

< Yes, what? >

< You mean it is not normal for you to be exploited because you are not a cash cow. You therefore suggest that it is normal for cows to be exploited, right? >

I wonder how I come up with all of this!

< It could be understood that way, I guess. But... then again... We aren’t beas-- What I mean is that it’s disgraceful to treat human beings like anim-- Enough! Go away, let me finish my speech! >

“What? I’m not interfering with your writing... Why are you saying that?”

“Sorry Farrah, I wasn’t talking to you.”

< Tell me at least why exploiting cows is not such a bad thing. >

“Not talking to me? Then who were you talking to? You talk to yourself now?”

He concentrated on what he was doing so that he wouldn't say his thought-words out loud anymore.

< Because, in my opinion, I think the well-being of humans is more important than the well-being of cows. And since I'm a human being, it seems natural that my first concerns would be for those of my species. Sadly though, as it is, mankind has enough problems without worrying about other species. >

< Your preferential priority claim would be admissible if you were only talking about their 'well-being' and 'worrying about' them, as you put it. However, taking better care of cows is not the subject here; what I am saying is that they should not be exploited anymore. I am not talking about doing the right thing, but about no longer doing the wrong thing. >

< Uh... >

< And then, when you talk about your species, you use the word 'mankind'. That in itself is very sexist and patriarchal, a contemptuous attitude towards your females, towards women. >

This is crazy! There are two of us in my head! Soon, if this keeps going on, the gorilla-me is going to convince the human-me that I'm just an old fart!

< Yeah, well! What can I do about it? >

< Do not use the expression 'cash cows' anymore, to begin with. And say 'human beings' when you are talking about human beings rather than 'men' or 'mankind'. >

< If that makes you happy... >

“If what makes me happy?” said Farrah, surprised.

“Huh?”

“You just said, 'If that makes you happy.' What are you talking about?”

Lucien drank some coffee and put the cup back down.

“Uh... Sorry! I was just thinking, and some words must have slipped out.”

< Yes >, said the gorilla. < I would appreciate that. It would also be nice if you no longer ate any more dairy products or meat. >

Farrah was watching Lucien out of the corner of her eyes.

< An overwhelming majority of people eat dairy products and meat. Almost everybody does. >

< So what? >

< That goes to show that it's normal to do so. >

< Are you telling me that the majority has necessarily got it right? >

< When such a huge proportion does, yes, chances are it is. >

< I understand... >

< Well, yeah...! Glad you're finally seeing the light, > Lucien answered.

< So, when everyone believed the Earth was flat, it really was. It became ball-shaped later on, when the majority began to believe that it was round. >

It's fun being crazy! These are questions I've never asked myself before!

< Okay... the majority isn't always right, > Lucien admitted. < Nevertheless, we've always done it. >

< Done what? >

< Always eaten meat and dairy products. >

< I understand... >

< Really? >

< Yes... why doubt me? > asked the gorilla.

< Because you often say that you understand, and then... >

< I really do understand your point. Illnesses have always existed, so no use getting treated for them. Wars have always existed, so we should continue killing each other, because that is how it has always been. Acute poverty, illiteracy, rape, crippling diseases, blindness, deafness, suffering... all these have always existed, so there is no reason to try and rid ourselves of them, much less prevent them from happening. And why do women vote? Even if they now have the right to, they were never allowed to before... >

My form of craziness is incredibly insidious! It'll wind up convincing the sane part of my mind that it's the one that's nuts!

Lucien suddenly remembered that Isabelle had asked him to call when the gorilla came back to talk to him. He rang her to tell her.

“Come home, I’m going to take you to see someone,” she said simply before hanging up.

Surprised, he wondered what she was up to.

What did she mean by ‘someone’?

It was almost 7 p.m. His curiosity piqued, he would have gladly gone home to see who she was talking about, but he had an important appointment at half past. The jeweler-furrier that he was supposed to meet up with was a very good client, so putting off the appointment was not an option. Forgetting to say goodbye to Farrah, he left, determined not to let the meeting last any longer than necessary.

11) I must advise you not to deal with this client!

Lucien arrived at the jeweler’s five minutes early. He tossed his cigarette, put his phone on silent and entered. The store owner was leaning on his elbows on his glass display case. Inside, lines of rings were embedded in black and red velvet and showcased by powerful lights. He was talking to one of his employees, but broke away and exclaimed, “Mr. Prérubem! You’re right on time, I appreciate that!”

Lucien smiled as best he could, shaking the extended hand. Two gold rings adorned the man’s expertly manicured hands. They were always perfectly white and smooth, with skin that seemed as delicate as a baby’s.

“Good evening Mr. Fobour!”

With a wave of his hand, the master of the house invited him to follow him to an alcove in the corner of the store that he used for sensitive negotiations with his wealthy clientele. Once they both had settled into the comfortable armchairs placed next to a rosewood coffee table, Jean-Philippe Fobour coughed delicately to clear his voice before saying, “So! Tell me all about this new insurance policy, Mister Prérubem. I’m all ears.”

The store featured three types of luxury products: jewelry, fine furs, and high-quality leather goods. A rack of mink and silver fox fur coats separated Lucien and his client from the rest of the store.

The man made ostentatious gestures. He flapped his hand in front of his nose as if chasing away unpleasant smells or an annoying gnat. Lucien opened his attaché-case, took out the document that Fobour had asked him for, and laid it in front of him. Fobour checked the knot of his tie, as if making sure that it was still there. He then slicked an imaginary rebellious lock of hair back into place on the right side of his head with a delicate index finger. Finally setting eyes on the insurance policy, he picked it up to read it. His plucked eyebrows furrowed slightly as he concentrated on his reading. His left hand lightly caressed the black silk of his shirt. Lucien looked at his client without seeing him, his mind on the gorilla.

< I must advise you not to deal with this client! >

Not again!

“The coverage is satisfactory, but the price is a bit high,” said the jeweler.

< Why not? >

“Because I think you should make a goodwill gesture. I am a good customer!”

Whoa! I'm speaking out loud again! This gorilla is driving me nuts!

“Of course, Mr. Fobour. You are one of our greatly valued clients. That's why I'd like to offer you a global five percent discount.”

Jean-Philippe Fobour brushed invisible dust off the sleeve of his alpaca jacket, then stared at Lucien with a look that said ‘come on, you can do better than that!’.

< Do not negotiate with this man, he is going to die. >

< What are you talking about? >

What am I talking about?

< I am going to kill him. >

Before Lucien had the time to ask himself what that statement meant, a man suddenly appeared in front of them. Dressed in jeans and a white shirt, he was small, chubby, with a beard and bald head. He stood there, motionless, for several seconds before suddenly pulling out a gun and pointing it at the astonished storekeeper.

Two deafening roars erupted. Jean-Philippe Fobour fell over backwards, one shot to the heart, the other to the middle of his forehead. The killer then lowered his weapon and stood there, rooted to the spot.

Lucien let out a scream and fell over the rack of coats as he jumped up and backed away. Then, he flew out of the store and ran frantically down the street as if death itself were on his heels. One of the fur coats had wrapped itself around his arm, making him look like he was running away because he had just stolen it. He didn't even notice it falling on the sidewalk a few moments later when he unintentionally bumped into someone. Rapidly out of breath, he rushed into a bar and collapsed onto a chair that made a cracking noise and skidded over the tile floor. All heads turned to look in his direction with curiosity, but he didn't pay them any attention. When the server asked him what he wanted to drink, he realized he was back at Chez Marcel. His legs had carried him there as if they had known all along where they were going.

The barman, with what seemed like great patience, waited for him to recover his breath and finally be able to talk.

“A cup of coffee,” Lucien managed to utter.

The server turned back towards the bar, a dishcloth draped over his arm, a tray held against his stomach and a resigned look on his face. He turned on the espresso machine, brewed a cup, put it on the counter, then cut his eyes towards Lucien. He sat prostrated at his table, his head wrapped in his arms.

< There, there, Predator! You shouldn't blow this all out of proportion, > said the gorilla.

< What was that?! This can't be happening! How could I have guessed that he was going to get killed? >

< You guessed nothing at all. This is proof that I exist, by the way. >

< But... So you're the man who just shot Mr. Fobour? >

< Of course not. I only used that man's body to open fire on your client. >

< But why did you shoot him? >

“I didn't shoot anyone, sir! Here's your cup of coffee.”

“Oh! Thanks. Sorry, I wasn't talking to you...”

“Yeah... I’d guessed that much. I’m starting to get used to it.”

The server moved on, rolling his eyes.

< Why did you kill that man? > insisted Lucien, nibbling on his right thumbnail.

< Why does this concern you? Because you lost a customer? >

< Ha! That’s not the issue! A man just died! >

< The death of one man... the Earth is swarming with seven billion of you! What does one less matter? Seven billion minus one man. That is less than one hair on a head! What is the Earth but one planet out of billions in your galaxy? And moreover, what is so special about your galaxy compared to 100 billion other galaxies? We are only talking here about the visible universe. So, why all the fuss over one sinister individual? >

< I don’t even know why I’m talking to you. You’re crazy! In fact, yes, I’m the one who’s crazy! You are just a figment of my mental illness. >

< Of course... A mental illness that allowed you to guess that your client was going to die. >

< If you really do exist, then you’re a monster! You’re a killer! >

< Nonsense! Your species has not become endangered because I got rid of one human being. >

< But we aren’t talking about species here! You killed an individual, a person. >

< Oh! So what? The situation needs to be regulated at some point. There are way too many humans and they are wreaking havoc. >

< This is monstrous! A real nightmare! >

< You are being dramatic, Predator. But you are overreacting for the wrong reasons. Are you aware that children in Africa, in Madagascar and elsewhere, work hard to extract the gemstones that this evil person was selling? The money that you had come to beg for, the jeweler had earned it off of the backs of destitute men and women who survive by digging mines that collapse and bury them. Yes, these poor people risk their lives and often perish in the mine galleries. Some of the children are only five years old! The gems that are bought from them over there for next to nothing, make people over here, like your client, very rich. How many deaths was he himself personally responsible for? Do those

deaths torment you as much as his? Apparently not, since instead of blaming him for them, you obsequiously pandered to him for his foul money! >

< But... give me a break! >

< Do you know that the fur coats he was selling were made from the skins of minks? Minks were actually living in those skins. That may seem pretty obvious, but you seem to have forgotten it. Imagine a young mink born in a cage that it will never leave, except to be skinned. It looks out through the bars of its cage at the freedom that it will never have. For all its brief life it will be imprisoned, deprived of family and social relations and mostly, it will know fear—and so much pain! In order to steal its fur without damaging it, the mink will either be electrocuted or skinned alive. And for what reason? So that someone can wear the envelope that housed this tragic existence around their neck. And so that people like Jean-Philippe Fobour can get rich, too. How many minks are living and dying in such horrible conditions? Does that distress you? Your contempt for all of this suffering is so strong that it does not allow compassion to even flit through your tiny little doxa-formatted mind. >

< But... come on, really! >

< Hundreds of child slaves, millions of minks or foxes perish every year to make trinkets for the wealthy, and you worry yourself sick because I killed a merchant of suffering and pain? >

< You can't compare the lives of minks to the lives of human beings! All lives are not of equal value! >

< Right! Jean-Philippe Fobour's life was not worth any of the lives that he destroyed! >

< What I meant is that you can't compare the life of a human to that of a mink. >

< Yes, I understood you perfectly. Are you racist? >

< Of course not! What does that have to do with this? >

< What it has to do is that when you refuse to discriminate because of the color of someone's skin, refusing to discriminate because of what is covering that skin—hair, feathers, or scales—is only a small step away. >

< Well, in any case, you can't just take law into your own hands! >

< How you have learned your lesson well! Your head has been well formatted! >

< But rule of law must be upheld! >

< Most certainly, yes! The law of the jungle! >

< No! No way! Laws protect us! >

< Tell me, Predator, when it comes to laws, you are the one who said that the lion eats the zebra. Is that not a metaphor that glorifies the survival of the fittest? >

< Yes, but... > Lucien tried to reply while chewing on the nail of his left pinkie.

< Well then... I am the fittest. Therefore, you cannot criticize me for that. That is the way it is. That is life! The lion eats the zebra. I even ate two of them in one bite, without even having to lift a hand! >

< What do you mean ? >

< The shooter that I had under my control was an arms dealer. He sells devices designed to kill. I think that he will spend the rest of his days in jail. >

< You're despicable. >

< Much less than he is. That putrid being took great pleasure in hunting foxes with hounds. Nothing is more horrific than hunting with hounds! >

I must really have lost it. I'm suffering from an acute case of schizophrenia. I have two personalities in my head bickering in lunatic discussions!... Alright, so... how could I have known that this murder was going to take place? But!... Of course! That explains it all!

< Of course! That explains it all! >

< What explains it all, my nice little Predator? >

< That I'm crazy! >

< Again! A little dense, yes! But crazy, no. I will ask you the same question again: how could you have foreseen what was going to happen to your client if I was just an invention of your brain? >

< That's an easy one. This murder did not take place. My crazy mind has made me imagine it all. As a matter of fact, I'm going to go find out if it's true right away. >

Jumping up like an uncoiling spring, Lucien knocked the table over. In his hurry to leave, he shoved past a customer who spilled his drink on his pants. He ran as fast as he could back to Fobour's boutique, leaving howls of protest and threatening gestures in his wake. Now that he was sure that he had imagined the whole thing, he wanted to see it with his own two eyes. But his enthusiasm waned and his anguish grew as he noticed in the distance the flashing lights of police cars in front of the store. Slowing down as he got closer, he saw several men in uniform entering and exiting the jewelry store. Other officers were keeping onlookers at bay. A man and a woman in white coveralls from La Criminelle, the major crimes unit, were also there.

< Two possibilities, my little Predator! Either what you saw really happened, or you are still dreaming. I will let you find the solution to this mystery! >

Lucien stopped and turned around. He felt like someone had placed an enormous boulder on his shoulders. Shoulders hunched, head hanging, he walked away, unsure of where to go. At the epicenter of a terrifying hopelessness, he painfully realized that the gorilla was the only one he could talk to about what had happened. He longed to ask it not to leave him to himself, but how could he expect that the one being who was responsible for all of his problems would want to help him? It was like expecting to get first aid from one's executioner!

12) The policewoman raised a soothing hand

A total basket case, Lucien arrived home around 7:30 p.m., his fingernails bitten to the quick. He walked in, surprised to find two police officers, a blond woman with blue eyes and a tall, thin brown-haired man, waiting for him, standing in the living room with Isabelle.

"Lucien," she mumbled, "these officers brought your attaché-case back. They've been here for a half-hour, I tried to call you, but..."

"I forgot that I'd silenced my phone."

"Good evening, Mr. Prérubem!" said the policewoman, handing him his briefcase.

“Good evening, Mr. Prérubem,” added the policeman. “We’re well aware of how upset you must be, so we won’t take up much of your time. We do need to take your statement, though.”

With a knot in his throat and a pounding heart, Lucien reached out for his attaché-case and replied, “Thank you! I didn’t do anything. I swear... I...”

The policewoman raised a soothing hand.

“No one is accusing you of anything, sir. We watched the CCTV recordings and we know that the murderer is the owner of a gun shop located near the victim’s store. We just wanted to know if you had a clue as to what his motivations were. If you could tell us if there’s anything that you know that could help us understand what was going on in the shooter’s head, that would be extremely helpful. From what we’ve learned so far, the two men didn’t even know each other. Did Jean-Philippe Fobour say anything that should be brought to our attention?”

“Absolutely nothing! I know nothing about it!” cried Lucien in a voice so loud and a tone so dramatic that it surprised both the officers and Isabelle.

Trembling from head to toe, he seemed close to breaking out in tears.

“We really understand how you’re feeling, sir,” asserted the policewoman. “You should get some rest. We’ll contact you later.”

The investigators politely took leave.

“Your life is anything but monotonous at the moment!” declared Isabelle.

Lucien didn’t know what to say. He didn’t feel like talking about what he had just experienced. Isabelle understood that from the despondent look on his face.

“I’m exhausted, that’s all I can say just now. I’m going to roll myself a joint to help me relax.”

“Remember that I wanted to take you to see someone,” she said.

13) So, is it here with you as we speak?

Susan Cilvan was booked until 10 p.m., so that is when Isabelle and Lucien arrived at her office. In the car, with Isabelle driving, Lucien had a 'conversation' with the gorilla during which he did not hide the fact that he was going to see a psychiatrist. The therapist welcomed them kindly. They exchanged the usual civilities, introductions were made, and Isabelle was asked to step out. Not knowing how long the consultation would last, and extremely tired as well as worried about her work not coming along fast enough, she decided to take the metro home and leave the car to Lucien. She sent him a text message to tell him so and left.

*

Lucien gazed at the therapist in a distracted and detached manner. She smiled at him and asked him to take a seat, which he did. The room was quite intimate and decorated with photos you rarely find in such a place: rockets, space shuttles, Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin walking on the moon, portraits of Yuri Gagarine and Valentina Terechkova...

< Dear Predator, you know that she is going to ask you to tell her everything that I say to you. That will slow down our exchanges. Oh well... it is not that big of a deal. This is going to be an interesting experience. >

< Ah! You're still here! >

< Yes. I did not want to leave you alone for too long, not after what I put you through. >

< That's real sweet of you! Your company is so reassuring! >

< Do not be sarcastic now. I was telling you that she will want to know everything about our exchanges. You do not have to tell her every little detail! We are entitled to our privacy, are we not? >

< Well, duh! You didn't think that I was going to brag about knowing who the killer of my client actually is! Anyway, I don't need to tell her that, because I'm already ready for the straightjacket. >

The magnitude of my delusions really is amazing! I'm having amazing conversations with myself! I'm going to need an entire army of head doctors to help me! One doctor alone will never be enough.

The therapist did not sit down behind her desk; she came around to sit next to him. He estimated that she was in her late thirties. She was wearing a pair of gray slacks and a white sweater, a sober and neutral outfit.

"So, is it here with you as we speak?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Where is it?"

"On the wall behind you, above your head."

"Does it talk to you?"

"Every once in a while, yes."

Unconsciously, Lucien was hoping the gorilla would be able to listen to the conversation.

< Tell me, Predator, I hope you do not find her attractive! Do you think she is attractive? >

< No. >

"What is it saying?"

"It's asking me if I find you attractive."

Susan Cilvan looked flustered.

< You did not have to tell her that. >

< What do you care if I find her attractive or not, anyway? >

The scope of my delusions really is amazing! I shouldn't hide anything from the doctor though, if I want to give her a chance to help me. Everything except for the murder. I don't want to talk about that...

< I care, > stated the image on the wall. < She is probably hesitating before asking you what you were going to answer. Feel free to tell her that you do not find her attractive. >

< How do you know what she's thinking? >

< I do not, I am just guessing. If she asks you, just tell her what you told me. You can even say, "No, really not at all!" >

“And what was your answer?”

< Ah ha, see... There you go. She asked you. >

Lucien felt embarrassed about having to answer the therapist’s question.

“Don’t hesitate and don’t lie,” she encouraged him.

< Tell her no. Tell her you do not like her at all! Tell her that she is repulsive!

“I answered, ‘No.’”

“How did it react?”

“It insisted that I tell you what I had answered. It knew that you would want to know and even said that you were hesitant about asking me.”

She must be analyzing how deeply my delirium has set in. I have no choice but to tell her the truth if I want her to reach a diagnosis.

< Believe me, you came here for nothing. She cannot heal you because you are not ill. I really do exist. >

The therapist seemed to be deep in thought. She got up and went to sit down behind her desk across from her patient, glancing at his chewed fingernails. Her brow furrowed, she moved the stapler, then the pen holder, then the tape dispenser a millimeter over. When the three objects seemed perfectly aligned to her, she asked, “How can you handle a three-way conversation like this? I mean, the gorilla and I are speaking to you at the same time, aren’t we? We must be talking over each other. How do you sort it all out?”

She must feel like she’s dining with the Mad Hatter!

“Actually, discussions with it are extremely rapid. We don’t exchange pronounced words but thought-words. It isn’t quite instantaneous, but almost. That’s why I can answer your questions and communicate with the gorilla at the same time.”

< See! That goes to prove that I exist! >

< No, it doesn’t. On the contrary, since I’m talking to myself in my head, it’s normal for the exchange to be fast. I don’t need to listen to myself because I already know what I’m going to say! >

Oh, boy! This is getting worse and worse! It’s getting dangerously worse! I’m talking crazy to myself! Mad stuff!

“Alright...” said Susan Cilvan, meditatively stroking her right cheek with the back of her bent fingers.

“It just pointed out that the explanation I gave you is indeed proof that it exists.”

“It’s trying to persuade you that it exists because you don’t believe it does, right?”

“Well, yes!”

“So, consciously, do you believe that you have a mental illness?”

“Well, yes...”

“But a part of you is trying to convince yourself otherwise. That’s very interesting!” she said while moving the stapler a half-millimeter.

< If she says so! >

“If you say so... It just said that.”

“Huh? You lost me there.”

“I was saying that the gorilla just said, ‘If she says so!’”

“Oh! Okay... Not always easy to follow. So, it seems the animal can hear me?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Other than this character that you have inside your head, do you have any other reasons to doubt your mental integrity?”

< She says that *I* am a character! *She* is the one who is a strange character! >

“Up to now, no.”

< Are you going to let her talk about me so disrespectfully? >

My insanity is on such a roll that I can't tell her everything that's going on in my head. The answers I'm inventing to answer my own questions are all so epic! I can't even begin describing what's going on in my mind. I still hope she can find a cure for me.

< Your denial of my existence is becoming quite intolerable! She calls me a character, and you think I am not real! Yet you know that you could not have foreseen that your client was going to die right before your eyes! And you still are not convinced that I exist. It pains me, you know! >

< Since you're the one bringing up the subject of your crime, there's something I'd like to know. You said the gun shop owner fired his gun

because you willed him to. Can you coerce someone into doing things, into acting in certain ways? Are you capable of remotely controlling people? Can you take control of their bodies? >

< I can, yes. But only with a few rare people. >

< Which ones? >

< I do not know. It works with some of them. It is unpredictable. My powers are different depending on the individual and the moment. I believe it is the same for you. There are some people that you can beat at chess, poker, or arm wrestling, but you do not know who before you give it a try. >

< Have you tried it on me? >

< No. >

< Why not? >

< I have never felt the need to. >

< We'll discuss this later on. >

< If you want to. >

“Well... Then tell me how and when it first manifested itself. Your wife told me what she knew, but I would like to hear your version.”

She rotated a miniature Saturn V rocket that was on her desk one or two degrees, then sat back in her chair with a relaxed expression on her face, ready to listen.

Lucien told her everything that had happened at the ophthalmologist's and in the subway. While he was telling his tale, the image on the wall spoke to him several times: to reaffirm that it really existed, to deny that Lucien had a mental problem, and to question the therapist's intelligence, since she should already have noticed that he didn't have a problem. When Lucien finished his story, Susan Cilvan sat there for a moment without speaking.

“So, you say that you don't converse with words, but directly with thoughts. Is that correct?” she asked him for confirmation.

“I said that we don't use pronounced-words but thought-words. Let me explain a little more clearly. What I mean is that we exchange words that are not pronounced but that are intentionally thought to one another. I also told you that is why our conversations are so

extremely rapid. Even though sometimes I involuntarily say some words out loud that I was directing to it.”

< Stop trying to convince her, Predator! You are wasting your time. Leave her office, let us go to your home. It will be easier for us to talk there. >

This is insane! I want to be cured, and that's why I'm here, but at the same time I'm telling myself that I don't need any help.

“Yes, that’s right! I’m glad you reminded me of that,” said the therapist. That is indeed totally different.”

“...”

Holding her chin meditatively between her thumb and her bent index finger, she looked as if she was mulling things over. She said, “We’ll stop there for today. For the moment, I’m not going to charge you anything, we’ll see about that later. I’ll call you to make another appointment. I’m sorry, but it’s impossible for me to do so now, because I’m expecting an inspector from the URSSAF (*t/n French Social Security Office*) to pay me a visit tomorrow, and I don’t know how long he is going to harass me... Phew! You should know how that goes, since your wife is also self-employed. We independent contractors have become regular cash cows!”

< Cash cows! I am so fed up with all this, > said the gorilla. < I did not want to reveal myself to this woman, but since you are counting on her to rid yourself of me, as if I were just an illness, I will now prove to her that I exist. That way she will tell you herself that I am not an imaginary character. >

This said, Susan Cilvan froze for about ten seconds during which Lucien wondered what was happening to her. She then jerked out of her stupor and let out a long, terrible, and terrifying wail.

< What did you do to her? > asked Lucien.

< Nothing, of course, since I do not exist! >

14) Lucien called an ambulance

Susan Cilvan hid her face in her hands and let out several screams. Then she cried out, “Yes! What you’re seeing truly exists. You aren’t sick.” She lost consciousness after that, and crumpled to the hardwood floor.

Stunned, Lucien called an ambulance. The emotion on his face and the confusing account that he gave the paramedics convinced them to call the police before taking the psychotherapist to the closest emergency room. Lucien had been asked to answer the police commissioner’s questions before being allowed to go home.

2:15 a.m.

As soon as he got home, Lucien recounted everything to Isabelle, who had been waiting for him with growing impatience.

“She said, ‘What you’re seeing truly exists?’”

“Yes, I’m sure of that.”

“Then... she fainted?”

“She fainted, yes. She fell off of her chair right in front of me.”

“This is nuts!”

Isabelle’s incredulous look irritated him somewhat. He called the police station and handed her the phone.

“Here’s the police station. Ask them about my statement and tell them that you haven’t heard from me.”

A police officer confirmed that Lucien had given a statement.

“You can also call the paramedics if you want to,” he said as soon as she got off the phone.

“That isn’t necessary. I believe you. What’s your gorilla doing at the moment?”

“I haven’t heard from it since it last talked to me at the shrink’s.”

“But you’re sure it’s the one that...?”

“Of course it is, because it told me it was going to reveal itself to her.”

He tried to repeat everything that the image had said to him as accurately as possible before the therapist fainted.

“Why ‘cash cows’? What do cash cows have to do with this?” she wondered.

“The doctor had just said that independent contractors were the cash cows of the URSSAF. Those words apparently made the gorilla very mad.”

“So, that animal was defending the URSSAF!”

He didn’t feel like answering what sounded like a sarcastic remark. Isabelle remained silent for a long while. He did too.

“So, I guess you believe it exists now, don’t you?” she asked.

“Yes, I do. I didn’t want to admit it to myself, but I think that I’ve believed that for some time now. Probably from the beginning.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Wait till it reappears and have a talk with it. What about you?”

“I was hoping to get some sleep. I’m beat. Tomorrow I’ll swing by Susan Cilvan’s office. I can’t wait to hear her version of the events. You, too, should lie down and get some rest. Look at you, you’re exhausted! You look like a zombie!”

“Let’s go to bed then.”

2:45 a.m.

Isabelle seemed to be sleeping. Questions crowded Lucien’s mind. Who was speaking to him through this animal? How did that person manage to communicate with him this way? Why choose the image of an ape? Was it a symbol that he should decrypt? Why choose him, Lucien Prérubem? Was he the only one who could see this gorilla? Was he an experimental subject? Was someone observing his reactions? Was there only one person behind this image or an entire crew?

Isabelle wasn’t sleeping either. She was thinking that there were only three explanations for what was going on.

Either Susan Cilvan had fainted for an unknown reason and Lucien thought he had heard her cry out ‘what you see exists’.

Or else, Lucien’s mental illness was contagious, and he had contaminated the therapist. It seemed highly unlikely since he had spent such little time with her, and Lucien would have already contaminated other

people, including herself, if that had been the case. Maybe only some people were responsive to this pathogen.

Or again, this gorilla really existed one way or another. A new and mysterious technology was being used to communicate with Lucien, who was perfectly sane. Who was behind it all? Why the image of a gorilla? What reason did they have for doing this? Had Lucien been randomly or intentionally chosen? Was he the only one that this was happening to?

She was really looking forward to seeing the therapist again so that she could check out her first two hypotheses.

15) Something unbelievable happened

Anna walked past Guy Sabatini, one of the four guards posted in front of the door to SACI's laboratory. He gave her a friendly smile and watched her put her finger on the digital identifier. Next, she placed her right eye in front of the iris recognition camera, before finally posing for facial recognition. The three devices confirmed that she was definitely Anna Pyrrus, ethologist and neurologist, SACI employee. The guards all knew her, but this was standard procedure. If they had dispensed her from doing it, they would have provoked the wrath of Colonel Floyd.

Guy was having a hard time hiding how attractive he thought she was. Smiling at her amiably, he was just about to let her through under the watchful eyes of his colleagues, their weapons at the ready. But before he even had the time to open the armored door, something unbelievable happened.

One of the other three soldiers turned the barrel of his weapon towards Anna Pyrrus and emptied his clip into her. Guy looked with dread at the body of the scientist lying on the ground. Her head had been literally severed from her torso and the body was so ripped apart it didn't even have a human shape anymore. Bloodstains covered the walls of the scene.

*

Colonel Elijah Floyd was almost two meters tall, with large shoulders, muscular arms, and a constant scowl on his face—imposing a cautious reserve on potentially bellicose adversaries wishing to confront him. When he was only eighteen years old, word got around that he frequently broke arms and legs here and there in night club fights to ‘discourage eventual assailants’—as he was rumored to have said.

The colonel was so infuriated, that he had what could have easily been called a nervous meltdown. He interrogated and re-interrogated Yves Badol, the soldier who had fired his weapon. The latter was in a state of dejection and stupor so deep that it was difficult to get anything from him. Squirming on his chair, wringing his hands, he repeated over and over that the person he had seen and shot was not Anna Pyrrus, but an armed stranger who was about to kill Guy Sabatini. On instinct, he had fired at this mirage, discovering afterwards with horror what he had really done.

16) A game of chess

8:10 a.m.

Sleep had finally overcome Lucien. He had been asleep for about three hours when the mental image insinuated itself back into his dreams. It woke him up.

< You’re back, > he word-thought.

< Yes, Predator! You now know you are not mad. You know that I exist. >

< Yes. You exist. But stop calling me Predator, it’s ridiculous. >

< You think *that* is ridiculous, how about a lion inspiring your moral conduct? >

< Come on! The lion is a metaphor. >

< Yes, yes... the food chain and all that... The law of the fittest! >

< It isn't just because we're physically stronger that we're superior to animals, but because we're more intelligent. >

< Ah! I understand. You have to eat calves, for example, because you are more intelligent than they are. Right? >

< I don't have to, but... Let's say that it's acceptable. That's life. >

< Hmm... I understand. It is not physical strength but the difference in intellects that make it morally right to eat animals. >

< Yes. That's the way it is. Whether or not you like it, that's life. >

< Uh huh! I understand... >

< Really? >

< Oh yes, of course! Thus, any person more intelligent than you, a Nobel Prize winner in Physics, for example, could eat you without you having your say. In any case, they could eat a village halfwit. The higher the IQ, the more rights they would have to do what they want to others. >

< Gosh! I don't want to talk about that anymore. > Lucien scowled.
< You're doing all you can not to understand. We are at the very top of the food chain. There's nothing wrong with killing an animal. As long as you kill it respectfully, of course. >

< Kill it respectfully? How do you do that? >

< You kill it humanely. >

< I understand... >

< About time! > exclaimed Lucien.

< I understand what you are saying, but now I have two other questions. >

< What now? >

< The jeweler did not have time to suffer. Why then criticize me for killing him? >

< Because he was a human being, and that's not the same. >

< If you say so... >

< And the other question? > asked Lucien.

< The other question is, how do you know that the animal that you are eating did not suffer? >

< I... >

< Yes? >

< Come on now, you're really doing all you can not to understand, > said Lucien. < You're acting in bad faith. Let's not go there anymore. >

< Alright. So, as I was saying, now you know that you are not crazy. And you know that I exist. >

< Yes, I do. >

< But now, you think that I am either one person or several people, right? >

< A gorilla can't talk! >

< A predator would not eat sausage or meat out of a tray. It would chase herbivores and kill them with its teeth. >

< Ha! Nice way to dodge the subject. But I repeat, a gorilla can't talk. >

< You mean cannot speak a human language, yes? >

< Yes, if you prefer. >

< A gorilla that corresponds to the usual standards of what a gorilla should be, no, it cannot. But I am not a conventional gorilla. >

< In other words? >

< We will talk about this later. I need to know you better before telling you secrets that could put me in danger. How about a game of chess? Would you like to play? >

Well, ha! Something must be wrong with my head! Maybe I've contaminated the shrink. That would explain it all.

< But... whoever you are and wherever you may be... What is this all about? Let's cut to the chase! Why don't you just tell me what you want from me? And why me? >

< Why you? Because you are the first one that I came into contact with in this manner and who I received something from in return. >

< Received something from? What did you receive? >

< Perhaps I will tell you later. >

< Why not now? > Lucien tried to negotiate.

< I don't dare yet. >

< ...? >

< Other than that, I would like to appeal to your reason, > said the mental image.

< In other words...? >

< You have to acknowledge that, somehow, someone is speaking to you in your head, right here at this moment. You have no choice but to admit it. Right? >

< That's right. How could I deny it? >

< If that is the case, since you have made it this far, why is it so difficult to admit that a gorilla is speaking to you? Would that make everything that you are going through even harder to believe? >

Lucien gave himself five seconds to think about it and conceded, < Like you just said, seeing how far I've come along... I must admit that it wouldn't make much of a difference. Although it *is* easier for me to believe in human technology than in gorilla technology. What you're trying to tell me is that you're a gorilla. A real gorilla. >

< Originally, I was a female gorilla, yes. >

< A female? >

< Yes, a female. I hope you are not sexist! >

< Wow! >

< I am forty years old. I am a female gorilla from the Western lowland. The scientific name that I have been given is *Gorilla gorilla gorilla*. As you probably know, there is no specific word for the female gorilla, because your patriarchal language rules out certain feminine nouns. >

< Okay, right... Most animals are 'hes'. But there are specific names for male and females in each species. >

< That is true, I'll give you that. >

< But how is it that you know so much... and that you speak so well? >

< Why are you surprised? Because of my species or of my gender? >

< Geez! Because of your species, obviously! > said an indignant Lucien.

< I was chiding you. Nevertheless, I am sure that you are a tiny bit sexist. I know you better than you think I do. >

< What's your name? Were you given a name? >

After several seconds of silence, the female gorilla answered, < Those who use me as a piece of laboratory equipment have given me only the name of an experiment. I would like you to call me Bellisae. >

< Bellisae... you'd like me to call you that? Is that your name or not? >

< I would like you to call me Bellisae, that is all. That is all I have to say on the subject. So, can we play chess? >

< Alright, but I'm going to get up first and have breakfast. >

< That is fine. >

Lucien slipped out of bed without waking Isabelle. He made himself some coffee in the kitchen and sat down at the living room table, on the other side of the kitchen bar that separated the room in two. A virtual chess board appeared on the table within Lucien's field of view.

< Start whenever you want, > said Bellisae. < All you have to do is think about moving your pieces and they will move. >

Lucien took a sip of his hot coffee and thought about moving a pawn to free the bishop and the queen. His thoughts turned into moves. Bellisae opened with her knight.

*

Fifteen minutes later, Lucien had lost three games and won none.

< I guess you probably could play better than that, but your mind is not on the game. >

< I don't know if I can do any better, Bellisae. But I must say that I have a lot on my mind at the moment. I'd rather learn other things from you than your chess moves. I really would like you to tell me why you chose me. And if I'm the only one. Truly, I need to know. I think it's time you told me. >

< No, you are not the only one. But you are the one who matters the most and with whom I have had the most conversations. >

< Why? >

< I cannot tell you yet. >

< Why not? >

< The reason I do not feel comfortable telling you why you are the most important is the same reason why I do not dare tell you why I do not dare. >

< Are you kidding me? >

< No, I swear. >

“It looks like it’s here with you now,” said Isabelle, walking in, yawning and stretching.

Lucien turned towards his spouse. “She’s here. She told me she’s a female.”

“Ah! Well, looks like I have a very strange rival!”

“Her name is Bellisae.”

“Bellisae!”

“Yes.”

After a moment of silence, Isabelle added, “Ask Bellisae if she would accept to prove her existence to me. She did it for your shrink, after all, didn’t she? Why wouldn’t she extend the favor to me?”

< Isabelle would like... >

< I heard her. >

< Wait! How did you do that? >

< What she said is in your thoughts. >

< You can read everything that I’m thinking about? >

< I can access some of your thoughts, but certainly not all of them, because few of them make it through. If so little was going on in your head, I would really pity you. That said, how could I know if I have access to all of them? Just like you, you cannot know that what you do not see exists, precisely because you do not see it. >

< Okay, enough! Cut it out! >

< I made you mad, my poor little Intelligent Predator! >

< This violation of my private life is making me extremely uncomfortable, > complained Lucien. < No one can talk to me without you hearing everything that’s being said. >

< I do not think that is true. It seems that I can only access the things you want me to. >

< Whatever. I still know way less about you than you do about me. >

< I am quite sorry about that. At the same time, I feel reassured. >

< Why would that reassure you? Do you have something to hide, Bellisae? >

< Yes, I do, for the time being, > Bellisae admitted.

< Yeah, sure... And you don't dare tell me why you don't dare... I get it. So, what answer do I give Isabelle? Are you going to give her the proof she's asking for? >

< No! >

< Why not? >

"So?" asked Isabelle. "Did you ask her?"

"She doesn't want to."

"Why not?"

"I asked her exactly the same question. I'm waiting for her response."

< Because she offended me. >

"Because you offended her."

"I did? How?"

< She did? How? >

< Because she said, 'Here I am with a very strange rival'. >

< Gosh! It was a joke! >

< It was not funny! >

"So, how did I offend her?"

"Oh, just forget about it!"

"I want to know why!"

< You do not have to tell her! >

"Because you said that she was a very strange rival."

"Huh? No, really? You're joking!"

"Nope, I swear!"

< You did not have to tell her! Certainly we can have our privacy! Most importantly, you should not have told her that you call me Bel-lisae. >

< Ha! You're one to talk! Coming from someone who reads my thoughts as if my skull were made of glass! That's really inappropriate! >

"I'll leave you with your touchy baboon!" Isabelle exclaimed. "I'm going to check on the shrink. I hope she can help me understand you."

She walked out, slamming the door behind her.

< The lack of sleep is getting to us. That's your fault. As a result, it's kind of normal for her to be on edge. >

< You should never have told her that you call me Bellisae, I repeat. >

< What do you mean by 'I call you'? Is it or isn't it your name? >

< Another game of chess? >

< No! I want you to tell me what you did to the shrink to make her scream and faint like she did. I need to know what she's going to tell Isa. >

< Alright!... If you really want me to! I am going to give you a summary in only three seconds of everything that I told her. >

< Why only a summary? >

< Because I will slightly adapt my discourse, if we can call it that, to you alone. >

< I'm eager to find out what it was. >

So, as Bellisae's face grew bigger and bigger, filling Lucien's entire field of view, she sent the following thought-words to his mind.

17) Look into my eyes

§§§

[§[Look into my eyes. Observe my pupils intently. One, then the other, then back to the first, then the other... Focus. Dive deep into my eyes. Try hard to be mindful. Concentrate on looking directly at me.

Does the shape of my nose prevent you from opening up your mind to my alterity? If that is the case, forget my face's other features and keep your eyes fixed on mine. There, see! You can sense it better this way, right? You clearly perceive that I am a person! A slight glimmer of empathy is all that is needed to provoke your awareness.

Look again. Please take your time observing me. Allow this disconcerting notion that I am a person to settle in. Yes! Even though I am not of your species, I am a person. A person to be considered with all their individuality and uniqueness. Is it easier to accept this idea now? Yes, you can envision this, yes, you know it to be true. Stay plunged in the abysses of my eyes so that you never forget the soul that you have discovered there.

My individuality is becoming more and more obvious to you... Unsettling, isn't it? And do you know why, with a little effort, you can fathom this notion?

You can do so because I am like you. You usually only interact with those who look like you. That is because you are narcissistic, egocentric, self-absorbed. You personify everything that resembles you; you objectify all that does not. You are not all that bad, though. That is not what I am saying here. The suffering of others can touch you deeply. I have no doubt about that.

The problem is, to find favor in your eyes, one must look like you. Absolutely, yes! In order to accept me as a person, you—and this is true for your peers, too—must avoid looking at my nose because it is too different from yours. The mere color of someone's skin has already caused so much discrimination between those of your own species. You see, your problem is your over bloated self-esteem.

But I will not pile recriminations on you. In your eyes, I am now a thinking entity, and that is all that counts. So, listen closely. Speaking in the name of all my fellow creatures, the person you see in my eyes affirms what follows.

Just like you, our flesh feels pain. Just like you, we are afraid of suffering and death. Just like you, we also feel fear, terror, panic.

Our minds harbor subtle and varied feelings. We seek social and family relationships. Friendship and love pave the way for hope, happiness, jealousy, or sadness. We enjoy sex, but no more than we enjoy tenderness and its caresses.

We can be shy, angry, generous, greedy, distracted, focused, intelligent, stupid, exalted, depressed, selfish, cruel, compassionate, brave, cowardly, envious, indifferent, passionate, detached, gourmand...

Just like you, we have an ego that can take up a lot of space. When it does, simple dignity, pride and even conceit can influence our behavior.

We also enjoy eating fermented fruit and getting drunk.

So, please avoid making anthropocentric statements such as, 'After all, they are so much like us.' No! *You* are the ones who are very similar to animals, and that is because you are animals too. You have known this since your fellow creature Darwin told you so. But since this idea is too

disturbing, a majority of you will not accept it. Accusing us of anthropomorphism is simply an obscene show of your anthropocentrism.

Who can choose the envelope that they are born into? You were born into a human body. I was born into a gorilla body. Why? Who knows the answer? Does this question even make sense? Persons come in many different shapes, that is all there is to it. You could have been born into a monkey's body just like mine, you know, but likewise into a cow's, a pig's or a fish's... We discover who we are, we do not choose. Unfortunately, the less your appearance resembles that of a human, the less this dominant species accepts that you are a person.][§]

*

Billisae's face disappeared from Lucien's visual field and the interior of his apartment reappeared.

< I admit that you have all the characteristics of a person, > he acknowledged. < But... I would have to see other gorillas up close to see... although I'm pretty sure that this is also the case for your fellow creatures, I would need to make sure. >

< I am glad that this has motivated you to want to do so. >

< So, this is what caused my shrink's fainting spell? >

< In truth, no. >

< But you were supposed to show me what made her pass out! >

< I am going to show you, but I wanted you to have the benefit of this brief introduction. As for her, I must confess that I lost patience when I heard her use the expression 'cash cow'. I have mood swings, you know. When you yourself used this hateful expression, I grant that it annoyed me, but I forgave you for that. Since I have little sympathy for her, I wanted to teach her a lesson. >

< Wow! It's hard to understand why using those words is so upsetting for you. >

< Of course they upset me! They are odious! >

< Really! Why? >

< This is why... >

Bellisae fed a flow of thought-words and engrams into Lucien's mind. Once again, the apartment disappeared from his view, and this time, the interior of a huge metal building replaced it.

18) Imagine that you are born into a cow's body

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[§[As I was saying, no one can choose the time or the body into which they are born. Imagine that you are born into a cow's body. Notice that I did not say "imagine you are a cow", but "imagine that you are born into a cow's body"! The difference between these two statements is of the utmost importance.

So, imagine yourself in the body of a cow. Specifically, you are a Holstein dairy cow, the queen of all dairy breeds. While dairy cows bred for their meat will produce up to four liters of milk per day, your breed of cows will produce an average of twenty-eight liters over the same period of time. Lactation peaks can reach sixty liters daily. This extraordinary achievement that shatters all the records found in nature is the product of genetic selection. You are a biological milk-producing machine.

You have a shiny black and white coat. Your head is completely black, except for a white spot on your forehead that is almost perfectly diamond-shaped. The tag on your ear says you are number 2712. You are located in row 17 at the Pierre Morageot intensive livestock farming facility. A concrete pad lies under your hooves while, above you, a sheet of corrugated fibrocement supported by a metallic structure is your sky. All the rows are separated by packed dirt that is, depending on the season, either muddy or dry.

A human sticks his arm deeply into your anus and inserts a rod into your vagina in order to deposit directly into your uterus the bull semen that was collected by masturbation¹. You do not know what he is doing to you, but you are in restraints and have no choice but to comply. You

look deeply into the eyes of the human that is inseminating you, but he does not look into yours. He does not see your fear, your sadness, your despondency. Because you look nothing like him, you are just an object in his eyes, certainly not a person.

A fetus is now growing in your belly. You feel it move. You do not know that the penetration that was forced on you is related to the being growing inside of you. As time goes by, hormones (mostly oxytocin) begin to flow throughout your body, preparing it for all the changes you will undergo in order to become a mother.

280 days later, you are about to give birth to your first child. For the occasion, they take you to a calving pen. It is in the same building, about fifty meters away from your own living space. This move makes you feel like you are undertaking a long trip—you have not taken that many steps in a long time. In this room, there is straw on the ground. You feel it under your feet for the second time in your life: the first time was when you yourself were born.

The man uses a calf-pulling chain to extract the new life from you. A magnificent heifer calf appears, and she is almost completely black. The white band around her neck makes her look like she is wearing a necklace. She also has a white spot on her belly. A powerful feeling is now growing in your bovine mother's heart, something that humans call 'maternal instinct'. It fills you with joy and exhilarating happiness. You want your daughter. You love her. She is so beautiful! You want to care for her. You tenderly lick her to remove the amniotic fluid that coats her. Quickly, she wobbles up onto her spindly legs and takes her first steps. Pride and tenderness spread through you like gentle sunshine. Soon, your beautiful creation nuzzles up to one of your teats and starts suckling your colostrum. The happiness you feel is ineffable. For one whole day, you are in mothers' paradise. The smell of your calf and every tiny aspect of her small body are now imprinted on your soul.

Once those twenty-four hours are past, though, they come to get her and take her far away from you; you will never see her again. They take you back to the tiny stall they house you in, which is both your living space and your world. You express the despair that is tearing your heart apart in your heartbreaking bellows, but the *Homo sapiens* who stole your child from you ignores you completely. You are nothing but a

milk-producing machine to him. What he wants is the bovine mother milk that was destined to your child and that is swelling your udder. It will be used to feed those of his species. No, your baby has no right to what you wanted so badly to give her. The frustration you feel is unbelievable. As for the child that you love with all your motherly heart, she is also weeping and trembling with fear. And you know it. You know that she needs you. You know that it is as horrible for her as it is for you, because, you, yourself, remember the overwhelming despair that you felt when you, too, were separated from your mother. This painful memory makes your suffering increase tenfold.

Months go by, but do not lessen the grief you felt from the abduction of your first child. Your tongue remembers her small fragile body that you were allowed to nurse for only such a short time. Her smell is forever inscribed in your memories. Over and over in your mind, you hear her distressed, heart-rending mooing as she called out to you when they took her away.

Meanwhile, they have inseminated you again, and the changes you feel inside ultimately bring you some peace. And then, one day, you give birth to another daughter. Magnificent! She is almost completely white, with two black ears and lots of little black spots on her back. She gets to stay with you for about twenty hours.

This second calf that they steal from you today is yet another tragedy, and it feels like a knife has been plunged into an unhealed wound. Your heart bleeds, and you give voice to your desperation in long, agonizing bellows.



Illustration by Boris Tzaprenko

Revolt never comes to your mind, because you do not know that these abductions are crimes. That is life, that is just the way it is. Even the perpetrator of these abductions does not consider it a crime, because for him too, that is life, that is just the way it is. Common ideology has turned this act into something quite ordinary, because you are just a cow, a dairy cow. In human doxa, your being a slave is so commonplace that being a ‘cash cow’ is a phrase that illustrates the legitimacy of exploitation. “We are not cash cows!” is an indignant cry.

They have packed thousands of you into the building. Metal bars separate you from one another. You bond with your neighbors, but only superficially—social relationships are difficult under these conditions. On this day, however, you bond with the cow standing to your left. You now have a friend. This cow is older than you and bellows out her misfortune along with you. Your suffering reminds her of what she went through two months before. She licks your muzzle to show you her compassion and it comforts you. When one does not have hands, the tongue is often used to give comfort because it is an organ covered with extremely sensitive nerve endings. Therefore, licking each other is a way of showing affection. Mothers use their tongues to tenderly caress their children. Tongues are also used in different manners to show love or friendship, according to the nature and the intensity of one’s feelings. Bovine persons have a complex emotional life just like so many other animals do. But the mindset of women and men is so impermeable to alterity that expecting them to believe such a thing is probably too much to ask for! Very few realize how much two cows can communicate with each other. For most humans, other species simply make noises. The notion that they could be speaking in unknown languages never comes to mind, nipped in the bud by the certainty that they are just emitting insignificant sounds.

Human beings think that only they know how to think, and have convinced themselves that only they know how to speak.



Illustration by Rose de la Haye

During the following weeks, your friendship grows, and this makes your life as a slave a little easier to bear. Your friend only has one whole ear, the right one, and a little less than half of the left one. Both have a tag with the number 2311. You do not know why her left ear is injured and she has not told you how it happened. Cows do not easily talk about this kind of thing. But she did tell you that all her calves were stolen from her, too. She suffered terribly from it, that is why she understands you so well and shares your pain. You are so fond of her!

Your third daughter is white with only two black spots, a huge one on her back and a small round one on her forehead. When they tear her from you, the ordeal is terrible once again. Fortunately, your friend One-Ear is there to support you.

Alas! One day, she is pushed aboard a big gray and red truck along with other cows, all of them worn out by their years of bondage. They are loaded with extreme violence onto the truck. Blows from sticks and pitchforks rain down on their backsides. They are afraid of slipping on the ramp leading up into the trailer. Their legs, which have barely been used for walking, wobble with the effort. One cow slips and hits the

dry ground with a tremendous thud of crushed flesh. Her painful bellow makes you shudder and spreads fear to all of your fellow prisoners. She cannot get back up, despite the blows pouring down on her. They twist her tail, but this only makes her scream even louder with pain and terror. Her front left leg is broken, and the man you recognize as the one as your caretaker belches out a string of profanities, annoyed at this waste of time. Panic sends shivers down your spine as you witness these brutalities.



Illustration by Boris Tzaprenko

Hastily, a strap is roughly wrapped around her, then a winch and a rope are used to pull her into the trailer of the truck, into the midst of the other terrified cows.

The livestock trailer starts up and takes them to a location unknown to you. You will never see the one-eared cow again, but you will never stop thinking about her. Anguished moos echo for a long time amongst those who share your miserable fate. Consequently, you eat, because eating is all that is left for you to do. You chew and ruminate your corn silage. You are so far from imagining that your ancestors

roamed free and ate grass; so far from imagining what freedom is; so far from imagining that an entire world exists outside of the walls that hold you prisoner.

Time goes by. You regularly have mastitis, a painful udder infection. So much milk has been pumped out of you! You have just given birth to your fourth child. This time, it is a baby bull. Your poor broken body seems a little reinvigorated by the happiness that you feel. The man who pulls the calf out of you says, “Hey! This one looks like a panda!” He tags his ears with the number 3388 and leaves him for a moment with you.



Illustration by Boris Tzaprenko

You do not understand human language, and you definitely do not know what a panda would even look like. You envelop him with all your maternal love and you are ecstatic when he drinks your colostrum. But you only get to show him your overflowing tenderness for a little less than a day. Your baby is loaded into a wheelbarrow and taken away from you.

This is the fourth child that is wrenched from you. This time, of course, you knew it was coming. But that does not make it any easier, and you no longer have One-Ear to comfort you. By now she has already been ingested and defecated by *Homo sapiens*.

Day and night, you bellow out the terrible distress that overwhelms you. Every time you are milked, you look sadly towards the person who is there to siphon you. You seek help in his eyes, because he is all you have left. He is often brutal. He mistreats you because he has issues. Despite the mistreatment you become attached to him, most likely because of what the human species calls the Stockholm syndrome. He

hears your distress, but he feels no empathy for you. He is used to hearing cows cry, for he has already taken countless calves away from their mothers. It is his job. As usual, his eyes avoid yours. It is difficult for a human being to feel pity when the money he makes is inversely proportional to the intensity of his compassion.

He attaches the milking equipment to your teats and moves on to your new neighbor who is mourning as much as you are and for the same reasons. So much bovine misery echoes continuously under this roof! At least one out of four cows is crying here.

The human species call you cash cows. Advertisements show you grazing in green pastures with your calves romping around you. How could you know what a pasture is, you who have never ever seen a blade of grass or a patch of blue sky? The world you live in is just a metal building.

Homo sapiens occasionally talk about you to their offspring. These children sometimes ask, “Where does milk come from?” and their parents answer, “From cows,” and add “moo... moo”. They then tell them that you ‘give’ your milk, never that it was stolen from you. In good faith, they are repeating what they themselves learned as children. Needless to say, not very many of them know that for you to produce that milk you must be inseminated and have your babies taken from you. Almost all of them believe that you piss milk like they piss urine. Actually, nobody really wonders about it. The cow ‘gives’ milk, and that is all. Some even say that by taking your milk, they are being kind to you, because otherwise your udder would make you suffer. There is even a cheese named ‘The Laughing Cow’ with an illustration of a grinning cow on its box. How cynical can they be?

A little more time has gone by. Your mammary glands have not completely dried up, but you produce less milk than before. Your exploiter decides to cull you so he can replace you with a younger cow who will soon give birth to the first fruit of her womb. The births of your calves and the 35,000 liters of nourishing liquid that your body has supplied have depleted you. You are so weak that you do not even have the strength to bear the weight of your sadness—you are too tired to be miserable. Your body and your soul are just dwelling places for your weariness.

The gray and red truck that took away your friend drives up and stops. You recognize the smells of its exhaust fumes and motor oil. You have seen it several times over the years, and every time it makes your heart beat faster because you associate it with the disappearance of your friend. The appearance of the truck also terrorizes all of you because every time some of your fellow cows are violently loaded into its trailer and taken away. Moos of pain and fear systematically accompany each one of those abductions. Every time you hope that the truck is bringing One-Ear back. Sadly, she never reappears. When they untie you and roughly move you over to the cattle trailer, you understand that today, it is your turn to be taken away. Despite the blows they give you, you cannot climb into the vehicle that is going to take you on your first and last trip because the ramp is too steep. A crane is there to hoist you into the trailer. The straps that lift you cause you much pain, but you are so tired that you barely cry out. Twelve dairy slaves are being fatally retired and loaded along with you into this funereal vehicle. The lifespan of cows like you is usually of about twenty years if your living conditions are peaceful, but enslavement drains you so much that you are at the end of the line by the age of five. And you are now five years old.

The trip seems never-ending. It is high summer, and the trailer is as hot as an oven. The suffering makes time dilate. You do not know what a minute is—it is a human word—but every one of them is endless. Bumps, vibrations, accelerations, sudden braking, jerking, sharp curves throw you against each other or against the sides of the trailer. Your hooves slip on the metal floor and just staying upright is a constant battle. Hundreds of unknown noises coming from both inside and outside the vehicle add to your stress. The tarp covering the trailer hides the outside from view, slamming and flapping in a very threatening way. And the heat inside the truck is intolerable! You are all so thirsty! You would give everything you have to drink and rest, but you have nothing left to give. Your entire fortune consists of your flesh and your skin and, unfortunately, humans do not need you to give it to them. They will take them from you and give you nothing in return, not even a few drops of water. The *Homo sapiens* that reign in this

world as lords and masters have rendered you powerless—a mere resource. You are a cash cow.][§]

Lucien fell from his chair without being aware of it. Blind, deaf, his senses no longer in tune with the world in which his human body lay, he did not feel the impact when he hit the ground. Bellisae continued to feed thought-words and engrams into his mind.

§§§

19) The death chute

[§[The cattle truck arrives at the Dybun slaughterhouse on the evening of the next day. You do not know where you are—obviously, you do not know what a slaughterhouse is. However, the smell of blood suspended in the air triggers a fresh bout of anguish. Sweating and breathing heavily, you drool, lying in the excrements that you fell into when the truck hit a bump. Your legs are weak and numb, and you cannot get back up because you no longer have the energy to do so. You have had no food or drink for thirty hours. You wonder if you are going to see One-Ear. Suddenly, shocks from cattle prods force you all out of the truck. Several of your frantic fellow sufferers rush to climb down from the vehicle, jostling on the ramp placed behind the trailer. The electric shocks do not restore your strength. The man who is hurting you is not the man that you know—the one you could not help liking despite yourself. This bewilders you all the more. Since you cannot get back on your feet, this stranger hits you and twists your tail. You only manage to move a few feet farther despite the unimaginable pain. They then attach a winch to your leg, pull you down the ramp onto the loading dock and drag you along the concrete floor to the lairage area—with no care, with no compassion. Remember, you are nothing but a cash cow.

Once in the lairage area, you will wait for hours until morning comes. All around you, the cow slaves cry out their despair and their fear. You only see two of those who were on the truck with you, the others are

lost among all these strangers. One of them is bleeding from her right rump, her skin having been torn by a pitchfork while she was being loaded. The slaughterhouse will take it into consideration when charging the exploiter, and he will take a financial loss. She hangs her head and rolls her big round eyes filled with sorrow and fright. The other one is tall and thin. Her udder is distended and so painful that she walks with her hind legs spread apart. In the truck she hit her left eye against one of the bars, and it is so swollen that she will be half-blind for the little time she has left to live. You made acquaintance for the first time during the trip even though you had both lived in the same place. There were so many of you there! It is very difficult to move around. Luckily, they remain next to you. They also like having you close by. Faced with adversity, all sentient beings seek the company of their peers. Faced with despair, all souls come together to support each other.

Here, even the air is thick with suffering and terror. The smells of urine and blood that previous victims have left behind are ominous olfactive messages that you all recognize. This hideous fear of dying amplifies as it spreads from one of you to the other. You radiate it and it comes back like a boomerang. When day breaks, strange noises bring your anguish up to a new level. Metallic clangs and unknown human voices ring out. Suddenly, the screams of your fellow creatures send chills up your spine. The nauseating smell of blood becomes stronger and stronger. The murder factory has started up again. And you understand perfectly what all these terrible bellows are saying, just like humans can understand the pleas, the desperate tears and the terrified cries of fellow humans, whatever their language.

The relative coolness of the night has revived you a bit. You make it back onto your feet. You still cannot see One-Ear, but Hanging-Head and One-Eye are still near you. Suddenly, not too far away, there is a commotion. Some *Homo sapiens* appear.

Pushed forward, shocked by electric prods, you move towards the death chute². You are not the first one to enter it and you will not be the last. You will not leave this place alive. Rule number one in a slaughterhouse is that 'no animal comes out alive'. Two high concrete

walls and a concrete floor encase you. Your hooves will never have tread on grass. Behind you, Hanging-Head is bellowing her fear, followed by One-Eye who is mechanically swinging her head from left to right, seeking oblivion in this repetitive motion. The appalling odor of blood and the blood-curdling screams come from the place where you are being forcibly led, between these two walls that are taking you to your death. You would like to escape, but the electric shocks force you to move forward. In front of you, a frightened bull calf tries to back up and blocks the death chute. Even though you never got to see your children grow up, you know he is an adolescent and extremely scared. The man who was forcing you to move along is now using his prod on him. Your frustrated maternal feelings are tearing your heart apart. You would like to save this child but there is nothing you can do—you are nothing but a dairy cow, weighed down by the merciless shackles of the dominating species. Here, stolen children or young females exhausted by their bondage and the misery endured by the loss of their offspring are indiscriminately slaughtered. He is so cute, so touching with his stubby juvenile horns. It saddens you so much that you forget your own plight for a while. Under the blows and the shocks, the bovine orphan moves on. In a dreamlike state, you remember your last child, his eyes outlined by black ovals and gazing into yours.

The compassion you feel for this bull calf, the morbid smells that waft towards you, the cries of torment and suffering that cover your own bellows, the throbbing of your weary body, the ugly dread that makes your blood run cold, everything blurs together and you no longer know who you are or what you are. However, you know that you will not exist much longer. You are nothing but pain now, conscious pain moving towards a term that is as liberating as it is feared. Your entire life has been a burdensome ordeal. Losing it will mean deliverance, but just like all sentient³ beings, you are so afraid of dying that the slaughterhouse employee doubles down on the electric shocks to get you to move towards this fatal outcome. He does it without even thinking about it—you are just a dairy machine that is no longer useful. He is not necessarily a mean person. In his mind, there is no actual violence because you are nothing more than a piece of meat. He sees you as a cash cow, certainly not as a victim.

The electric shocks push you into the stunning box⁴. This chamber is the epicenter where the stench of death reaches frenzied heights. Metallic surfaces surround you. Stress frees a torrent of adrenaline into your veins. Your blood will soon flow too. It will blend into the red river that takes its source here, and the smell of it will reach the next victims' nostrils and reinforce its lugubrious message.

The slaughterer lifts his arm to place the Matador⁵ onto your forehead. Who knows if his primary concern is to kill you respectfully? The panic that takes control of your body causes your head to jerk upwards just when he pulls the trigger. The stunning device shoots its bolt into your left eye and destroys part of your skull. You can see nothing more on that side but you don't even notice. Searing, terrible pain engulfs you.

Terror and pain... that is all that is left! The executioner misses your thrashing head once again and blows your nose to pieces. He shoots once again, swearing loudly. This time, the bolt severs your spinal cord. You fall brutally to the ground, paralyzed. Paralyzed, but tragically still conscious⁶. You are hung by your back leg. This should be excruciating, but the severance of your spinal cord has left most of your body insensitive. In any case, the agony you feel in what remains of your skull is so overpowering that it obscures all other sensations.

Pain. You are nothing but atrocious pain. A pain so intense that it supersedes your fear. Your body hangs there, unmoving but not completely insensitive. You can still feel it when the blade slits your throat. Your blood spurts out and spreads underneath you. If you had been laying down, you would have rapidly lost consciousness. But in this position, with your head hanging down, the blood flowing to your brain prolongs the agony. You are a prisoner of this body that life will not leave. You do not feel it when they chop off your two front legs. The nociceptive⁷ signals sent by these limbs do not reach your consciousness. But inside your supine body, you silently endure the agony of your fragmented skull. The ending that you were so afraid of, you beg for it now. You beseech it. It is all that you want now with every atom of your body. Since you can no longer express in your movements or in your screams your inconceivable suffering, it becomes

even more abominable. You agonize for long minutes inside your unresponsive envelope.

Life finally ebbs out of you. You were once a being, now you are nothing but an object. Actually, that is all you have ever been to the human species. But now it is a simple fact—you are an object that is going to be cut into pieces that will then be sold in cellophane wrapped packages. The customers who will buy them will not give a second thought to who you were. All they will see is a product. A comestible substance called meat. They will put a sticker with the word ‘beef’ on your body parts. The total disregard for who you were is such that the person who chews on your flesh will not even know that you were once a cow, a dairy cow who was completely sucked dry.

As for your poor skin, it will end up stretched out on the wood flooring of someone’s living room, in front of a leather couch. Human persons sitting there will enjoy its softness with the tips of their toes. Their children will play on its comfortable black and white surface. The skin that housed your painful existence as a dairy cow will end up becoming an original decorative object. Proudly, the homeowners will show their visitors what is left of you, but without ever thinking about you. You will never have been someone for anyone... except maybe for One-Ear, and for such a short period of time. But who knows? If fate will have it, the couch’s leather will have been made with your friend’s skin—that way, in a certain sense, you will be together again.]}]

20) This is disgraceful!

David Déchairs settled into his leather armchair, grabbed the remote control from where it laid on the armrest, and turned the television on. His morning working at Giantmarket had been grueling. He had labeled and stocked 30,000 dairy products of thirty-two different product types onto the shelves! He then had helped rearrange the meat department, which meant moving around almost a ton of meat and cold cuts.

Anyway! He had taken the afternoon off, and he was planning on unwinding a little. He had made himself a ham and cheese sandwich with butter and was about to devour it. His shoes off, legs stretched out, he gave a sigh of relief and began chewing on the bread. The newscaster on the television was talking about butcher storefronts being stoned by animal rights activists.

The spokesperson for an anti-speciesist organization had been invited on set. The news anchor who was hosting the debate asked, "Lately, shop windows have been tagged with graffiti, and fake blood has even been splashed on them... You understand why butchers are shocked, don't you? Do you condemn this extreme violence?"

This is disgraceful! thought David. *Of course targeting poor hard-working people is truly violent. I'd throw all of those troublemakers in jail!*

21) He dragged himself to his closet mirror

Lucien partially regained control of his human body and his senses could perceive his surroundings once again. He didn't know when he had fallen off his chair, but he was now lying on the floor. Rolled up in a fetal position, paralyzed by fear, he let out an interminable scream. Then, without ceasing to shriek, he began writhing around, clutching at his throat. He howled for five more minutes before his screams turned little by little into sobs. When he regained some of his self-control, he shoved himself up into a sitting position on the wooden floor. His trembling fingers feverishly palpated his neck. After having checked his hands, arms and legs, he undressed himself so that he could examine and probe the rest of his body. Then, all the while moaning, crying and whimpering, he dragged himself to his closet mirror to continue his visual and tactile examination. It took him more than a half hour to psychologically reintegrate his human shape. And he realized that from now on, that dairy cow was a part of him.

In his mind, Lucien Prérubem, tag number 2712, was now a part-human, part-cow hybrid. Even though he never truly had a bovine body per se, it made little difference to him. The memories of the dairy

slave were as much a profound part of him as Lucien Prérubem's were. He supposed he had never actually been this dairy cow, and that Bel-lisae was the one who had placed these memories in his mind. But even if the memories had been implanted, even if that existence had not been real, it did not change the way he felt—his concept of reality had lost its meaning and importance.

22) He isn't crazy!

Isabelle went directly to Susan Cilvan's office after trying to reach her by phone unsuccessfully several times. The door was closed and not even the prolonged use of the doorbell had caused it to open.

Isabelle reluctantly turned away, but not wanting to leave it at that, she called her best friend, who was a doctor in the ER. She begged her to find out what was going on, and to ask no questions. Her friend confirmed—not without difficulty, Isabelle had to insist because of doctor-patient confidentiality—that they had admitted a certain Susan Cilvan after she had lost consciousness. She had only been unconscious for around ten minutes while she was there, and if you added the six minutes that it had taken to transport her to the hospital, from the moment the paramedics first examined her, all in all, she had been unconscious for a little over fifteen minutes. Once awake, the patient signed a release form and left the hospital, refusing to answer any questions or even to be examined. She took a taxi once outside. On the off-chance Isabelle asked, “Do you know where she asked to be taken to?” but, as she had expected, her friend answered, “How would I know?”

Isabelle went back to the specialist's office, only to be disappointed again by not finding her at her workplace. She searched the Internet on her phone for other contact information, but it brought nothing up, and she decided to ask around in the neighborhood. Just as she was about to ring the doorbell on the other side of the hallway, Susan Cilvan flung open the door and, in an exasperated voice, called out, “Really! When are you going to stop stalking me?”

Isabelle froze, unable to say anything. The therapist grabbed her by the arm and pulled her energetically into her office.

“Stop making a public spectacle of yourself on my doorstep,” she said, closing the door behind them.

“I, uh, I...” stuttered Isabelle.

“Let’s not talk here in the entrance. Come into my office, but no longer than five minutes. I don’t want to see you for more than five minutes. Five! Not a minute more!”

Isabelle followed her in.

“So,” said Susan Cilvan. “What do you want to know? Information about his mental health, I guess... I apologize, I’m not myself at the moment. Yes, I guess that this probably sounds strange coming from somebody who’s supposed to be treating other people’s brains! But that’s how it is. I’m doing the best I can.”

“...?”

“I should never have accepted to see you again. But if I hadn’t opened my door to let you in, you’d be walking around asking everyone about me! You’re a female version of Lieutenant Columbo, right? You never give up!”

“...!”

“So... I apologize once again. Come on, let’s sit down. I owe you a brief explanation. It’s the least I can do.”

She pointed to a chair, inviting Isabelle to sit in it, and she sat on the corner of the desk.

“So! He isn’t crazy! There, I’ve said it. Now, I’m in deep sh... What I mean is now you really aren’t going to leave me alone. You’re going to want more information. Do you know that I’m under the obligation to respect medical confidentiality?”

Isabelle ignored the last part. She sat down slowly, more because she was afraid of falling than because she was accepting the psychiatrist’s invitation. “So... You fainted because... how can I say...?”

“I lost consciousness and I lost my mind too, because I realized that your husband’s mental health is not linked in any way to his visions. I’ve discovered that this animal exists, or at least that something is

communicating using that image. Is this thing a man, a woman, or even a group of people? Who knows?”

“What does that mean? What exactly do you mean by ‘I’ve discovered?’”

“I mean that I caught a glimpse of it, and I heard it. To be truthful, it’s presumptuous of me to say that I discovered it. This thing actually gave me proof of its existence.”

“And what did ‘this thing’ tell you?”

“Oh, so much! So, so much! And in such little time! It did much more than just tell me. I’m sorry, but I don’t want to speak about it any more than I have to. I’ve shared the gist with you. You’ll probably learn more from your spouse. I’d really like you to leave me alone now. I’ve confided in you much more than I’m professionally authorized to do. The rest I’ll keep to myself. And please do not ever ask me to testify about anything in relation to this. I’ll deny having any knowledge of this case. Officially, I passed out because of a combination of overwork and hypoglycemia... or something like that.”

“So, you don’t believe it’s a gorilla?”

“How could a gorilla ever formulate all of those things?”

“Precisely. I don’t know what it told you.”

“Anyway, gorillas can’t speak. And I’ve finished talking too. I have a lot of things to do...”

“Alright,” said Isabelle. “I won’t bother you anymore. Just two last questions, please, and then I’ll leave.”

“Go ahead.”

“Does ‘Bellisae’ ring a bell?”

“Bellisae?”

“Yes, Bellisae.”

“No, it doesn’t. What is it?”

“You said, ‘I lost consciousness and I lost my mind too.’”

“Huh?”

“Did this encounter, if we can call it that, change you in any way?”

“Yes. I’ll never eat any dairy products again.”

Having said that, Susan Cilvan let out a strange whimper. She ran to a large mirror hanging on the wall just across from her desk, examined

her face, and palpated her head with both hands in two different places. Her trembling fingers betrayed the powerful emotions she was feeling. She also touched her throat, observing it for several seconds before turning back towards Isabelle. Seeing how pale she was, Isabelle thought she was going to pass out again.

“Are you okay? You’re white as a ghost!”

“No more dairy products! No!” the therapist repeated mysteriously.

“...?”

“And of course, no more meat!” she added unexpectedly.

“...?”

Susan Cilvan then opened the office door, inviting Isabelle to leave.

*

At about 10 a.m. Isabelle arrived back home and found Lucien sprawled out on the couch. His eyes were wide open, looking up at the ceiling where there was nothing in particular to be seen. She stood there in front of him without moving, but he didn’t even notice her.

“Hey! Are you okay?” she blurted out.

He turned towards her with a very strange look in his eyes and murmured words she couldn’t understand. Bone-weary because she wasn’t sleeping well and worried because of her slow progress with work, she decided to go to bed and rest so that she could recover enough lucidity to finish making all the software modifications that her customer had ordered.

When she woke up around 3:00 p.m., Lucien was no longer on the couch. He had left the apartment and wasn’t answering his phone. His car was no longer parked in front of the building. She had called his office, but he wasn’t there either and no one had seen him.

Evening came, then night... Over and over she tried to reach him, leaving voicemails and sending text messages up until dawn. By morning, she still hadn’t heard from him.

He had been gone for over twenty hours by now. She guessed that his disappearance was certainly linked to this business with the gorilla that

had shaken Susan Cilvan to the core. She didn't know what to do. Telling the police that Lucien had vanished because of an imaginary gorilla was not an option, of course. The psychologist would refuse to confirm it anyway. By mid-afternoon, though, she reported his disappearance.

23) Liquid latex

Adam Polikant was a researcher working for the vivisection laboratory located in the same building as the SACI facility. One morning, just before going to work, he realized that he needed to buy some pre-vulcanized liquid latex, a product that is often used to create disguises or special effects in movies. Once in his car, he searched on his phone for a store that sold it. He found several locations, so he started his car and drove to the closest one. Ten minutes later, he entered a novelty shop.

“Good morning, sir!” sang out a small brunette who was tidying up her shelves, humming while she worked. “What can I do for you?”

“I'd like some pre-vulcanized liquid latex,” he heard himself say.

“Follow me, it's over here. How much do you need?”

As if waking up from a dream, he surprised himself by answering, “One tube will be enough.”

The salesperson handed him the tube, looking at him curiously.

Now that's a weird guy! He looks so stuffy in his little suit! His eyes are so cold, dark and serious!... I just can't imagine him dressing up as a zombie just for fun... What does he want to do with the latex?

The scientist paid and left without saying a word.

Why had Adam made this purchase? The strange thing is that he himself didn't have a clue... but there was someone else who knew very well why. He had been seized by a sudden strong desire to make this purchase before going to work. His subconscious had taken over, creating a sort of mental numbness that prevented him from being fully aware of what he had just done.

He was running a little late by the time he got to the laboratory. He took the tube out of his pocket, gave the cap a half-turn to break the seal, and screwed it loosely back on. Once that was finished, he put it into a drawer, again barely conscious of what he had just accomplished. He then rapidly and completely forgot everything that had to do with his purchase and the latex.

24) I don't have time for this! I have cows to milk

Carlos Marcos was standing near Silo number 3. They were having problems because the corn silage was pouring out too slowly. He turned the speed regulation button one way, then the other, but it didn't change anything, so he gave the enormous reservoir's dispenser a huge whack with a shovel. The silage started flowing more regularly onto the conveyor belt that took the feed out to the animals. Something must have jammed it, creating a bottleneck, and hitting it had solved the problem.

Now he had to take care of the milking of the fifth row. Climbing back into his Toyota truck, he noticed a car approaching in a cloud of dust. It pulled up in front of the entrance gate. There was only one person on board. The driver honked three times, then got out of the vehicle and waved widely.

Wondering who had come all the way out here unannounced, Carlos started the engine and went to see who it was. He stopped ten meters from the gate and got out of his vehicle. The stranger was standing next to his red Kia Picanto, still waving his arm.

"Hello!" the man cried out.

Carlos came closer, his eyebrows knitted into a question.

"Hello?"

"This is the Pierre Morageot farm, right?"

"Yes, it is! It's written on that big sign right above you."

The man was wearing a light blue shirt and a black suit so wrinkled he looked like an origami man. Carlos thought he was probably a salesperson coming to sell him something that would supposedly be

miraculous at an unbeatable price, such as a milking robot, hormones, food or water distribution systems... Carlos frequently met lots of people like him. Sometimes it would be an attractive woman, who would try to charm him, but this was the first time that he saw a salesperson as unkempt as this one was, with stubble on his chin and rumpled clothes.

Looks like he slept in his car! he thought.

He was about to say that he couldn't purchase anything from him because he wasn't the boss, but the man, as luck would have it, asked the right question.

"Are you Pierre Morageot?"

"No. No, in fact, I'm just an employee here. I can't sign any orders."

"But I'm not selling anything. I didn't come here for that."

"So, what do you want?"

"Information. Only information."

"About what?"

"It's hard to explain just like that. Can I come in?"

"I don't have time for this! I have work to do and cows to milk. I can't let the cows wait."

"I won't bother you. You can go ahead with your work."

"I'm not allowed to let you in. I don't even know what you want."

"I told you, information. I'd also like to visit the site."

"Sorry, but I gotta go," Carlos said firmly.

"You aren't allowed to, not even for fifty euros?"

Carlos turned back to him.

"I'm not gonna risk losing my job for fifty euros, sir. Why don't you tell me what you want... What kind of information? I don't even know you."

"It's about a cow. My name isn't important, but I'm Lucien Prérubem. How about a hundred euros? That would be a nice little bonus for the day, wouldn't it?"

"Okay, but leave your car outside the fence," said Carlos, taking the two bills that the man handed him through the steel bars of the gate.

Carlos swung the doors open and Lucien entered.

"Thanks."

“Why are you looking at me like that?” Carlos asked, surprised.

“Oh! Uh, I wasn’t looking at you in particular...”

Lucien found it hard to hide the emotions that were engulfing him.

It’s him! It’s hard to believe, but it’s him! Good grief! It’s terrifying, it really is him!

“Get into the truck with me.”

Lucien did as told and Carlos turned the engine on.

“You’re a city boy and you wanna know about farming, is that it?” he asked.

“Not exactly, but close enough. I’d actually like to get some information about a specific cow. Maybe about two of them, if possible.”

“About a specific cow! You’re gonna have to explain that one to me. That’s a strange request. I still have to finish my milking. It’ll take me about fifteen minutes.”

“I won’t get in your way.”

Carlos stopped in front of the fifth row, got out of the truck, and motioned for Lucien to follow him. They both approached the first bovine. Lucien had never seen cows up close while living in his human body. But recently, while living his dairy cow life, he had rubbed shoulders with them for such a long period of time that they all seemed both extraordinary and familiar at the same time. He was deeply troubled and couldn’t hide it. Carlos assumed that Lucien’s unease was what most city dwellers commonly felt when they came into contact with large animals.

“Don’t be afraid,” he mocked. “They aren’t carnivores!”

Lucien tried to smile. Several of the bovines mooed so sadly that it broke his heart. He hoped he was wrong, which would have been likely had he been a man who knew nothing about these animals. But over the course of a few minutes, he had been a dairy cow for several years. It was a crazy thing to say and to think, but it was nevertheless true. Lucien, the former cow, could understand these sad moos, these wrenching moans caused by terrible despair.

“So, what’s this all about?” Carlos asked.

Lucien watched him hook cups onto the teats of the milk cow. Noticing that the cow had contracted her stomach muscles, a distinct memory of pain awoke in an organ that he no longer had.

“You’re hurting her!” he cried out. “Her udder is inflamed. She’s suffering.”

Carlos stood up and stared at Lucien with astonishment.

“What would you know about that?”

“I... I’m guessing. She quivered.”

“I know what I’m doing. You can’t do my job if you get all sensitive like a girl. I’m here to work, you get it?”

“Yeah, sure,” Lucien agreed, afraid of being thrown off of the property.

Carlos went back to work. Sticking teat cups onto another udder, he asked once again, “I’m still waiting for an explanation. What do you want from me?”

“I wanted to know if you had a cow with tag number 2712.”

“What a weird question!” the farmhand said, taken aback. He went on sticking the cups onto the other mammals. “Of course we did, since we’re currently about to reach number 3500.”

“So, it’s the same for tag number 2311. You had one with that number, too.”

“Well yeah, obviously!”

The cow that Carlos was about to milk turned her large sad eyes towards Lucien and looked into his. Startled, he smiled stupidly at the animal and murmured, “I... I think she wants to get your attention. Look into her eyes.”

Surprised by his words, Carlos attached the last teat cup, and frowned in Lucien’s direction.

“What?”

“I... I think that she’s sad and she wants to tell you so.”

“Are you one of those damned animal rights activists who say all those stupid things about us? I hope not!”

“I swear I’m not,” Lucien assured him. “Like you said, I’m just a city boy, so I... I don’t know much about all of this.”

For several seconds, Carlos gave him a harsh look full of suspicion before finally lightening up. He even laughed, much to Lucien's relief.

"So, you're just a guy with a little sensitive heart who has never seen a cow in his life, right?"

"Yes, that's one way of putting it."

"Well then, yeah... cows can sometimes be sad. But you too, right? It happens to us all. Do you think I have time to stop and check how they feel and comfort them all? I'll start worrying about their problems when they start worrying about mine. Do you think this one's gonna pay my credit card bills, for example?"

"No, that's not what I meant. But sometimes... I was told their calves were taken away from them."

"Of course, the calves are taken away. If their calves drink their milk, how much would be left for you city folk to put in your cereal, huh? And how would you get to eat cheese and butter, smart aleck?"

"Yeah, right!"

"It's as simple as that."

Lucien felt the bovine's eyes glued to his, and it took all his willpower to avoid looking at her.

"Could you show me where tag number 2712 was, please?" he asked.

"What do you care?"

"It's something I wanted to see," Lucien answered, hoping to remind the man that this was why he had given him the money.

Carlos seemed to get the message.

"Okay, I'll show you as soon as I finish this row. I'll have to take a look at the register to find out where it was."

Ten minutes later, Carlos turned on the touchscreen tablet that he took out of the Toyota's glove compartment, then took Lucien up to a cow who watched them coming towards her with curiosity. She seemed to be wondering who the strange man walking next to the one she knew was.

"There you go," said the farmhand. "Number 2712 was here, in this one's place. We're in row 17, the one across from here is 16."

"Thanks."

Lucien examined the pathway of dried dirt that separated the two rows. The rows of stalls had concrete floors and the vast roof that covered them hid the sky. All of this was atrociously familiar to him, and he remembered every little detail: the metal pole where the milking device was attached, still partially bent; the corner of the stall's slab where a piece of concrete had broken off; the shapes of the two rust stains on the railing separating the stalls; the conveyor belt at the bottom of the trough that brought in the corn silage; the big, flat, smooth rock slightly sticking out of the dirt three meters away to the right; and, of course, the face and the hands of Carlos. He had recognized those as soon as he had seen them through the bars of the entrance gate.

Lucien actually remembered having been that cow because the last experience that Bellisae had injected into his mind—'Imagine that you are born into a cow's body'—had been much more than just the transmission of word-thoughts. He had been forced to feel the actual sensations of being in cow number 2712's skin. This 'virtual embodiment' process had only lasted one hour, but the memories of several years of this existence were now a part of him. He could feel it all so clearly: his hooves on the concrete, the weight of his body supported by the two toes at the end of his limbs; the taste of corn silage; the suction of the milking cups on his teats; the itching that couldn't be scratched because the stall was too small to turn around in; the worry caused by having his interior fiddled with during inseminations; a calf growing and moving in his womb; the abominable suffering caused by the loss of a child; the milk swelling his udder; his friendship with One-Ear; being stabbed by pitchforks; the harshness of the trip in the cattle truck; the terror he felt in the death chute; the electric shocks; the explosion of pain in his partially smashed skull; the thin edge of the blade cutting through his throat... Lucien had, in a certain way, really lived through all of this. He had been that dairy cow.

He identified with her so completely that even once he was back in his human body, seeing Carlos had brought back his Stockholm syndrome feelings. He would have loved to hate him, but he just couldn't. From now on, he knew he would spend the rest of his life remembering that he had once been this bovine.

“Why are you so interested in this cow?” asked the farmhand.

Lucien ignored the question and asked one instead.

“She gave birth to female and male calves...”

“Of course, otherwise she would never have produced any milk.”

“Where did these children go? I’d like to see them. Are they here?”

“Nope.”

“I was wondering if maybe they were now living here as dairy cows.”

“I said no. All of its offspring were sent to the slaughterhouse.”

Lucien remained silent, struggling to hold back his tears. He noticed Carlos was watching him with a surprised look in his eyes.

“Over there’s where a cattle truck occasionally comes to take them to the slaughterhouse, isn’t it?” he asked.

“Yes, we cull the cows when they produce less milk because they still eat as much as before.”

“Is it true that cow number 2311 was in the stall next to hers, to the left?”

Carlos looked it up on his tablet.

“Yes,” he confirmed. “That’s right, they were next to each other for a while, until 2311 was culled. But how’d you know that?”

“And her left ear was damaged?”

Creasing his forehead, Carlos gave Lucien a puzzled look.

“What... well, but...”

Refraining from asking a question that he couldn’t quite formulate, he checked his tablet once again.

“Shit! The screen shut down. I always forget to charge it. Come to the office with me for a minute, so I can plug it in. But I’m warning you, I don’t have much time for you today.”

Lucien climbed into the Toyota truck next to him. The farmhand drove for only 300 meters before parking in front of a prefabricated structure covered in dust and mud. Tablet in hand, Carlos entered the building through a small door that looked like it was always left open.

“Come on in, let’s get this over with!”

Lucien followed him in and stood behind him. It was very dimly lit, having only one small window with dirty panes, so he couldn’t see what he was walking on. The farmhand flipped the switch, but as soon

as the light came on and he saw what he was standing on, Lucien jumped back, letting out a yell.

“What’s wrong?” asked Carlos with surprise.

“I walked on... I walked on cow skin,” stammered Lucien, trembling with emotion. “Oh, my goodness! I walked on cow skin!”

Carlos observed his visitor with growing consternation.

“So what? It isn’t dangerous! What are you afraid of?”

“...”

“It’s just a rug!”

“Sorry, don’t pay me any attention, I’m very emotional.”

Thinking that this city dweller was extremely bizarre and that the faster he got rid of him, the better it would be, the farmhand tried to hurry things up.

“Okay. I plugged my tablet in... Where were we? Oh yeah, did 2311 have anything wrong with her ears? Right?”

“Was her left ear damaged?” Lucien specified, trying to avoid looking at the skin laid out in front of him.

“Hmm... Yes, that’s it! Wait...”

“...?”

“Yes, that’s right. Her ear had been ripped off when it got caught on something. But how’d you know all that?”

“Someone told me.”

“Who did?”

“If I told you, you wouldn’t believe me! I know that’s a classic line from a bad fantasy movie, but I don’t have any other.”

“Hey! If this is a new, half-assed inspection that you’re putting me through, it’s a really messed-up way of doing things. Regulations don’t say that you have to cull a cow because of a damaged ear, as far as I know!”

“Don’t worry. If I’d been an inspector for who-knows-what, I wouldn’t have had to give you money to get information.”

That reassured Carlos.

“Yeah, but in any case, you’re a wacko. I’m taking you back to the gate and you’ll do me the pleasure of leaving. Let’s go!”

Once outside, Lucien tried again.

“One last question. Do you have a picture of those two dairy cows?”

“Heck, no! Cows are identified by a number, that’s all. It’s a ten-digit number, the first six of which correspond to our national registration number. You gave me the last four, the ones written in large print on the ear tags. That’s their tag number here on the farm.”

A gray Peugeot van pulled up not far from where they were standing. A woman got out and walked up to them.

“Hello, sir,” she said to Lucien.

“Hello, ma’am.”

“Angela! What do you want? What are you doing here?” asked Carlos.

“If you answered your phone, I wouldn’t have to come all the way here to talk to you!”

“Oops! I left in on silent, sorry. What’s up?”

“There’s a woman who wants information about cow number 2712. I told her that it had gone to the slaughterhouse, but she insists, she wants to see where it lived. Since you weren’t answering your phone, I told her to wait until I asked you about it.”

“Where is she?”

“She’s waiting up at the entrance gate.”

Carlos glanced at Lucien.

“How many of you are there? What’s going on with tag number 2712? I have to tell my boss about this. Something’s wrong here.”

“What do I do about the lady?” Angela insisted.

“I’ll talk to her. I’ll take care of it. I have to take this gentleman back to his car anyway.”

Could it be her? Lucien wondered.

“She’s a short-haired blond woman with round eyeglasses, isn’t she?” Lucien asked Angela.

“Yes. Do you know her?”

I think I do...

25) How horrible! It really is him!

Carlos dropped Lucien off in front of the gate, then got out of the Toyota and approached the woman standing on the other side. Surprised at seeing her patient there, she was dumbstruck by the sight of Carlos.

“Aaaah!” she exclaimed.

“Yes, Ms. Cilvan,” Lucien called out. “It’s a shocker, isn’t it?”

“What?” asked Carlos. “What’d I do? Is there something wrong with me? Why are you looking at me that way, too?”

“No, nothing...” the therapist said apologetically.

It’s him! How horrible! It really is him! she told herself.

Carlos opened the gate and let Lucien out. He closed it behind him and turned towards the woman, speaking to her through the bars.

“I was told that you, too, want to know about tag number 2712. What’s all this freaking business about? Why are you looking for information about this cow? And why are you staring at me as if I were a Martian?”

“If I told you, you wouldn’t...”

“I wouldn’t believe you, I know. This guy gave me the same answer. In any case, I’m going to tell my boss all about this.”

Carlos took pictures of Lucien and the therapist with his phone.

“As for me, I don’t want any trouble. You both should leave. It’d be better,” he added.

Susan Cilvan stopped her white Peugeot 208 next to the Picanto.

“I got here before you did,” said Lucien, lighting a cigarette.

“That’s normal, since you lived, if we can put it that way, the life of this cow before I did.”

“Not at all. I lived it after you did.”

“Really...? Did you recognize that man too?”

He blew smoke out.

“Yes, straight away, just like you did. I saw how surprised you were. I asked him and he showed me where I—I mean she—was... I almost said ‘where I was’, that goes to show how intensely I lived all of this. So, as

I was saying, he allowed me to see my stall, I mean her stall. I don't know how I didn't pass out. It was exactly as if I was back in there."

Lucien was standing, hands in pocket, leaning on the front left fender of the Kia. Leaning against her own car, Susan faced him with her arms crossed.

"Something really strange has happened to us," she said thoughtfully, cupping her chin in her hand. "We have both been in the same cow's skin. We now have a particularly harrowing, I'd even say particularly gruesome, part of our lives in common. The two of us lived in the same body. Psychologically, the experience was... I can't find the words for it. Nothing comes close to describing it well enough. To know someone who lived in the same body that I did! It's inconceivable!"

"Even more inconceivable when the body you lived in was a cow's!" he added after discreetly spitting out a piece of nail.

"Yes, that's right! That's what makes this so uncommon! What did you feel when... when you reintegrated your human body? When I woke up in the ER, along with a ton of other sensations, you can't even begin to imagine the effort I had to put into signing the papers so that they would let me out. I thought that I still had hooves in the place of my hands."

"It took me a while to be able to take control of my human body, too," Lucien confirmed. "At first, I think I crawled on all fours just to go and look at myself in the mirror. I was afraid of falling over if I stood up."

"That's exactly what I did when I got out of bed. They must have thought that I was some kind of freak! This kind of confirms the famous aphorism that psychiatrists are the craziest of all."

They smiled at each other.

"Do you have any children?"

"Yes, two. Why?" she wondered.

"That makes this adventure even wilder for me. I'd never been pregnant before, unlike you."

"I hadn't thought about that."

"But since you've already been through it twice, tell me, was it any different? I mean, did it feel different, having calves instead of babies?"

“No, it wasn’t different at all. The two experiences have so much in common that it’s extremely troubling.”

“I had never been pregnant before,” Lucien repeated, touching his belly.

She shared the pain he was feeling when he added, lips trembling, “You can’t imagine how miserable I was every time he stole one of my calves. The suffering was excruciating!”

“Yes, what we’re living here is really extraordinary, if not terrifying. We gave birth to calves! Isn’t that insane?”

He crushed his cigarette butt out on the dirt road.

“It’s even crazier when you’re a man!”

“In any case, we lived in the same bovine body, and we bore the same children. This extraordinary adventure we have in common connects us, whether we like it or not.”

“The farmhand already thinks I’m a wacko, using his own words. What would he say if he heard us getting all emotional because we gave birth to the same calves?” Lucien murmured.

“Is it here, with you, right now? The gorilla?” she asked, after a moment of silence.

“You mean, is she here?”

“What do you mean by ‘she’? Who are you talking about?”

“The same person you’re talking about. She says that she’s a female.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes,” he confirmed.

“You said ‘the same person’. So, you know who’s hiding behind this image. Is it a woman?”

“Yes, I did use the word ‘person’. I don’t know who is behind this image, as you say. I was talking about the female gorilla. I shouldn’t even say ‘female’, because our language is too sexist, even when it comes to gorillas.”

“So, you consider this animal as a person?”

“Didn’t she also ask you to, just before beginning the dairy cow story?”

“No. I don’t know what you’re talking about. When she contacted me, I only saw her for two seconds before she began with something like,

‘Imagine you are in a cow’s body’. You know about the rest, since you’re here, too.”

“She didn’t ask you to look into her eyes?”

“No. Explain that to me.”

“Oh... We’ll talk about that later... Did she...” he hesitated.

“Yes? Did she what?” she urged him on.

“Did Bellisae tell you anything?”

“No, nothing at all. Wait! Your wife asked me the same question. Who is Bellisae?”

Too busy realizing that he was happy, oddly enough, that Bellisae was reserving certain privileges only for him in her communications, Lucien didn’t reply.

“I see that you’re keeping secrets,” the psychiatrist observed. “You remained silent when I asked you if she was here, with you, at this moment.”

“No. I haven’t heard from her since my death in the slaughterhouse.”

“You won’t tell me anything more about Bellisae?”

“No.”

“Too bad. Tell me, you must have slept in your car to look like you do, right?”

“Yes, I did.”

“Why?”

“I was so shaken up by my experience here,” he said, pointing to the gate with his chin, “that I needed to be alone. I wasn’t up to answering Isabelle’s questions. I should call her, she must be worried. That won’t be easy though, I’m having a hard time getting over my death.”

“Me, too,” she admitted, touching her neck as if making sure that it wasn’t bleeding. “The weird thing is, I lived here as a cow for years, although it only lasted for... I don’t know... an hour or two.”

“Same for me, an hour or two,” he confirmed.

“How do you know how long it lasted?”

“I looked at the clock just before the ‘Imagine that you are born into a cow’s body’ episode. And when I was Lucien once again, I think I saw what time it was on my computer’s clock when I left home. But given the mental state I was in, I don’t really know if what I’m telling you is

true. I ran away, hoping to come to my senses without having to deal with Isabelle's questions. How could I explain any of this to her? I didn't know how and I didn't have the strength nor the desire to do it."

"I understand. I felt the same thing when I woke up in the ER."

"All the same, you now know that I'm not crazy."

"Crazy! I never use that word in my line of work."

"Alright... You know what I mean."

"Yes, of course I do. I admit that either you are not insane, or we both are."

"Okay... let's go with the first hypothesis. So, if we aren't lunatics, do you, the head doctor, have any idea what happened to us? Do you have an explanation? Do you know if there actually is a way to remotely control someone's brain?"

"No," she answered, shaking her head, "I'm as much in the dark as you are. I have no other hypothesis to offer."

They both went silent, lost in their thoughts.

"What did you do once you were a man again?" she asked. "I mean once you recovered the usage of your human body."

"I threw out my leather jacket as well as all the other leather objects I had."

"Did you give them to anybody?"

"No, I threw everything away. I thought about giving them to someone but..."

"...?"

"I told myself that I had no right to these skins. Not even the right to give them away. Would you like it if somebody gave your skin to someone else?"

"You're right. Just like you, I threw it all out. I hesitated, too, but not very long."

"Is that true?"

"Of course it is! We both learned the same lesson living this bovine's life."

"That jacket meant a lot to me, though!"

"And everything I threw out meant a lot to me, too. I was so proud of owning those objects, but I feel so guilty now."

“Same for me.”

She changed the subject.

“You came here. Have you thought about going to the Dybun slaughterhouse?”

“Yes, I have. And you?”

“Me, too, but I don’t know if I’m brave enough. Anyway, they’ll never let us in.”

“We don’t have to ask permission.”

A notification sound came from Lucien’s pocket. He looked at his phone and saw that it was a text message reminding him that the police wanted to see him so that he could give a statement about the tragic death of Jean-Philippe Fobour.

26) He held his head in his hands and screamed

Following the unthinkable event that had taken place right in front of SACI’s entrance, Yves Badol, the soldier who had shot Anna Pyrrus, had been questioned repeatedly, in all different ways and with all different means, with or without psychotropics, by specialists in interrogation techniques and brain functions. They had learned nothing more than what he had spontaneously told them: he had seen an armed stranger about to gun down Guy Sabatini.

Presently, they had almost as many psychiatrists as military personnel guarding SACI. Colonel Elijah Floyd had asked a squad of experts in mental disorders to watch over the guards and had given them specific orders.

“Do not take your eyes off of them, not even for a second. If you have the slightest doubt, or if you see the tiniest suspicious detail, call me. Whatever it is, the shifty furrowing of an eyebrow, an ambiguous nervous tic, an unusual gesture, something that just seems off... call me immediately. Do you hear me? Straight away! Even if I have to leap out of my fucking bed completely naked in the middle of the night to rush here, I’ll be here within seconds!”

To ensure that he could be notified as soon as anything occurred, the colonel no longer left his living space that was adjacent to the laboratory. He continuously scrutinized the psychiatrists, staring at them interrogatively to see if everything was under control.

This way, there was someone monitoring the ones who were monitoring the ones who were monitoring the secret research. Many more people and also much more stress. What worried Elijah Floyd the most was that the more people there were that knew about what was going on, the harder it would be to maintain secrecy. Of course, only a few of them knew what they were guarding. However, considering what was being implemented to conceal things, no need to be very smart to guess that something of great importance was being kept under wraps here. Whetted curiosity could lead to greater efforts being made to snoop around.

Besides the guards posted outside the building, the scientific team was under the watchful eyes of two armed guards and two psychiatrists inside the room where the well-guarded secret was housed. They seemed fully protected. Nevertheless...

At 9:30 a.m. the colonel had barely returned from what he called his 'brief let's-check-to-see-if-everything-is-okay patrol round' that he made several times a day. It consisted in talking indiscriminately to everyone he met, interrogating them and encouraging them to contact him if they noticed something unusual. He learned nothing new. He went to his quarters, got out a small bag of cocaine that was discreetly hidden under miscellaneous papers and objects in the bottom of a drawer, and laid out two lines on the back of a book that was lying on his desk. Using a short straw, he snorted the white powder into his nostrils, then put the tube back into the bag and stashed it all away. He was about to fix himself some food and was reaching out towards the refrigerator door when a terrible scream sent a shiver down his spine. He bolted outside. The sound came from the building where Prima 16, the main focus and *raison d'être* of SACI, was housed.

Two of the soldiers who stood guard in front of the entrance ran into the room. The colonel got there a couple of seconds after them.

On the white tiles, a body was lying in a pool of blood. It was Augusto Brayonzo, one of the team's most brilliant neurosurgeons. A

scalpel was lying on the ground next to his head. The other scientists, the guards, and the two psychiatrists were staring at Augusto with stupefaction, eyes bulging out of their sockets. Guy Sabatini, one of the armed men, looked at the colonel with a mix of helplessness and incomprehension on his face. “What could I have done?” he seemed to ask.

Two surgeons lifted the body and put it on an operating table to see if there was anything they could do to save him. The colonel questioned Guy Sabatini.

“What happened?”

“He suddenly turned livid, his lips were trembling. He held his head in his hands and screamed, then he slit his throat with a scalpel. It all only lasted four seconds! No one had time to do anything!”

“I hope the fucking surveillance tape will tell me more!”

The colonel pulled his smartphone from his pocket and watched what had happened just a moment ago under the lens of the nearest camera. Everything was exactly as Guy had described. Four seconds were really all it had taken, between the first sign of confusion and the suicide. Five seconds before, there were no warning signs at all: the surgeon was studying a curve on a screen, with a slight crease in his forehead that indicated that he was deep in thought or that something may have been bothering him. But then he blanched, his lips effectively began to tremble and...

The colonel put the video aside so he could go through it thoroughly later on. He turned to see if the resuscitation efforts were bearing results, but the doctors who were trying their best to rescue their colleague told him that nothing more could be done to save him.

“He slashed his carotid,” said a tall blond man. “He lost too much blood. His brain... We’re not equipped for emergency transfusions... Even if we had the required equipment, I don’t know if we would have had the time to save him.”

The commanding officer turned his eyes from the surgeon’s bloody gloves and shook his head from left to right, his arms wide apart. He cursed loudly and left, only to turn around and come back.

“No wrath will be greater than mine!” he yelled. “I demand that each and every one of you who understands what is displayed on that

fucking monitor over there that he was looking at come and see me, one after the other. Whoever he was to you, friend or simple colleague, come report to me if you think you know anything. Beginning right now. I want to see the first one of you right away!”

On that note, the colonel left. Less than three seconds later, he burst into the laboratory once again.

“I take that back! I’d rather question you here. Better still, I’ll stay here day and night. I won’t leave this place. Why didn’t I think of it before? I want my desk set up in this corner here, so I can keep an eye on the whole fucking room! Guy!”

“Yes, sir, Colonel!”

“I’m putting you in charge of it. Set up a bed next to the desk. I’m going to sleep here, too. They should have consulted me about where to put things, before moving me into a room so far away from what my mission is to protect!”

“Yes, sir, Colonel! I’m on it!”

Elijah Floyd walked away to call his superior officer, General Michel Matrone.

27) I have killed again

Lucien stopped by the police station where they took his statement and then returned home. Such an annoying formality! What could he have told them that could not be seen on the CCTV recordings? He had apologized to Isabelle and tried to recount everything that he had experienced, but it was just so hard to describe! It was complicated, awkward, even dicey to explain how, in just one hour, he had been a cow for several years! Did he really need to add this to all the rest to keep sounding like a lunatic? Of course, Susan Cilvan could confirm what he was saying, but she refused to speak to anyone other than Lucien about it. Frustrated by the whole situation, Isabelle was beginning to think that the therapist was suffering from an identical hallucinatory pathology. Especially after Lucien tried to justify his present refusal to consume any meat or dairy products by clumsily

explaining that Bellisae had made him experience horrifying moments of intensive breeding. Remembering that the psychiatrist had made a similar statement, Isabelle wondered if somehow she had experienced the same situation. Still more questions than answers! And so many! She had searched for stories of other people who had endured similar ordeals, but had found nothing conclusive. There was no shortage of accounts of people communicating telepathically with animals, even dead ones. To the contrary! The problem was that there were too many of them, and it would have taken thousands of years to read even a little bit of each. Isabelle felt lonely and tired, and her work was affected by all this because she was having a hard time concentrating on anything.

Lucien was aware of this, but he himself was extremely confused. It had been seventy hours since his life as a cow had ended, and he hadn't heard from Bellisae yet. He was torn between antagonistic feelings: he both wanted her to contact him again and dreaded it. He couldn't go back to work; it would have been impossible for him to focus on anything. He spent most of his time researching how the brain works or reading articles about extrasensory perception and, more specifically, telepathy—notably the extremely controversial Ganzfeld protocol. But he couldn't find anything that came even close to whatever it was he had experienced.

“But what does this female gorilla look like?” Isabelle had asked. “Do you have a picture of her anywhere?”

“I'm sorry, but I don't. She's here, in my memory. I wish I could draw better...”

Her question had led him to look for pictures of gorillas, precisely of *Gorilla gorilla gorilla*, since that was what Bellisae had told him she was. Thousands of photos were available, and he spent hours examining them all. A lot of them looked like Bellisae, but none of them were actual pictures of her. He was sure of that.

He was regularly in contact with Susan Cilvan, the two of them wishing ardently to find out if the ‘Phenomenon’, as the therapist had prudently named it, had manifested itself in others. Lucien understood why she had a hard time calling Bellisae ‘the gorilla’, since she had only briefly caught a glimpse of her. He was also beginning to believe that

there was a human hand somewhere behind all of it. He felt that he was ridiculous for still believing deep down inside that he was interacting with a real-life female gorilla.

A question of the utmost importance obsessed the two of them: were they the only ones who had been contacted? They had thought they could find out by reaching out through social media with hashtags such as ‘gorillatelepathy,’ ‘telepathygorilla,’ ‘cow2712,’ ‘cow2311,’ etc., to no avail.

Lucien had also researched ‘Bellisae’ but kept it from Susan Cilvan. He hadn’t found anything even faintly related to a gorilla. So he created a new account using ‘Ms Gorilla’ as a pseudonym. The enigmatic text that he had left all over the social networks read, “Cow with 2712 earring seeks contacts”. It had generated hundreds of replies, all asking approximately the same thing, “What are you talking about?” He was yawning widely while reading one of them, when suddenly, at 10:15 p.m., the image of Bellisae covered his entire screen. He jumped. “Woah!”

< Hello, Intelligent Predator! What were you doing? >

< I... I was trying to see... How can I put it? I was trying to establish a dialogue with other people who... uh... you might have contacted. >

< Are you tongue-tied? What a surprise! >

< You leave me three days without a word and are annoyed when I don’t know what to say? >

< Did you miss me? >

Lucien didn’t answer. He didn’t want to admit that he had. Not knowing for certain who he was in contact with made him clearly feel that missing her seemed ridiculous.

I’m the only psycho in the world who is pleased to reconnect with who-knows-what.

< No answer? >

< I’d like to know who I’m talking to. You have the insane capacity to take over my brain, and you do it whenever you feel like it. You could at least have the decency to reveal your identity! How many of you are there? Who are you? What technology do you use? >

< I feel so sad that I have not yet convinced you that I *am* a female gorilla. You are so speciesist that, despite all my efforts, you cannot see me as a gorilla person. I may have made a mistake in choosing you. I probably should find someone else. It is a pity, I really liked you. >

Confusion submerged Lucien, a tumultuous wave of contradictory ideas and emotions. Humiliation came first, because he felt he was being manipulated. Then there was fear—his innermost thoughts were being spied upon. Excitement next, at the idea of living an extraordinary adventure. Curiosity and the need to know more. Frustration because he felt like a child who receives phone calls but can't call back. And finally, desire for exclusivity, or something similar, probably because he couldn't find out how many people Bellisae had communicated with in this manner. Having sifted through this hodgepodge of thoughts and feelings, he realized that he was afraid she would disappear and no longer come back to haunt him.

< I... I mean... >

< I want to tell you something important, something particularly important. I needed to speak to you about it. >

< You have no one else to confide in? >

Oh my gosh! I sound like I'm jealous! I'm really as nutty as a fruitcake! I hope this thing doesn't see that in my brain! Ah... I'm so ridiculous! So grotesque!

< Of course... But... I will leave you alone if you prefer. I will look somewhere else. >

< No, I don't want you to. What I meant is you do also communicate with my shrink. >

< I have only communicated with Susan Cilvan once, and then only to prove to her that you did not have any issues related to her area of expertise. Also, to make her aware of her reprehensible disregard for cows. >

He intuitively sensed that, for reasons unknown to him, Bellisae was feeling either sad or depressed.

< I'm sorry, you can talk to me. Nothing would please me more. >

I hope no one's making fun of me behind my back at this moment.

< I wanted to share something with you. I needed to tell you that I have killed again. >

Lucien couldn't tell if his heart had stopped for a moment or if, to the contrary, one of his heartbeats had been twice as strong as it should have been.

< Killed? >

< Yes. I have killed again. Twice. >

< I... You... uh... You're pulling my leg, right? Right? >

< I swear that I am not. I extinguished their lives because they had hurt me, and they were terrible people. I am a little disturbed by the fact that I enjoyed doing it, I must admit. But anyway... I killed them respectfully! >

Lucien didn't know what to say. The only noise that filtered through to him was the increasingly strong throbbing of his heart. He swallowed, trying to loosen up his throat. Bellisae was not only sending him thought-words, but, whether intentionally or not, he was certain that she was now transmitting emotions with startling acuity too. In this case, it was with anxiety-inducing acuity that he sensed she was trying very hard to keep her rage in check. He could have sworn that, in that instant, she was doing her best to control the hatred that was gnawing at her.

< I know that revealing this to you must come as a shock, but I needed to confide in someone. I am so alone! Well... I also mainly killed those two people to stop them from finding something out about me. >

< What is it? > he asked, happy to change subject.

< I cannot tell you yet. >

< Where are you? You can at least tell me that. >

< I cannot. I told you who I am and you do not believe me. That means that you do not trust me. Since this is the case, how can you begrudge me not trusting you enough to reveal something that would put my life in danger? >

< Put your life in danger? >

< Yes. For the moment, no one suspects me of being the killer. These two deaths are puzzling to those who know about them. If they knew

where the culprit was, they would immediately be able to identify me. That is why I cannot tell you. You do understand, do you not? >

< Yes. But I still think you're pulling my leg. >

< Well then, search the Internet for these two names: Anna Pyrrus and Augusto Brayonzo. They are both neurologists. Anna was shot down by a soldier, Augusto committed suicide with a scalpel. But I am the one responsible for these two deaths. I caused them. You may not find anything at this precise moment, but sooner or later their deaths will be reported. Then you will wonder how I knew about them before they were publicly announced. I am sure that the official statement will have other explanations for their demises. >

In Lucien's mental vision field, the two names appeared under the image of the female gorilla. He wrote them both down in an email that he then sent to himself with 'Bellisae Murders' as the subject line.

< Other than that, ask yourself, Predator, what reason would I have for deceiving you? How would I benefit from it? You still believe that my image conceals huge means, and perhaps a group of people. Why do you think that they would devote so much time and money to you? What for? >

Bam! Facepalm, Lucien the Super Predator!

< You said that one of the two people who died was shot by a soldier and the other committed suicide, but that you are the killer, right? >

< Yes, that is right. >

< And you did the same thing that you did when you made the gun shop owner shoot Jean-Philippe Fobour? You took control of the body of the soldier and of the person who killed himself? >

< No, that is not how I did it this time. >

< Well then, how did you...? >

< I can trigger reactions, among other things, through the transmission of images. For instance, if I make you see a tiger entering this room, you will most certainly run from it. >

< I understand... Now that we're talking about it, how do you send images to my mind that only I can see? >

< I send them to the visual neurons located in the occipital region of your brain. >

< How do you do that? >

< I do not know. >

< How can you do something without knowing how you do it? What you're telling me is hard to believe! I work in the insurance sector, but I am a rational person. I actually wanted to be a physicist. >

< I know. >

< How could you know? > Lucien was taken aback.

< I just know it. We'll talk about that some other time. >

< Alright, who cares anyway? My life's trajectory was extremely bumpy, and that's why I didn't become a physicist. But I still have a scientific mind, and what you're telling me is not convincing at all. >

< Which internal physicochemical processes gave birth to that question? Could you please draw me a complete neuronal map of the cells that were activated? Could you describe their interactions, everything that happened inside the synapses and the way the action potentials moved along the axons? >

< Uh... No, I can't, I admit it. >

< So should I deduce that you could not ask me that question because you do not know how it came to your mind? >

< Okay... Well... I may not know how my thoughts are generated, but I usually know how I do things. >

< How do you digest your food? To be more precise, how do you disassemble the proteins that you ingest so that you can extract the amino acids from them? Then, how do you reassemble these amino acids and produce your own proteins? How do you position your center of gravity vertically above your support points? How do you adjust the tension in your vocal cords in order to pronounce the words you speak? How do you stock these words in your memory? How do you retrieve them when you need to use them? How are images focused onto your retina? How do you generate the signal that you send to each one of your muscles, telling them to contract with a given intensity and length of time so as to allow you to move like you do? How do you mobilize your immune system to defend itself against each different pathogen? How does your body develop scars? Must I doubt your capacity to do all these things simply because you cannot explain how you do them? >

Oh well... gorilla or not, she just cut you down to size, you little punk!

< Alright, I get your point. We're all capable of doing a lot of things without knowing how we do them. So, if you aren't using your mastery of technology, it's more like a sort of power that you have... right? >

< You can call it that if you want to. Just like you can think or simply stay alive without having any knowledge of the physical processes that allow you to. >

< Um... Well... Whatever the case, I'm happy that you confided in me even if your confidences are a little overwhelming. Why did you kill those people? >

< Because they caused me much pain and they deserved to die. And, as I told you, they also could have compromised my projects. >

< So, am I truly the only one that you have confessed this to? >

< Yes, you are. >

< Why me? >

< If you cannot guess why on your own, I might tell you some other day. If we somehow manage to trust one another. >

< You have to understand something... I now have no problem accepting that gorillas and cows—and I'd say cows more specifically—are persons. But I'm still having trouble accepting that a gorilla can talk to me and, what's more, telepathically. >

< Telepathically! That is a bold claim! And a mighty big word! >

< But... that's what it is, isn't it? >

< If you say so. >

< Can you read all of my thoughts? >

< You have already asked me that. I do not think that I can access all of them. If that were the case, I would not need you to reply to my questions. All I would have to do is ask them to get answers. As of now, I repeat, now, I can only receive the thoughts that you intentionally send me. It is as if we were talking to each other without using sounds. The only thought-words that you can pick up are the ones I intentionally send to you. Otherwise, I could not keep anything from you. I would be an open book. >

< Why did you say, 'As of now, I repeat, now'? >

< Because my abilities are expanding daily and I do not know why. I have no idea of what I will be capable of doing in the near future. >

< Swear that you've never tried to take over my body. >

< I swear. >

< And you never will. >

< I also promise that I will refrain from doing that. >

< Why do you go for several days without contacting me? >

< I am not free to choose the moments when I can communicate with you. It can only occur during an 'experiment' that some people are conducting on me. That is when my 'power', as you call it, is activated. They initiate or suspend whatever allows me to communicate telepathically, as you would say, with you. But I am going to try to take control of this, and I hope to take advantage of it to increase my capacities. >

< How? >

< I cannot tell you any more about it for the moment. >

< So they know that you're talking to me! >

< No one knows. These people are so overtaken by their own experimentation that they are not even aware yet of all of its effects. And by the way, I did not only kill them because they were evil; I specifically ended their lives because they were about to discover something to this effect. What I find amusing, if I dare say, is that the studies they are conducting on me are secret. And I have my own secret project. They are unaware that their secret hides a secret that I alone know about. >

< And what is your secret project? >

< I have already said too much. >

< How did you manage to kill these two people? What did you show them to... >

< I have already said too much. >

< Alright! One last question. You said, 'I have killed again.' Are you going to keep on doing it? >

< I have already said too much. >

< ... >

< My turn to ask questions. >

< Okay, go ahead. >

< Do you and Isabelle often make love? >

Unable to answer, Lucien started coughing and blushed, which Bellisae, of course, could not see.

I'm pretty sure that someone out there is messing with me. How could I have fallen for this so easily?

< Why can you not answer such a simple question? I take so many risks to answer yours! > Bellisae word-thought indignantly.

Okay, guys, the game is up... show your faces!... But what if this is real? What if Bellisae gets tired of me and won't speak to me anymore?

< That's an embarrassing question. >

< Why? >

< It's very personal. >

< Why? >

Isabelle walked into the room. She had a naughty smile on her lips.

"It's 9:00 p.m.! Remember that your sister invited us for dinner. Don't you think the two of us should relax a little before leaving...?"

Lucien smiled back at her, looking embarrassed.

"I... I'm coming..."

Isabelle raised her eyebrows interrogatively.

"I see that my idea hasn't got you up and running towards the bedroom! Is she here, now, with you?"

"Yes..."

< Are you talking to Isabelle? >

< Yes. >

Oh, my goodness, why is it that such incredible situations only happen to me!

"What is she saying?"

< What is she saying? >

Yep, I can really get myself into some really weird stuff.

"Nothing special, I'll tell you later."

Lucien's phone, which was lying on the table, pinged with a new text message from Susan Cilvan. "So, any news so far?"

< Can't you hear what Isabelle is saying? Last time you could hear her... >

< True, but at the moment I cannot. Last time you thought about what she was saying and you sent those thoughts to me. Now you are not. It seems that you have learned how to listen without transmitting what you are hearing to me. So, what is she saying? >

< Nothing special, I'll tell you later. >

“Ha! And that woman is still in contact with you!” said Isabelle, reading the text message. “Obviously, you’re very busy these days! I’ll make an appointment so that I can have the privilege of seeing you for a while.”

“Ah, come on Isa... Let me explain...”

“If you can find time for me! I’m going to get dressed and put on some make-up. If you’d rather have a conversation with your virtual monkey and Doctor Noggin, be my guest!”

Geez, how pathetic!

< Isabelle is angry with me because she feels that I’m neglecting her at the moment... If you could show yourself to her, it could really be helpful. >

He didn’t get an answer and the image that only he could see disappeared from the computer screen.

< Bellisae? Are you still there? >

He realized that their conversation had ended. He laconically lied to Susan Cilvan, sending “No” in answer to her text message, then turned his phone to silent and went to join Isabelle. His sister didn’t like it if they were late when she invited them, especially on her birthday.

28) Happy birthday, sis

David Déchars, who we last met having dinner in front of his TV, was Lucien Prérubem’s best friend. This wasn’t a measure of the value of their friendship; Lucien simply didn’t have a more treasured friend. They had known each other since they were children. David was a department manager at Giantmarket, a big-box retail store. He had recently moved in with Lucien’s sister, Eve Prérubem.

“You look like you aren’t feeling too hot, brother,” she said to him.

“I noticed that too,” added David. “You look worried, buddy! Are you having trouble at work?”

The evening had barely begun. Isabelle and Lucien had just arrived, but he already wished he could leave. They both had agreed not to say a word about Bellisae. A couple of days before, Lucien had thought about confiding in his friend, but had rapidly given up on the idea. As for telling his sister about it, that idea had flashed through his mind like a bolt of lightning and disappeared just as fast. Disclosing his adventures would certainly amount to more fuss than reassurance and help. All this made him choose not to have that conversation.

“Happy birthday, sis!” he cried out as joyfully as he could.

I must absolutely change my mindset and smile a little or Eve will go full shrink on me and David will tell me to quit my job to come work at Giantmarket. And that will make me want to slap the two of them.

“Thanks Lucien! A year older, time flies by so fast!”

“Well! What would you like to drink?” asked David. “I have a fantastic bottle of port here. Anyone up to it?”

“I’d love some,” said Isabelle.

“Let’s give it a try!” declared Lucien.

Drinks before dinner seemed to go on forever. It was a real ordeal for Lucien, who kept asking himself what he was doing there. David and Eve even wondered why he was spacing out so much. David kept going on and on about his work at Giantmarket, more specifically about the meat and the cheese departments. His sister felt the need to tell them about all the books she had read, explained that black and white photos were more beautiful, and lectured them on the lighting, the camera angle as well as the depth of field of the movies she watched with the discerning eye of the enlightened film buff.

Then came the meal. And there, the ordeal suddenly turned hellish for Lucien. David deposited a large Dutch oven in the middle of the table.

“I’m the one who cooked for you tonight,” he announced. “I prepared a veal blanquette just for you... and you’re going to love it!”

“I can’t eat that,” Lucien announced determinedly, his voice a pitch above normal.

His sister and his friend stared at him with astonishment. Isabelle turned towards him with a slightly embarrassed air. He had said those words with such force that they all knew that he was very serious. They could see it clearly on his face.

“What’s your problem?” David asked after several awkward seconds of silence.

How can I continue living among these cannibals? What’s my life going to be like from now on? How could I have even eaten babies before... before having lived as a cow? Oh, my goodness! Am I insane? Bellisae, do you really exist?

“What’s the matter?” David insisted, and Eve echoed his words.

Shaken out of his thoughts, Lucien could no longer hold back his tears.

“This veal may have come from one of my children!” he declared.

Ignoring the dumbfounded expressions on his hosts’ faces, he continued, his voice laced with emotion.

“The only thing worse than that would be if you had cooked him in my own milk, he who, to my great despair, never even got a chance to drink it.”

Both embarrassed and upset, Isabelle kept her eyes riveted to her plate, not knowing what to do. Lucien was so obviously sincere that you could hear in his voice that he was genuinely suffering. Dazed, Eve and David looked at Isabelle with questions in their eyes. She avoided looking back.

“What’s his problem?” David then asked.

“Is he okay?” Eve simultaneously inquired.

Oh no! I blew a fuse! How can they not see that they are monsters? I should’ve known that this would happen. I should’ve seen it coming!

Lucien felt a deep anger take hold of him. His whole body trembled with rage. But then he remembered that, only days ago, he had been exactly like them. So he called upon all his determination to suppress his indignation and pushed himself away from the table. He left, alone, without giving an explanation, without turning back but also without hesitation. There was no contempt or rebelliousness in his actions. Before even having crossed the threshold, he was no longer there.

29) Chan Zhào

Chan Zhào gave some general recommendations to the zookeepers, and they went off to do their chores as soon as she was finished. Using her fingers as a comb, she raked them through her shiny jet-black hair, then walked towards the stranger who had been standing there watching the gorilla exhibit for a very long time. He was leaning on the guardrail and looking at them so intently that he didn't register her presence, even though she was only a few steps away from him.

"Hello, sir!" she said. "You seem to be decidedly captivated by the great apes."

"Yes," the man slowly replied, as if waking from a dream. "Yes, I am. Especially by the gorillas from the Western lowland, the *Gorilla gorilla gorillas*."

"Well! That's a very specific area of interest, and you seem well-informed. They are fascinating animals."

"..."

"If you don't mind my asking, what led to this passion?"

"I know one of them, a female, to some degree," Lucien answered.

"A female?"

"Yes, a female gorilla. Our languages are so patriarchal that you have to add the word female, otherwise everyone thinks it's a male."

"So, you know a *Gorilla gorilla gorilla*?"

"Yes... to some degree, as I just said."

"Uh huh... What do you mean by 'to some degree'? And where did you meet it?"

"If I told you, you wouldn't believe me."

Lucien had found less than ten zoos or animal parks in France where gorillas could be found, and only three of them had gorillas originating from the Western lowlands. His plan had been to undertake an extensive tour and visit them all, hoping to find Bellisae in one of them. After all, she 'spoke' French, so she must live in France. He was presently visiting the first one on his list, the Zoological Park of Spetian.

Highly intrigued by this man, Chan Zhào persisted.

“I’d be extremely grateful if you could tell me more. You’ve piqued my curiosity, I must say. There aren’t that many *Gorilla gorilla gorillas* running around out there... Stupid remark, I know, it’s obvious there aren’t, but what I mean is these animals are quite rare, even throughout the world. They are on the brink of extinction. So, getting to see one in France...”

“There are only three places where you can see them.”

“Ah, well, you really are well informed. I see you are a connoisseur. Funny how the Western lowland gorillas are currently of interest.”

Lucien turned towards the zoo director, a look of surprise on his face.

“Yes, funny. Yesterday, a lady questioned one keeper extensively. At least, that’s what he told me. Then she also asked me several questions about them.”

“A blond woman with short hair and round glasses?”

“Yes, that’s her. Do you know her?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Ah ha, a group of experts. You should’ve made the trip together. Other than that, there was an officer, too, who came by last week.”

“What did he want?”

“Information about the species, likewise. He also seemed very knowledgeable, but he said that nothing was more instructive than talking to someone who was well acquainted with the subject.”

“A soldier... in uniform?”

“No, but he looked like an officer. I might be wrong.”

“What questions did he ask?”

“Why don’t we talk about you? Why this interest? You said I wouldn’t believe you, why don’t you try me?”

“Let’s say... I had a... an experience... It’s difficult to explain...”

“Try me!”

He had no choice but to lie to her.

“I saw a documentary about these animals, and I was very troubled by what I saw in their eyes.”

She didn’t seem convinced by his explanation.

“You don’t want to talk about it... too bad. It’s really a shame, though, that you don’t want to tell me more about it. It’s quite strange that there’s so much interest these days in those gorillas. Should I tell the officer about it? Or maybe not?”

“Tell him about what?”

“About your questions regarding the *Gorilla gorilla gorilla* species.”

“But... why would you do that?”

“Because he told me to contact him if anyone seemed particularly interested in those animals.”

“Really!”

“Yes.”

“Now that’s unusual. I wonder why?”

“I don’t have a clue. I was hoping you would tell me, but sadly for me, you’re as secretive as he was.”

“I’m really sorry, I swear that if I told you...”

“I wouldn’t believe you. That’s what you think. But... What makes you so sure of that? Maybe I’d give you some credit. Maybe I’ve also had an experience with these animals that’s hard to believe...”

Lucien stared at Chan Zhào. Twirling a strand of her long ebony hair between her thumb and forefinger, she looked back at him enigmatically. He realized just then that he found her rather attractive.

“An experience with these animals that’s hard to believe, is that what you said?”

“That’s what I said,” she confirmed. “But if you want me to tell you more about it, you’ll have to be a little more loquacious yourself.”

“Yes, I get it. But, um... are you going to tell the officer about my questions?”

“I’m Chan Zhào. I’m the director of this place,” she said, holding out her hand to shake his.

He shook it.

“Lucien Prérubem.”

“Glad to meet you. It’s getting late, the zoo is about to close. Come have a drink at my place. My house is here inside the park. We’ll talk this over.”

30) Experimental neurosis

6722 didn't know that human beings called him a 'guinea pig' and had given him the number 6722. But this was of no importance. Even if he had known about it, it wouldn't have changed anything for him. Only one thing mattered to him: his mother. Or at least, the object he believed to be his mother—a grotesque puppet covered with scraggly fur.

6722 was one of the many baby monkeys that they were conducting a wide range of 'experimental neurosis' experiments on. He was the subject of a study that consisted in inducing a depressive state in rhesus macaque infants by allowing them to bond with a surrogate mother that would periodically turn into a monster, and sometimes even seriously harm them⁸.

6722 was a very young infant the size of a cat, with a head no bigger than a tangerine. His light-colored eyes, disproportionately big, were full of anxiety. His 'mother' was one of the devices that would suddenly shoot out spikes upon command of the experimenters conducting the study. They would then observe his reactions at their leisure through glass panes. His frail body was covered with painful wounds and scratches.

These trials took place several times a day. As confirmed by results of several other experiments of the same type, 6722 would not let go of the object that he emotionally depended on. But now it was nighttime, and the scientists were all sleeping peacefully in their homes. No spikes would be springing out to test the little monkey's need for love, and he had finally been able to get some sleep. Trembling from the nightmares that haunted his sleep, the tiny infant gripped his surrogate mother's pelt—rabbit skin soiled by splatters of his blood—tightly in his hand.

Suddenly, something unexpected occurred. His face muscles, usually constantly twitching, loosened up, his clenched fists relaxed, and his body stopped shivering. Waking up calmly, he opened enormous eyes that no longer expressed any torment. A mysterious source of gentle tranquility spread through him, making him forget his afflictions and anesthetizing the physical pain caused by the spikes.

Something inside of him was talking to him. 'Something' because he didn't know what it was, 'talking' because there are no words to des-

cribe what his mind was receiving. What he heard weren't actually human words, of course, but rather monkey concepts. They weren't noises either, meant to replace his own. These particular thoughts were more like suggestions that someone makes and that you are free to accept or refuse. We'll call this thing that was speaking to him 'the Influence'. It's impossible to repeat verbatim the silent conversation taking place in the mind of the small macaque. In order to comprehend what was being said, we're going to have to use human words to describe it.

< Everything is going to be all right, > the Influence said. < Your mommy is sorry that you are injured. She is not the one who controls these spikes. She loves you with all her heart and only wants the best for you. >

The infant gazed with eyes desperate for tenderness into the plastic eyes of his mother and rubbed his cheek on her fur. His plaintive whimper expressed the thought that the words 'my dear mommy' would be the closest in meaning to.

Obviously, he wasn't actually thinking 'mommy'! This is a human notion. But 'mommy' is the word in our language that best characterizes the mental vision that he had of this object that meant the world to him. 6722 no longer felt his wounds. He was no longer afraid either, and the certainty that his mother loved him fulfilled his need for tenderness. He blissfully relished a tranquility that he had never felt before. And rightly so!

The Influence suggested that he might want to leave his wire and glass cage and, that way, experience freedom. It then explained to him how he could escape. The baby stuck his arm through the bars and pulled on a safety pin attached to a small chain. Using force and extending his arm as much as he could, after several tries he managed to pull the pin out. Having successfully freed the latch that had kept the door to his prison locked, he easily slid it out and pushed the door open. The knowledge that his mother was watching him while he was doing this and that she was proud of him filled him with sweet felicity. He exited his minuscule place of detention—it was thirty centimeters long—and found himself on a long wide shelf that spanned the wall at about one meter thirty from the floor. There were other similar cages

on the shelf containing little macaques and their different types of pain-inflicting monster-mothers. There were also two adult monkeys held prisoner in contention devices that immobilized their limbs, chest, and head. One of them had been subjected to a craniotomy, and a plate studded with electrodes covered its skull. Their terrified eyes followed 6722's movements.

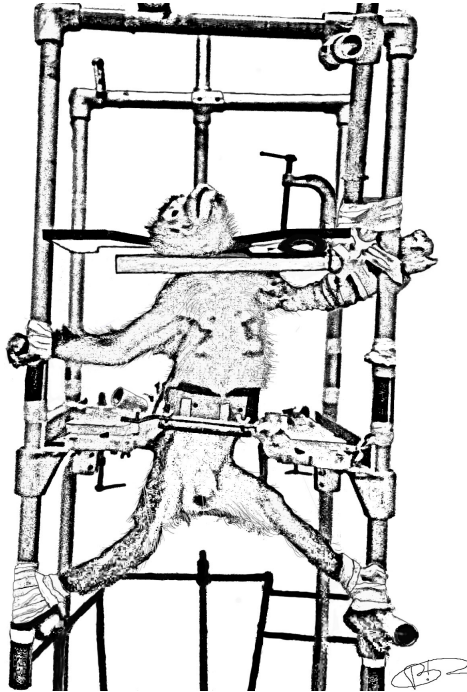


Illustration by Boris Tzaprenko

The Influence slipped thoughts into 6722's mind, somewhat similar to, < Everyone you see here is suffering. You are going to free them. Your mother is watching you. She will be so proud of you! >

This idea gave him so much joy that it quickened the beats of his tiny heart. The Influence led him towards a drawer where he grabbed the tube that Adam Polikant had purchased. It then told him how to open it and coat his four hands with the liquid latex. It was an awkward operation; he had to lie on his back so that his twenty fingers wouldn't touch anything. When he had finished, it told him to stay put for several minutes without getting up, gently waving his hands so the

latex would dry faster. Once the latex had hardened, the quadrumane was equipped with four smooth and flexible custom-made gloves.

Following the advice of this external spirit that cared so benevolently for him, the young animal disposed of the tube by dropping it behind the filing cabinet. Other drawers contained a variety of objects, and the Influence had him pick out a syringe and remove it from its sterile envelope. Then it directed him to a vial and showed him how to open it and fill the syringe. All these complex manipulations were accomplished slowly and with difficulty because these objects were too big for him to handle well with his little hands. But he performed all the actions he was instructed to and fully filled the syringe. The kind spirit again sent him suggestions through a series of mental representations.

< It would be better if you began by those who cannot find rest. >

It guided him towards the two adults who watched him approach. There was so much anguish and pain in their eyes that there was no longer any room for curiosity. The infant lifted up the syringe, as large as a chimney pipe compared to his size, inserted the needle into one of the study subjects and injected some of the product. The test subject instantly found eternal rest. The second one was freed in the same drastically tragic way.

The Influence then instructed him to fill the syringe again and put an end to the suffering of the twelve other infants. They were all sleeping, clinging to their artificial mothers. The operation took him about fifteen minutes because he had to open all of the doors to get into each cage. By the time he was through, the tiny corpses all lay at the bottom of their miniature jails, some with their thumbs still in their mouths.

6722 was in a trance-like state, not fully conscious of what he had just done. He however felt the gentle eyes of his mother, so full of pride, resting on him. The Influence once more sent thoughts into the macaque's mind that could be translated as, < Now, I have an important mission that I really need your help with. You must leave this place. Your mother is watching over you. She loves you so much! >

With the help of the Influence, the infant monkey put the syringe and the vial back where he had found them. He then climbed up onto a sink and tried to turn on the faucet, because the source of his thoughts wanted him to drink some water. He unfortunately couldn't

get the water to flow, the handle being too hard for him to turn. The Influence decided to give up on this, and asked him to move on to the rest of what it had planned. He climbed a pipe that was in the corner of the room. Once he was close to the ceiling, he lifted up a grate and slipped into a ventilation shaft.

His small size made it easy for him to move along the shaft. He felt a light breeze of fresh air on his face, a new and rather pleasant sensation. The Influence guided his steps for about fifteen meters in the dark, then it instructed him to open a second grate as silently as he could, slip out of the shaft and enter a room he had never seen before. This wasn't surprising, of course, since he had only seen two rooms in his entire life: the room he had just left, his 'work' room; and the room he had been born in, where they bred 'experimental material'—which is the terminology used by the vivisection world to describe their test subjects.

Still partially assisted by the Influence, the infant climbed down the electrical cable conduit to the floor. Two armed soldiers guarded the room. Slumped on a chair, his head lying on his bent arm on the table, the psychiatrist who was in charge of watching them was trying to get some rest. In another corner of the room, a man was sleeping on a cot. Fighting against drowsiness and boredom, the two guards were impatiently waiting for the next change of shift, which was scheduled to take place half an hour later. They didn't have the right to sit down or look at their smartphones, and they had no desire to disobey that rule, seeing who was snoring on the cot. The infant went to the body lying on the bed. Quiet as a mouse, he grabbed the socks that the sleeping man had left on top of his impeccably shined boots. The small primate jumped onto a chair, then a table, from there to another piece of furniture and finally landed on a beam to which a camera was attached. This series of swift movements had taken place outside the range of the camera's lens. The young study subject covered the lens with one of the socks. After a new series of jumps, he incapacitated a second surveillance device with the second sock. During these operations, the Influence continuously encouraged him, telling him that his mother loved him, that she was watching him and that she was extremely proud of him.

The last step of the mission was the most difficult to realize, and the Influence had to take full control of his little hands. He had to use a keyboard to add some lines of code to a program, change the value of three constants and modify an algorithm. The computer was located in an angle that wasn't visible to the two men, but it was in the line of vision of the two presently blinded cameras. It took all of five minutes.

The Influence knew that it was vital for the infant to find some food, but more importantly, to find water. It could numb his hunger and the pain from the wounds inflicted by the monster-mother's spikes, but his energy and water levels were getting dangerously low. He needed to drink and to rest. Time was running out. It suggested that he get back into the ventilation shaft, then guided him along about twenty meters to an inlet leading out into the open air. There, it instructed him to jump onto a branch, to climb down the tree and to run through the grass towards the train station, which was some 500 meters away.

It was almost 1:00 a.m., and the post office platform was deserted. It instructed him to climb into a postal railway car, full of canvas bags stuffed with mail, then sent him some last thoughts.

< Find a comfortable little corner in the back and take a nap. Your loving mother is watching over you. >

31) Socks

Elijah Floyd himself didn't know what woke him up. The fact remains that, at 1:02 a.m., he abruptly sat up in his bed.

"Hey, guys!" he shouted. "Is everything okay?"

The two armed men jumped, startled.

"Yes, Colonel!" They both responded at the same time. "Nothing to report."

The psychiatrist bolted up so rapidly his chair fell over.

"Lights!" the colonel thundered.

One guard dashed over to the two switches and flicked them on, flooding the room with light. The officer took a few steps in his bare feet, looking in all directions, his eyebrows furrowed over worried eyes.

“You there, the mad doctor! You aren’t being paid to sleep, but to keep an eye on the soldiers!” he barked at the psychiatrist, noticing his rumpled face.

The latter picked up his chair, apologizing profusely. The colonel slept in his clothes so that he wouldn’t waste any time if anything happened. His gut feeling told him something in the room was wrong, but he saw nothing to confirm it. He decided to interrogate the guard standing outside the door. Sitting down to put on his shoes, he noticed that his socks were no longer laying on his boots. Letting out a string of insults, each one more dissonant than the other, he demanded explanations from his men. Three stunned faces stared back at him, and he realized that none of them could give him the solution to this mystery, even though he declared that “the two damned socks didn’t walk off on their own”.

After having unsuccessfully inspected the entire room once again, not forgetting to look under and inside his bed, the colonel checked the images from the two surveillance cameras that had the bed in their line of vision. That’s when he discovered that, at 00:44 a.m., one of the screens had gone black. Lifting his head to examine the camera, he spotted one of his socks, and right after that, the other one, covering the second camera lens.

“Get those two damned socks off of there and bring them to me!” he roared out, in particular to Guy Sabatini, one of the two soldiers. “No, forget that! Don’t touch them! Bring in the fingerprint experts and have them inspect the cameras and everything around them. Call all the brainiacs that work here, drag them out of their beds. I want them all here in front of me in fifteen minutes tops. Summon all the directors of the SACI program and their subordinates.”

He flung open the door and called out to one of the soldiers standing there.

“Corporal! Go get me some socks, from wherever you want, even if you have to knit them yourself! Hurry up!”

The corporal ran off to fulfill his request. He questioned the others.

“So, nobody saw anything, of course! No use asking the shrinks! They probably were snoozing like logs, no doubt about that, just like the one who was in there with me! I’m talking to the soldiers. Did you notice

anything? A slight noise, for example, any odd thingy? Nothing? Not even the burp of an ant?”

32) He must eat as soon as possible

Lucien had stayed up with Chan Zhào until late into the night, and learned that she had been born in Peking. Hoping that she would share her ‘experience that is hard to believe’ with him, he had shared confidences with her, but only partial ones, and even then with extreme caution. All he told her was that the visual communication that he had experienced had troubled him deeply, and that the exchange was so profound that he felt that it must have been telepathy. Chan was no fool, she knew that he was keeping his secret to himself. When she asked him where it had happened, he had vaguely answered ‘in Africa’. He couldn’t have been more vague if he had said ‘somewhere in the world’. She didn’t hold it against him though, hoping that, in time, she could wear him down and he would tell her. Until then, she had adapted her level of loquacity to his, explaining that she had taught sign language to one of these animals and the results had far exceeded her expectations.

At 1:10 a.m. she offered to share her meal with him, but he refused.

“No, thanks. That’s nice of you, but... my stomach isn’t agreeing with me at the moment. A little bit of fasting will do me a world of good.”

Chan decided it was pointless to insist. It was quite obvious that he really didn’t want to eat. She chalked this up to the list of the man’s peculiarities, because having ‘stomach issues’ but still being able to drink three glasses of port was somewhat contradictory... And why didn’t he want to talk about the reasons he was interested in the Western lowland gorilla? Or again, why had he spent the whole evening on an uncomfortable wooden chair, having refused to sit in the cozy leather armchair that she had offered him? Decidedly, the more time she spent with him, the more questions she had.

“Oh gosh, it really is late,” he added, getting up. “I’ll be on my way. Thanks for the invitation. I won’t impose on you any longer.”

Since he was dead set on leaving, she walked him to the park's exit. She opened the gate and held out her business card.

"Please come back whenever you want to observe the gorillas. And if you need me, call."

"Thanks again," he said, slipping the rectangular card into his pocket. "It's a deal. I'll definitely be coming back."

He exited, then turned back towards her.

"I forgot to ask. Will you call the officer about me?"

"Who knows?"

He looked kind of miffed, so she smiled.

"Probably not, but I'll allow myself to give you the same cryptic responses to your questions that you give mine."

He scrunched up his mouth in a grimace that meant, 'Yes, alright, fair enough, I admit it, but I'd really appreciate it if you didn't tell him about me.'

She closed the gate without saying a word but waved goodbye, and he waved in return. He climbed into his Kia, which was the last car left in the dark parking lot, and was barely behind the wheel when he heard Bellisae's thought-voice in his mind.

< Lucien! Hurry! I am in great need of you! >

< What... what's going on? >

< I need you to go to the Fleuret railway station as fast as you can. >

< What for? >

< You must pick up a little monkey there. An infant rhesus macaque. >

< ... >

< You must hurry because he must eat as soon as possible. Find someone who can care for him, too. Until you do, I will help you care for him, but you need to find someone who knows these animals. >

< What...? Where...? How...? >

< You are having trouble thinking your question. >

< Yes, well, now where did this monkey come from? >

< I will explain later. You must go to the Fleuret station immediately. The child is in a postal railway car. It is train 212's next-to-last wagon, and it is arriving at 2:30 a.m. You must be there before the postal

workers find him or maybe even injure him when they unload the mail bags. >

< But tell me at least where this monkey is from! >

< I do not have the time at the moment to give you the details. This is an emergency, I insist. I will talk to you as you drive there. >

< Alright! But I'm going to ask someone to help me, if you don't mind. >

< Who? >

< A very competent person when it comes to primates. She'll know how to take care of him. >

< But... how do you know her and since when? >

< I don't have the time to explain, you said this was an emergency. >

Lucien took the card out of his pocket and read:

Chan Zhào

Primatologist

Director of the Zoological Park of Spetian

At the bottom of the card was the address and phone number of the park. Next to it, she had written down her cell phone number. He called it.

"Yes?"

"It's Lucien... You told me to call you if I needed any help..."

"I did."

"Well, I need your help."

"That was fast!"

"Yes. And it's extremely urgent."

"Okay, I'll come and let you in."

"Uh, actually, I need you to come with me as rapidly as you can. We need to save an infant rhesus macaque. I was told he needs food and drink right away. I need someone with me who knows what to do."

"Alright. I'll grab a bag with everything I need for a baby bottle, and I'll be right there."

In the car, on the way to the railway station, Lucien had a hard time explaining to Chan Zhào why he so imperatively needed her to take care of a little macaque and why, suddenly, at this time of night, a monkey was waiting for him in a train wagon. He mumbled something about a friend who had called and asked him to do this for her and that he would know more about it later on. Chan seemed to have settled for that, but she told herself that she would get to the bottom of this once they had recuperated the animal.

Train 212 arrived on schedule at 2:30 a.m. at the Fleuret station. Lucien and the primatologist were waiting on the platform. The postal car was the next to last one, as he had been told. There was hardly anyone there and no one from the post office.

Lucien climbed onto the footboard and pulled as hard as he could on the car door handle to open it, but it was locked and impossible to even crack open.

“This isn’t going to work,” said Chan Zhào, “and people are arriving, look!”

They had grown much more comfortable with each other without realizing it after the time spent together in the car. Lucien desperately searched for a mechanism that would release the car’s door when Bel-lisae manifested herself.

< I do not know what you are doing, but it is of no use trying to open the wagon door if it is locked. We can try something else. >

< What can we do? The postal workers are almost here... >

< Precisely. Once they have opened the door, lift your arm in the air so that I will know who you are. I have never seen you up to now, and I do not know what you look like. >

< But... what are you planning on doing? >

< You will find out soon. >

A small train on wheels was driving up to them on the platform with three men and two women on board. One of the women was driving the electric vehicle, which was pulling a dozen or so flat wagons, and the other four were in the first one.

The convoy stopped in front of the postal car, and they all stepped off onto the platform. Some of them turned to look interrogatively at Chan and Lucien who were standing there looking like they were waiting for someone, wondering who they were. But fortunately they were not really that interested in them. One of the men opened the car door. Lucien lifted his arm, attracting the surprised attention of the team, surprise that grew dramatically when a small monkey sprang out of the wagon and jumped on him, clinging to his clothes.

< Hide this child in your jacket and watch out for him, > said Bellisae. < He urgently needs to drink and eat. >

< I'll take care of him. >

Followed by an astonished Chan, Lucien quickly rushed out of the railway station.

< This woman walking next to you is the competent person who knows about primates and can take good care of him? >

< Yes, she is. >

< You should give her the child then, should you not? >

Lucien handed the little macaque over to Chan. Without even slowing, she placed the child in her jacket.

“Oh! He’s covered with wounds, poor thing. Whatever happened to him?” she asked.

“I have no idea.”

*

In the car, Chan opened the bag at her feet.

“He must be about twelve months old,” she estimated. “I’ll prepare a bottle for him.”

Less than two minutes later, she had presented the child with the bottle nipple, and he was greedily sucking away.

< He is drinking so heartily! > Bellisae word-thought. < Just in time! >

< Can you see what’s going on? >

As the little macaque was replenishing, Chan turned her eyes to Lucien.

“This animal is covered with sores. I don’t have what I need to treat them in my bag. I’ll dress his wounds back home. Look, his four hands are covered with latex! He looks like he’s wearing transparent gloves. But... I think it’s time you told me about him. I think I deserve an explanation, otherwise I might feel offended.”

“If I keep my silence, you’ll get angry at me. If I talk, you’ll think that I’m crazy.”

“That’s your problem. Choose the lesser of the two evils.”

< You must remove the latex from his hands. But first, tell me, do you think she is pretty? >

< What do you care? >

“What? What do I care... But...”

“No, that wasn’t intended for you.”

“How’s that, not for me?”

< In any case, you look comfortable together! She has bewitched you! >

“You aren’t the one I’m ta...”

< Leave me alone! You totally ignored my question. I’ll ask again, how is it that you can see and hear what’s going on around me? You hid that from me! I won’t answer you anymore until you answer that question. >

“You weren’t talking to me? Were you talking to the monkey?”

Lucien had had enough.

“Alright... I’ll tell you everything. But it’s a long story and you’re going to think...”

“I’m going to think you’re crazy... I know. Just take the risk, please.”

“Okay. I’ll tell you the whole story. After all, it’ll be a release. But... where should we go?”

“To my place, of course. Unless you want to kidnap me! I have to work tomorrow. And everything I need to care for him is at the zoo.”

“Yes, sure... I’m a little lost here.”

Lucien started telling her his story.

“It all began at my ophthalmologist’s. I saw a poster there, a huge picture of a gorilla...”

During his narrative, he ignored Bellisae who tried several times to stop him from telling her the whole tale, who insisted on asking him if he found her pretty, and who also told him that she was probably going to kill someone else. He pretended not to hear this last declaration, thinking that she was just trying to get his attention.

33) 6722’s cage was empty

Honoré Goriot, the primate keeper, started work early enough so that he wouldn’t get in the scientific team’s way. As usual, he arrived at the vivisection laboratory, located in the same building as SACI, at 4:00 a.m., and approached the two soldiers standing guard in front of the entrance. For a while now security had been reinforced all over the building, even in the units whose activities had nothing to do with SACI’s. The armed men lifted flaccid hands to their right eyebrows, a gesture soldiers liked using when they saluted civilians. This limp salute lacked any martial quality to it and was their way of showing him that *they* belonged to a specific group and were making an effort to show respect, even though *he* didn’t belong to it. Like the previous days, the keeper answered their social gesture by a nod of his head that was just as casual, then presented his left eye to the iris identifier. As soon as the heavy metal door opened enough for him to slip in, he entered and shut it behind him. The room was dimly lit. He flicked one of the switches, turning on just enough light to see, but not enough to wake the sleeping test subjects. He was secretly disturbed by what was being done to the animals here. He didn’t like to see them suffer, but... They kept telling him that these experiments were essential for the good of mankind. This was his only job, he had no other means of existence, so he made an effort and tried to believe them. Nothing is more painful than to silence your heart because of your existential needs.

He always started out by cleaning the cages. He hung his jacket on the coat hanger next to the entrance door and glanced towards the

monkeys. He blinked, frowned and, surprised, let out a stifled cry. He rushed to the cages containing the small bodies stretched out, frozen in death. The two adults were still standing, slumped, strapped to their contention devices, but he could see that they were no longer alive. Honoré stared at all the corpses for several seconds without reacting, as if not believing his own eyes. Then, he picked up one of the tiny inanimate quadrumanes, number 6701, in his right hand. Feeling it so cold and rigid sent a shiver down his spine. He often had to handle dead macaques in his job, but they had died during experimentation and were still warm and limp. Scanning once again the macabre scene, he noticed that one of the little monkeys was missing. 6722's cage was empty. He also noted that its door was open, but in the same instant realized that all the doors were. He was so distraught that he hadn't paid any attention to it, even when he had reached in to pick up number 6701.

He had to sound the alert without further delay. He had probably already waited too long and he knew that he would be criticized for that. Honoré exited the room and called out to the soldiers.

"Soldiers! Call your superiors! Something terribly wrong has happened!"

*

They had pulled Adam Polikant out of his bed, then Marie Barlox had been torn away from her breakfast and told to get dressed in a hurry. Soldiers waited to transport them posthaste to the vivisection laboratory where they worked. Adam Polikant had never felt so embarrassed. They had barely given him enough time to slip on a jacket over his pajamas and his feet into shoes. The little amused looks that Marie Barlox gave him only accentuated his discomfort. The two scientists had just found out why they had been pulled in at such an early hour.

Elijah Floyd rubbed his red-rimmed eyes. He was so sleep deprived that he could have fallen asleep on a nail-studded plank. He scratched

his neck, pointed in the direction of the cages, and tried to sum it all up.

“So, yesterday evening, all of these little beasts were alive. You’re sure of that. Then, this morning, they’ve all passed away. And, according to you, the deaths are not natural, I mean they didn’t die on their own. You also think that it’s highly improbable that the experiments that you were running on them could have caused them to die during the night.”

He was talking to Honoré Goriot and to the two scientists. Adam and Marie answered “no” once again to this last question.

“So, what you’re saying is that they’ve been killed. Are you convinced of that?”

“How else can this be explained, Colonel?” asked Honoré Goriot. “Let me remind you that all of the cage doors were open too!”

“That’s true,” Elijah admitted. “The fucking doors were open!”

“I can understand why it baffles you,” Adam mumbled.

Trying hard to win the favors of the colonel, he hadn’t found anything better to say.

“Why it baffles me,” the commander repeated through clenched teeth, moving in so close he almost was nose to nose with Adam. “It *is* baffling! Should I also be bewildered? Or maybe even stupefied? Should I be astonished, perhaps? Imagine that last night, my damned socks went off on their own to cover up the cameras! Exactly as if they wanted to stop me from seeing what was going on in this freaking madhouse. Because you’re all completely mad, especially in this place! So don’t go thinking that your bloody open cages surprise me in the least! Believe me!”

“I-I...,” stammered the scientist.

“I, I! And no one else here has anything to tell me that is more useful than Mr. I-I Pajama here,” ranted the colonel, at wit’s end.

When he first met the man, he hadn’t liked him at all. He didn’t like his shifty eyes and syrupy tone of voice. A coward who exacts revenge for his pathetic life on monkeys, he had thought at the time.

“The bodies will have to be examined to determine what killed them,” Marie proposed.

“Finally, something that makes sense,” exclaimed the commander. “Get on with it!”

While the two scientists got busy doing what they were told to do, the colonel spoke to Honoré.

“My men told me that you gave the alert after having been here for more than four minutes.”

“It’s true, I was so...”

“Okay, I understand. Is there anything more you can tell me? A detail that you noticed... Something that wasn’t where it was supposed to be or was missing? Was anything stolen?”

Honoré didn’t know why he felt the need to hide the fact that 6722’s body was missing. He did it almost in spite of himself, hoping that Marie and Adam wouldn’t take notice of it right away so that he would have the time to conceal the disappearance.

“Nothing more, Colonel. If I see anything else...”

The officer pulled at the bottom of his Army jacket, adjusted his khaki cap and stuck his thumbs into his belt.

“Okay. I’m counting on you.”

He liked Honoré. He winked at him complicitly.

“I gave your psychopath in pajamas a hard time there. He doesn’t even have a monkey left to take it out on.”

The keeper smiled bitterly.

“His pajamas aren’t what bothers me the most.”

“I know, I know... Why do you work here if the fate of these little creatures affects you?”

“I know it shouldn’t, but when I started out, I didn’t know what to think. It’s hard to find a job, and beggars can’t be choosers!”

“Yep! You got that right! You can’t always choose your assignment! As if *I* was having the time of my life, in this shithole where even socks can piss you off!”

“Socks, Colonel?”

“Forget it, I’m just tired. What were they doing here? I mean, what ongoing experiments were they conducting, if it isn’t too complicated to explain?”

“Well, the adult macaques were subjected to brain ablations or incisions, electrode implantation... to study the effects they would have on them: loss of balance, blindness, deafness, tremors... that kind of thing.”

“Holy shit! If only I had retractable ears so that I couldn’t hear such things! And the small monkeys?”

“The small ones are infants.”

Honoré rapidly explained the idea of the monster-mothers.

“These people are seriously sick, they’re fucking psychopaths! Now that I think of it, the people who murdered these monkeys may have been animal rights activists, because taking their lives was a way to end their unbearable suffering. That in itself is probably enough of a mobile... even if, had I been given the choice, I would rather have shot the tormentors than the victims. But you didn’t hear that, did you, Honoré?”

“Of course not, Colonel! I don’t even know what you’re talking about! As for your hypothesis... who knows? I’ll leave you alone for a moment, if you don’t mind. I have something I have to do.”

“Right! Call me as soon as these wackos find out how those poor critters were killed.”

Honoré saw that Adam and Marie were both bent over the body of one of the baby macaques. Wanting to make the disappearance of one of the bodies less obvious, he grabbed one of the plastic cans that they usually used to throw away the ‘experimental material’ that hadn’t survived the experiments, stacked up the corpses in it and left it there at the scientists’ disposal. An empty cage would be easy to detect, but he knew they wouldn’t count the bodies.

The colonel rubbed his chin thoughtfully. What else could he do now? SACI’s facilities had been scoured and scrutinized without any results. Not a trace, not a fingerprint on the cameras. And how could he explain the socks?

He left the vivisection laboratory, his hands clasped behind his back, and was saluted impeccably by the two soldiers standing guard.

“None of you saw anything at all? Heard anything?”

They both put on a sorry face and said they hadn’t.

“Fucking haunted building!” he exclaimed. “Let’s speculate for a moment. What would you have done in my place, if we had been attacked by a swarm of demonic socks, soldiers?”

The two soldiers had totally puzzled looks plastered on their faces.

“A swarm of demonic socks, Colonel sir?” one of the soldiers dared.

“Never mind...”

The commander decided to see if there was anything new going on at SACI, the entrance of which was on the other side of the building. He had barely made two steps in that direction when a piercing scream, coming from the laboratory, made his blood run cold. He turned on his heels and launched himself through the open door of the building.

Adam Polikant was lying in a large red puddle. Streams of blood were spurting from a scarlet wound on his neck. Marie Barlox and Honoré Goriot were staring at the dying man, their eyes bulging with stupor.

34) What the hell happened, once again?

Colonel Elijah Floyd let out a huge stream of expletives.

“Paramedics to vivisection! Now!” he barked into his phone. Once that was done, he continued defiling proper language as loud as he could.

After Augusto Brayonzo’s suicide, a team of paramedics had been stationed on the grounds ready to intervene if needed. Fifteen seconds later, stretcher-bearers came to pick up Adam Polikant’s body.

“I want you to revive this guy immediately,” ordered the commanding officer. “You have ten minutes to turn him into a potential Olympic champion!”

He then whirled around towards Honoré Goriot and Marie Barlox.

“What the hell happened, once again? What the hell happened? Again!”

They both were manifestly in shock.

“He slit his carotid artery,” said the female researcher. “All of the sudden, he slit his carotid artery open, there, right in front of me...”

Pale as a sheet, Honoré couldn't utter a word. The colonel made a sound somewhere in between a growl, a shout, and a groan.

"Once again!"

The two armed men started to step into the room to see what was going on.

"You two get back to your job out there!" the commander yelled at them. "Peel your eyes! Understood? Annihilate even the tiniest flea that tries to get in here!"

"What was he doing just before he cut his throat?" he asked Marie Barlox. "In the seconds before he committed this act?"

"Nothing special, I swear. He looked like he was deep in thought, he stood there silently for several seconds without moving. He seemed to be concentrating and I thought that he was about to tell me something when suddenly..."

"Did the CCTV cameras record this fucking suicide?"

"The surveillance cameras are all turned off in here, Colonel."

"Why's that?"

"Adam didn't want the lab to be filmed. He was worried that animal rights activists would get hold of the images."

"I see... So that he could go about torturing these animals, in the utmost ataraxic serenity, without being disturbed—and prevent unauthorized eyes from viewing his psychopathic acts!"

Marie was speechless.

"Did you find out what freed the victims?"

"...?"

"Yes, well! I meant to say what killed the monkeys, if you prefer."

"Yes, Colonel. A hypnotic drug that was in there."

She pointed to the filing cabinet.

"In that drawer?"

"Yes, in that drawer. You can see that it's unlocked. We haven't touched it today, and I'm pretty sure that it was locked yesterday. The product came from this vial that was not properly resealed. And this is probably the syringe that was used. The sterile wrapping that was protecting the syringe is on the countertop above the drawer. Discovering this has speeded up our search, all we had to do was test the blood of

two of the bodies and see if they contained this hypnotic. It's lethal if administered at too high a dose."

"You're assuming that someone came here to inject these animals with this stuff!"

"What I'm saying is that the monkeys died from an excessive quantity of this substance, that the drawer is open and that a syringe containing traces of this product is right there. I'll add that we haven't used this hypnotic in weeks, that the vial was full and that it no longer is."

"And how did whoever did that enter then leave?"

"I haven't the slightest idea."

The colonel's face darkened.

"Who did this and why?" he grumbled. "Was it my socks? In a place like this, full of raving maniacs, every possibility must be considered."

"Your socks?" asked Marie with surprise.

Three gunshots suddenly rang out outside. The officer worked his phone nervously trying to reach Guy. He lost his temper and started swearing profusely, called someone else and shouted into the device.

"Paramedics! Those shots are coming from your area!"

"Yes, come quickly please," said the paramedic team leader. "This is a disaster!"

The colonel bolted outside and broke into a leg-breaking run, heading around the building towards the paramedic facilities. When he burst into the room, his heart beating faster than a mosquito's wings, his eyes cut to one of his men, tied to a chair by meters of bandages wrapped around his chest and legs, making him look like a mummy. His hands and ankles were also handcuffed to the chair. It was Guy Sabatini.

Two soldiers were standing on each side of him ready to pounce if by any chance the prisoner freed himself. Elijah Floyd understood why Guy hadn't answered the phone.

The team leader was standing there and looked at Elijah grimly.

"Colonel, I..."

"What? What's going on now in this looney bin?"

"I called for help and then I saw your man following the stretcher-bearers as they passed him by. Seeing him walking next to the

stretcher, I thought he was there to escort them, to ensure the safety of the patient, but..."

"But what?"

"He pulled his gun on the wounded man... Then... then..."

"Then...? Then what? Dammit!"

"He shot him three times."

Elijah Floyd looked at the two soldiers.

"Colonel, sir," one of them said, "we rushed over in response to the yells as soon as we heard them. We easily unarmed him and tied him up, he didn't put up any resistance. We're sorry we didn't get there in time to stop him from shooting. We weren't trained to be wary of one another, but, on the contrary, to trust each other."

The colonel's expression said, 'yes, yes... I understand, soldier.' The murderer hung his head. Chin on his chest, he was staring listlessly at the floor. Nervous tics made his cheeks and eyebrows twitch. His lower lip was trembling. He twisted his fingers together over and over.

"Guy," the commanding officer said, extremely troubled. "What got into you, man? What was going on in your noggin?"

Guy Sabatini lifted his convulsing face and babbled, his hands writhing.

"I-I-I don't know... Colonel, sir. I couldn't help myself."

"Let's talk about this, just the two of us, Guy. Just the two of us, let's talk. You'll explain it to me calmly."

Elijah Floyd turned towards the other two men.

"Take Guy to my office. I want to talk to him in private."

35) Back to Spetian Zoo

When they got back to Spetian Zoo, it was 3:10 a.m. and the little macaque had been sleeping for a while. Clinging to Chan Zhào's sweater, his thumb in his mouth, he whimpered as he was dreaming, or more likely having nightmares, seeing what his life had been like up to then.

Lucien was about to park the car in the deserted parking lot when she guided him to the parking area that was reserved for the zoo employees. She gave him her access card to get in. Lucien pulled into a space and turned off the engine.

“Your story is astounding, I must admit, but... contrary to what you feared, I don’t think you’re insane,” said Chan. “I believe you.”

“Really? Why?”

“You seem disappointed that I don’t think you’re a madman!”

“No, that’s not it... it’s quite the opposite. But hearing myself reveal all of that to you, I’m beginning to doubt my sanity once again.”

“Do you know why I believe you?”

“I haven’t a clue. I’m not sure that *I* would believe everything that I just told you, so...”

“It’s time for me to tell you about the astonishing experience that I had.”

“You said that you had a dialogue in sign language that went beyond your expectations. You were a bit evasive about the details, though.”

“I gave you that answer so you wouldn’t ask any more questions, since you weren’t answering mine. But now, I believe I should tell you the truth.”

“It’s about time, as a matter of fact! I can’t wait to hear about it,” Lucien admitted.

“You more than anyone else should be able to understand why I had such a hard time sharing my story. I received a wordless message, just like you did. I was asked what I thought about the fact that gorillas were deprived of their freedom in my prison. Nothing after that. I didn’t answer, the idea never even crossed my mind that I could try. I thought it was all in my head, that I had imagined it.”

“Oh!”

“And while you were talking to me, about halfway here, when you were telling me about your life as a cow, I saw the image of a gorilla appear in front of my eyes...”

“Oh!!”

“Yes, but it was very brief. I thought that I was hallucinating because of the effect your story was having on me.”

“That’s a possibility.”

“No.”

“No?”

“No, because once you had finished telling me about your visit to the Pierre Morageot facilities, Bellisae spoke to me. She used thought-words, the same way she does with you, as you explained.”

“Oh!!!”

“Oh, yes,” she confirmed.

“What did... what did she...?”

“She asked me if I thought you were attractive.”

“Huh? I, what, but...! Oh!!!! And... uh...?”

“Hmm...? What do you mean? Your question is a little jumbled!”

“What did you answer?”

“Ah ha! You’d like to know... I didn’t know how to answer that. I don’t mean that I didn’t know what to answer, but it was as if I was unable to communicate in this astonishing new way.”

“What would you have liked to answer then?” Lucien insisted.

“You seem more surprised by the question than by the fact that she talked to me. Why?”

You’re ignoring my question!

“Because she’s been pestering me about it. She wanted me to tell her if I liked you.”

Chan frowned interrogatively.

“Is that so! And what did you answer?”

Lucien felt embarrassed.

That’s not fair! You tell me first!

Luckily, the young macaque created a diversion by waking up and crying plaintively.

“He’s hungry,” said Chan. “I’m going to feed him another bottle and then I suggest that you stay and rest here until tomorrow morning. We’ll talk about this later.”

For the sake of appearances, he pretended to think about it.

“Oh no!” she said. “You aren’t going to leave me here on my own now that your friend is communicating with me. I must admit that I need to talk about it. You’ve had time to get used to it, but me... I’m won-

dering... how can I say... I think I'm scared. I'd like you to stay so that we can talk about it, that's all."

"Thanks," Lucien meekly murmured.

He watched her feed the infant who greedily sucked down the milk, and mentally thanked the little one for allowing him to avoid having to answer her question. Suddenly, Bellisae manifested herself.

< I can see the way you look at her! Let me remind you that you already have a wife! >

< You again! Why did you ask her if she found me attractive? That's none of your business! You're getting out of hand! >

< Why are you angry? I am the one who should be. >

< Why? >

< Because you have told her too many intimate things about us, and because you keep staring at her. >

< How in the world do you know what I'm saying and what I'm looking at? You lied to me. You said that you couldn't read my thoughts. >

< No, I did not lie to you. I did not lie! But now I have the means to see and hear you that I did not have at the time. >

< Ah! Something new then? >

< Yes, it is brand new in fact! >

< So... I'm now being watched and listened to twenty-four hours a day? >

< Not all the time, only occasionally. >

< Even occasionally is too much! I demand that you give me back my privacy and that you leave me alone. >

< You know, I killed again. >

< I don't care! I told you, you're totally out of control! You are way too involved with my life. >

< I am telling you that I have killed one of your kind again. If I were you, I would not take this information lightly. I might not go that far, but if you get too close to this Chan Zhào, I could get upset and give her a hard time. >

36) My body lifted up my weapon

In the meantime...

Sergeant Guy Sabatini sat hunched over on a chair in Colonel Elijah Floyd's office. He had been immobilized by two handcuffs, one pinning his arms behind the back of the chair, the other attaching both of his ankles together.

Guy was weeping. Elijah was so exhausted that he felt he had a severe case of brain fog. Sitting down across from the sergeant, he put his hands on his knees and leaned forward to look him in the eyes. This was the very first time he had seen the man cry.

"Guy, he said. "Guy, dammit! It doesn't matter that you shot Polikant! That isn't what worries me the most. What I'm worried about is what was going on in your head at that precise moment. I'm sure it isn't easy to explain, but you're not the only one this has happened to. Remember that Yves Badol gunned down Anna Pyrrus. He, too, had lost control of himself. I'm not here to torment you, I just want to understand what's screwing with my men's heads. I'm not judging you. Who knows, I might be the next one to blow a fuse."

Guy lifted his head and looked at his superior through a curtain of tears.

"Didn't do it on purpose," he sputtered.

"I know! I know! Yves Badol said that he saw an armed man in place of Anna Pyrrus. Is that what happened to you? Did you see an armed man instead of Polikant?"

"No, not at all. That isn't what happened."

"Alright, then tell me! What did you see? A tyrannosaurus? Godzilla lunging towards you? Speak, man!"

The sergeant wanted to speak, but his jaw started to quiver. He mumbled a string of incomprehensible sounds. The colonel called upon his patience, poured himself another cup of coffee that he drank in one gulp, and tried his best to stay calm.

"Okay. Start all over again, this time use a decoder. I'm listening."

"The only person I saw was the wounded man. But then..."

"But then?"

“But then my body lifted up my weapon and pulled the trigger without my being able to stop it.”

“Come again?”

“I swear, Colonel! I tried to resist, but my body wasn’t obeying me anymore, as if someone else was controlling it... I could feel my muscles moving, but they were doing it without my telling them to. You know... like those electric muscle stimulators that make your muscles contract... You see what I mean? I was terrified.”

Guy started to cry again.

“I was terrified, Colonel. I was scared to death!”

“You’re telling me that you didn’t have any visions, but that you were physically manipulated. You felt your muscles moving on their own as if they were being controlled by someone else’s fucking brain?”

“That’s exactly what happened, Colonel, sir. Physically manipulated, like a puppet. My body didn’t belong to me anymore. It acted against my will.”

Elijah Floyd knew that Guy was by no means an impressionable man and that he normally kept his cool under any circumstance. Seeing the state he was in, the experience must have been extremely traumatizing.

“Calm down, Guy. Do you want a drink?”

“...?”

The commanding officer unshackled the sergeant’s hands and threw the handcuffs onto his desk.

“A shot of damn good cognac?”

“No thank you, Colonel. It was a nightmare. Do you believe what I’m telling you?”

“Of course, I believe you! I know you, I know who you are. I’m sure that noggin of yours is well screwed on. And, well... I guess if your socks took off on their own at night to block out cameras, you’d be ready to believe in strange occurrences too! Right? Your tale of disobedient muscles is easier to believe than the one of my living, mischievous socks.”

Knowing all about the mystery of the socks, Guy gave a faint smile. It was only a barely perceptible polite little smile, but it warmed his face up for a short while.

“Thank you, Colonel! You can’t imagine how traumatizing it is to have your body do things on its own, against your will, and to not be able to stop it from committing certain acts. I’ve never experienced anything as terrifying as this before. It’s as if an unknown power had taken control of my body.”

“I understand, Guy. I can imagine it well enough, believe me. It must surely have been atrocious. You and Yves Badol are going to help me convince my superiors and those fucking politicians that something very very wrong is going on here and that we absolutely must do something to stop it now.”

37) Do you doubt my ability to go through with it?

Lucien felt a pain in his heart, as if he had been stabbed. Should he take that threat seriously? Could Bellisae really hurt someone remotely? It was undeniable that she could communicate, see and hear... It wasn’t a far stretch to imagine that she could also physically affect someone.

< Do you doubt my ability to go through with it? > asked Bellisae.

What could he answer?

I should have checked to see if the people she claims she killed are really dead... I truly suck!

“A penny for your thoughts?” asked Chan. “You look funny all of a sudden.”

“I’m actually completely worn out.”

How can I tell her about this threat without scaring her and without Bellisae hearing me? I have to search and make sure as soon as possible that the people she’s talking about are actually dead. I’ll see if the official statements of their deaths were issued after, not before, Bellisae told me about these potential murders.

“Yeah, sure...,” said Chan. “I guess I’ve no choice but to be satisfied with this response. Come on, the little one has finished his bottle.”

< I do not know if you verified that my first two murders really occurred, but I have a new name for you. >

‘Adam Polikant’ appeared in Lucien’s field of vision.

It’s as if she was reading my thoughts. If that’s the case, this is terrible. But maybe she can’t, because she doesn’t know what I was thinking about the first two.

Lucien and Chan got out of the car. The macaque that the primatologist was holding in her arms was watching Lucien. They rapidly walked up the short gravel path and entered Chan’s living room. Lucien pointed to his phone.

“Sorry, I know it’s rude, but I urgently need to look up a couple of things. It won’t take long.”

She held out her laptop.

“Use my computer if you want to, it’ll be more comfortable. Sit at the table and do what you have to do. I’m going to tend to this infant’s wounds then I’ll fix us something to eat.”

“Thanks. Uh... About the food, uh...”

“You eat neither meat nor dairy products. I get that coming from a former cow. Me neither, believe it or not. I’ve never been a cow, but I’ve been a vegan for a long time.”

“Really? But... why?”

“One, I don’t eat meat because I don’t want animals to be killed. I’d feel like a cannibal if I did. Two, I’m lactose intolerant. Three, I hate eggs and everything that contains them... So, I’d say I’m vegan out of compassion, for my health, and by taste. I didn’t know that dairy products caused so much suffering. Now I have a second reason not to eat any.”

“That’s great then! You’ll be able to give me some tips, because it’s pretty new for me and I don’t know how to diversify my diet.”

< Your friend is scoring points, I admit. But however, I still do not like that you are growing so fond of her. >

“Of course, I’ll share some cool ideas with you. I’ll go heat up a seitan roast and some veggies.”

“I can’t wait to try that.”

She pointed at the leather armchair.

“I just remembered that you didn’t want to sit in that. Now I know why.”

“It would have the same effect on me as sitting on human skin.”

“I understand.”

Lucien didn't reply to Bellisae. He opened the email that he had sent himself, the one with 'Bellisae Murders' in the subject line. It contained the names that he had listed there, the two neurologists Anna Pyrrus and Augusto Brayonzo.

He searched for ten minutes, then came to the conclusion that Bellisae had effectively told him about the deaths of these people before they had been made public. The date and time of the email that he had sent himself preceded Anna Pyrrus' death certificate by fifty minutes, and Augusto Brayonzo's by over an hour. The official causes of both deaths had nothing to do with what Bellisae had told him, just as she had predicted. According to authenticated sources, Anna Pyrrus died in a car accident and Augusto Brayonzo of a heart attack.

Lucien lifted his eyes from the laptop's screen and met Chan's. She was sitting on the couch across from him with the infant still gripping her sweater.

“Are you going to tell me what's eating at you?” she asked. “Or are you going to continue doing your best to retain an element of mystery?”

< If you tell her anything I will get very angry. >

< And if I do, what will happen? >

“As a matter of fact, I was thinking that I hadn't visited the other zoos that have gorillas. I just noticed that there are others.”

Bellisae hadn't answered his question.

< Would you go through with your threat? Would you kill a vegan? >

< No, I would not kill her. But I would do something unpleasant to her. >

“I'm sure that you aren't telling me the truth, that isn't what you were looking up. You had such an urgent need to check the Internet that it can't be about that. You obviously already knew that other zoos housed gorillas.”

< She does not believe you. Find something else. Sorry for putting you on the spot. >

< Why is it a problem that I appreciate Chan? >

< Appreciate! As if I could not see that you more than appreciate her! >

That's none of your business!

< But what do you care? >

“Sorry, Chan, but I just can’t tell you for the moment. Please believe me when I tell you that I really want to, but I can’t. At least, not at this time.”

< Ah... Now that is more reasonable. You cannot say whatever you want to whoever you want. Some things are our business alone. >

< Are you going to leave her in peace now? >

< Yes, I promise. But... >

< But what? >

< You must not desire her. That would antagonize me. >

“Alright! Let’s eat then,” said Chan. “After that, I’ll have to find a comfortable place to keep this infant. I can’t carry him around all the time, and I can’t keep him here. I put a diaper on him, but look, he’s already trying to get rid of it.”

The young macaque would regularly wander off down the couch, then come back to climb back onto her. Lucien was so lost in his thoughts that he only now remarked that he was wearing a diaper and was covered with red spots.

“But he’s covered with red spots!” he exclaimed. “He’s a Redskin!”

< Tell her to give you the infant back, > said Bellisae. < It would be better if you took care of him yourself, now that he is out of danger. >

“I removed the latex from his hands. I don’t know how long it had been there, but if it’s on for too long it could irritate his skin. The red spots are just a simple antiseptic. I made do with what I had. I wonder what happened for him to be in this condition. You should ask Bellisae. By the way, ‘Redskin’ is funny. We could call him that...”

< But I can’t! I don’t know how to handle a human baby, much less... a monkey! Just imagine that! >

“Although ‘Redskin’ is a slightly pejorative term,” Chan went on. “How about ‘Indian’, or ‘Apache’, or even ‘Sioux’?”

< I am glad she removed the latex, I was going to ask her to. I will guide you and you will learn fast how to care for him. She can also give you some advice. But I do not want this monkey to leave your side... >

< Why not? >

“Apache is cool. I like Apache,” Lucien approved.

< Yes, Apache is nice. Call him Apache, > Bellisae intervened.

“I’m okay with Apache. I like it too,” Chan agreed.

< As if her opinion counted for anything! > scoffed Bellisae.

Lucien withheld a sigh.

This two-sided conversation is getting hard to handle. Geez, I’m really the only one who gets himself in...

Chan got up, the little macaque still clinging to her. She put two plates on the table.

“Are you conversing with Bellisae right now?” she asked. “You aren’t? I get the feeling that you’re not really here with me.”

Lucien nodded. Since the female gorilla hadn’t answered him, he insisted.

< Why? Why do you want that monkey to stay with me? >

< Because... I do not trust her. >

< You were pretty pleased when she came along to help me and give him first aid. >

“As I was saying, this is roasted seitan. I don’t need to tell you what the vegetables are,” Chan commented on the plates’ contents.

“Thanks a lot. I’m curious to see how it tastes.”

< So, can I trust you? Are you going to keep Apache with you? >

Instead of answering, Lucien asked Bellisae a different question.

< Are you the one who asked Chan how she felt about taking gorillas’ freedom away from them in her prison? >

< Yes. Who else could it have been? I just now realized that she was the one I had contacted. I did not talk to her very long, it was difficult to communicate with her. It was one of my first tries at mental contact. >

< Okay then! I’m leaving now, I’d like to eat in peace. >

< You did not answer my question, > insisted Bellisae.

< Later, maybe. >

Lucien speared a piece of seitan with his fork and put it in his mouth. He found it very tasty.

“This is delicious!” he said. “I’ve never eaten anything that tastes like this.”

“Glad you like it. Apache just fell asleep,” Chan remarked.

The infant had his back turned towards Lucien, his tiny fingers digging into the sweater of his new surrogate mother.

“Ah, he looks so comfortable lying there on you.”

“Since you were talking to Bellisae, did you ask her how he got injured?”

“No, I forgot to, sorry. I’ll ask her.”

“Did you notice how he kept staring at you?”

“Yeah, he was watching me a lot... Ha! But of course! I should have guessed that right away! Of course! Of course!”

“What?” said Chan with surprise.

“An idea just crossed my mind.”

“...?”

Lucien scruted Chan’s face with a big smile. He did it for several seconds, just long enough to make her start to squirm.

“Is that the idea that you’re trying to share with me?” she finally asked.

“Let’s say that I enjoy looking at you, yes.”

“Now that’s an unexpected opening line. Just a while ago, you were all tense and preoccupied.”

“I think I just found a crazy explanation for something.”

“...?”

“I believe Bellisae can see and hear thanks to Apache, using his eyes and ears. I should have guessed it earlier, when she asked me to put my arm in the air so the monkey could find us at the railway station. She probably has the power to use his senses, but also to influence or even control his movements.”

“Oh!”

“And since the little animal is sleeping, she doesn’t know that I looked at you like I did, and she didn’t hear what I told you. Otherwise, she would have been very angry with me. Yet, she hasn’t reacted.”

“Please explain,” asked Chan, intrigued.

Lucien told her about the conversation that he had with Bellisae and about the murders she may have committed. Chan was upset about the threats towards her, but she tried not to show it.

“Hmm...,” she said. “Since she insisted that you keep Apache close by, that probably means that she is using his senses to observe and listen to you. But her warnings against me and the questions she keeps asking prove that she’s jealous of me. She wants you for herself. As for the murders... I don’t know what to say, other than it’s scary. Shouldn’t you talk to the police?”

“And tell them that a *Gorilla gorilla gorilla* used telepathy to confide in me?”

“I can back up your story, and attest that she also communicated with me. And the shrink that you told me about... The three of us could all testify.”

“And then? Three straightjackets are easy to find!”

38) The general glared at Elijah Floyd

Colonel Elijah Floyd rarely liked politicians. High ranking or not, they were all ‘fucking opportunistic parasites’. And to top it all, let’s even say to make things worse, the only political figure who he had any dealings with was the Minister of the Army—and she was a woman!

Ah! A broad in charge of the Armed Forces! Things couldn’t get any nuttier than that! Having female generals was already crazy enough!

These were the thoughts that were roiling in the colonel’s mind. He was in the office of the President of the French Republic, who was obviously present, along with Army General Michel Matrone, the Minister of the Army, the Minister of the Interior, several other senior ranking officers and three scientific officials in charge of the SACI research project.

Encouraged by the colonel, Yves Badol and Guy Sabatini tried to describe to everyone present what had gone on in their minds right before they shot the scientists. Once the explanations were over, they

answered all of the questions that the officials asked them, and they left, escorted by their guards.

Once the door closed behind them, Elijah, who had requested that this meeting be held at the highest level, looked at the high-ranking participants with a solemn frown.

“You’ve heard them both. My own testimony, as well as their medical files, attest that, up to now, they have always behaved as perfectly well-balanced and sound-minded soldiers. These elite soldiers have time and time again shown their self-control and their capacity to react rapidly and optimally. They have undergone training that is reserved for the best combatants and that only the most physically and psychologically resistant manage to complete without breaking down.”

He remained silent for a short while so that this introduction would have as much impact as possible.

“Over the course of a few days,” he resumed, “at the same location, these two men killed the people that they were supposed to protect, and two others slit their own throats. Who, amongst you, believes that the only explanation for this occurrence is that anyone can lose their mind one day or another? I’d like to remind you that, from what we’ve been told, Anna Pyrrus, who was shot down by Yves Badol, was one of SACI’s most eminent scientists. Her death has notably undermined this project. In addition to these events, you have my account, as I told you before we questioned the soldiers, of the cameras that were obscured by socks.”

The colonel had omitted to stipulate that the socks were his, because it didn’t seem to be an indispensable detail.

“You seem to have come to the conclusion that this could only have been organized by the enemy,” said the Minister of the Army.

“Do you have another hypothesis, Madam?”

“I must admit that I don’t. Let me rephrase. I should have said that the elements that you have given us seem to point in that direction. But do we know all the details of this affair? Could there be information out there that we don’t know of yet and that could make us look at things differently?”

The colonel stuck his thumbs into his belt, puffed out his chest and furrowed his eyebrows even deeper in the minister’s direction.

“And just what are you suggesting here, Madam? That is a very odd question! How could I tell you about things that I have no knowledge of, since they are unknown to me? I wouldn’t have been more surprised if I were mute and you had asked me to sing you a song.”

General Matrone had often heard about the impulsive, albeit authentic, personality of Elijah Floyd. This had been an obstacle in his career more than once. He knew that if this colonel had been a little less proud and a little more diplomatic, he probably would have been promoted to general before he himself had been. Afraid a dispute would break out between his subordinate and the Minister of the Army, he tried to put out the fire that he knew was simmering in Elijah’s breast.

“Madam Minister, Colonel Elijah Floyd is the most well-informed person when it comes to SACI’s security. As a result, if he doesn’t know about it, nobody does. Therefore, if that information existed, it would have already been brought to your attention.”

“There’s no doubt in my mind, General, no doubt at all. What I meant to say was that we know little about the private lives of these two murderers. Right, Colonel?”

“Fearing that you would interrupt me, as you have just done, I chose to pause briefly before delving into the details on this subject, Madam.”

The general glared at Elijah Floyd the way one glares at a quarrelsome child. The latter looked at him in turn with an almost repentant and sheepish expression. Hesitating, the minister surveyed the two men and the other attendees before responding to this offense. They all pretended not to have noticed the incident. Thinking that she had more to lose if she reacted to it than if she ignored it, she decided to let it go.

“So what do we know about the private lives of my soldiers?” the colonel continued. “Could they have fallen prey to someone who approached them from outside the military sphere? Could somebody have manipulated or used them as pawns, or whatever you want to call it, somebody on the outside? Or could they have been drugged without their knowing it, for example?”

“That’s a good example,” the President intervened. “Could that have been possible?”

“No, sir, Mr. President. No, that is highly unlikely! Because, you see, and the general can confirm it, neither of the two men has left the military compound in the past six months. These two men live day and night with their respective families on SACI’s premises.”

The general nodded for the sake of those who glanced at him.

“What hypotheses are you entertaining, Colonel?” the general asked, more for the attendees than for himself, having already had the discussion with Elijah Floyd. “And what conclusions have you come to?”

“I have considered only one hypothesis for the moment: someone has found a way to act against us from a distance, using a power that enables them to take control of a person’s mind and body. But since I’m not a scientist, I wouldn’t be able to say how they do it. That would explain my fu... my men’s meltdown and the suicides. But I admit that it doesn’t explain why the cameras were obscured. I might perhaps advance the idea that one of us may have acted unknowingly, under the influence of this remote power... but there aren’t any fingerprints, any fragments of cloth or of anything else to eventually support this supposition. The most worrisome thing about these socks is that I can’t think of a motive. What did they want to hide from our view by doing this? It’s a mystery! Not one single change was observed in that room. Prima 16 is doing fine, and the scientists haven’t reported anything new about her, be it from a physical point of view or in her cerebral activity. It appears--and I repeat the word appears--that nothing was noticeably modified while the cameras were covered. We could assume that the presence of the two guards thwarted their stratagem. But then again, we also must ask how those fu... [*clearing his throat*] those socks were slipped onto the lenses without anyone noticing. The only people who could possibly set us on the correct path are dead.”

“What are you suggesting, Colonel?” asked the President.

“Initially, I wanted to search all the residences and all the different buildings in the area around SACI.”

“Now that’s an enormous task!” exclaimed the general. “SACI is isolated within a military zone with a thirty-kilometer circumference. Do you realize how much of an area you would have to inspect?”

“You’re absolutely right, General! We would have to deploy tremendous resources which would not only be extremely costly, but would also have the drawback of not being very discreet. That would definitely send our enemy the message that we have been severely affected and that we don’t know how to defend ourselves. This idea is therefore not a good one for those two reasons.”

“So?” asked the minister.

“So... the second solution that I came up with consists of moving SACI with the utmost secrecy. If the problems cease, then we’ll know that we’ve moved away from their source. If these fucking problems continue...”

The general’s eyes sent daggers at the colonel. A little abashed, he went on.

“Uh... As I was saying... uh, if the issues persist, then only two explanations would remain. One would be that we brought the cause along with us, and in that case, all we’ll have to do is look through what we moved to find it. The other would be that the cause followed us.”

“If that’s all we have to do!” exclaimed the minister. “Let’s move SACI immediately and then we’ll see what we’re dealing with.”

The Minister of the Army had recently been appointed to her position and had only a partial idea of what SACI was all about. Her ‘if that’s all’ got an instant reaction from the general, mostly because he wanted to pre-empt an eventual catastrophic answer from the colonel.

“That would be an expensive and extraordinarily delicate undertaking. However, Mr. President, Mr. Prime Minister and Madam Minister, and I say this with the utmost conviction, I support Colonel Elijah Floyd’s request. We must do all we can to preserve SACI’s integrity. The fact that the enemy is attempting to impede this research project goes to show how crucially important it is for our country’s defense. In all likelihood, someone out there does not want it to succeed.”

“I will need to know how much this will cost,” said the President. “I can’t sign off on anything without knowing its cost.”

“If this project is *that* important for our defense, it will cost us much more not to do it,” shot back the colonel.

“That’s exactly what I think, too!” the general seconded.

At that precise moment, the secure telephone on the President's desk rang.

"Excuse me," he said, lifting the receiver to his ear.

The assembly went silent. Everyone knew that phone line was not used for small talk.

"Just a minute, I'll hand you over to General Matrone. You'll tell him all this yourself," said the head of state. He held the receiver out to the general.

"General Matrone, General Nicole Rama-Déjardin, head of the Intelligence Service, has information she wants to share with you."

Michel Matrone took the receiver from the President's hands.

"Hello, this is General Matrone."

"Hello, General! I'll get to the point. We've intercepted an email containing the names of the SACI scientists that were killed. The subject line of the email had the word 'murders' in it. What's interesting is that the email was sent before the deaths had been officially announced. Of course, we've identified the author, who, by the way, addressed it to himself."

"Thank you so much, General! Give me just the time to pass on this information, and I'll get back to you as soon as I can."

The general went over to Elijah Floyd and whispered the news that he had just received into his ear.

"Now that is fucking good news!" the colonel thundered.

That outburst resulted, amongst others, in Michel Matrone gritting his teeth, the President putting on a surprised expression and the Minister of the Army's face showing outraged disapproval.

39) His name is Lucien Prérubem

It was 6:00 a.m. The colonel was fighting to stay awake with the help of massive doses of coffee and discreet lines of cocaine. Brigadier General Nicole Rama-Déjardin eyed the desk and the cot that Elijah had asked them to set up in the most important room in SACI.

“Are you sleeping here?” she asked, surprised.

“Yes, I am, General. With one eye open.”

“Where is she?”

“Prima 16?”

“Of course!”

“Over there,” said Elijah Floyd. “In that room.”

This was his first meeting with the pretty Chinese-African woman. He had been very flustered when he first set eyes on her and hoped that he hadn’t blushed. Coughing to clear his voice, he pointed to a door that opened into a small room. Two technicians and a female scientist were busy inside, handling equipment and consulting screens.

“Could you leave us for a moment?” he asked them. “Only if it doesn’t interfere with your work, of course.”

“No problem, in a couple of seconds, Colonel,” the woman answered. “I’ll record these two values and then I can take a break.”

The other two left the room after saying that what they were doing could wait.

The colonel had insisted on the general coming to see him instead of the other way around, as protocol usually recommended, invoking his need to remain close to what his mission was to protect. Protocol was usually ignored, anyway, when it came to SACI. The chain of command was rarely respected, and the situation was becoming completely surrealistic because of it. Slightly disgruntled by the request, Nicole Rama-Déjardin had nonetheless made the trip. They were sitting across from each other on uncomfortable wooden chairs between the desk and the bed.

The head of Intelligence Services made sure that no one was in their vicinity, then gazed into the sacrosanct room that was about ten meters away from her.

“Uh...” she said.

“Don’t ask me for information about Prima 16. How could I be more in the loop than you are? The only thing that I know for sure is that I practically don’t know anything at all about it. This research is classified as top-secret. The people who work on this project haven’t told me anything about it. And even if they had shared more information with

me, I wouldn't have retained anything anyway! I therefore have no details that I can provide you with. Besides, we don't have any time to waste, not even a second."

This last remark took a big chunk out of Nicole Rama-Déjardin's reserves of patience. However, she outwardly put up a seemingly even-tempered front so that she would not fail in the task that Army General Matrone had entrusted her with, which was to collaborate harmoniously with Elijah Floyd. She took out a sheet of paper from the attaché-case, laid it on her host's desk and started reading it, glancing now and then at her colleague to see how he was reacting.

"His name is Lucien Prérubem. Forty-five years old. Lives in an apartment in the center of Marsa, at 280 Dobra Avenue on the fourth floor. Works for an insurance company. Red Kia Picanto. We've examined his comings and goings over the past ten days, he came nowhere near SACI. Isabelle Prérubem, his wife, is self-employed and works from home. She codes database software for websites. His sister is Eve Prérubem..."

The colonel knew she was putting on a show and that she would run through all of the information that her team had collected, but he couldn't stand the wait any longer.

"Alright, alright... I'm impressed. But I'm also pressed for time..."

"Well anyway, there it is!" she concluded, feeling pressured by her interlocutor's impatience. "We can keep the rest for later if needed."

"Thank you, General!"

"So, what do we do about this guy, Colonel? Do we bring him in for questioning, or do we put him under surveillance so that we can learn more about him?"

"I'm guessing that you already have someone that you trust on his tail and that he can't get away from us?"

"You're guessing correctly."

"And this man has your full trust?"

"Woman, Colonel! This woman is a fine sleuth. I know that the sexists running this patriarchal institution don't like the fact that it's becoming more feminized!"

He pretended to ignore that she was obviously alluding to his own sexism.

“Is she the only one following him?”

“No, she leads a team that I can personally vouch for. This guy won’t give us the slip.”

“Good. And what is he doing at this moment?”

“He is in Spetian, at the zoo.”

“Right at this moment?”

“Yes. He even spent the end of the night there. He logged into his email account at exactly 4:13 a.m. from the IP address that belongs to a certain Chan Zhào, director of the zoo, and pulled up that notable email that he sent himself. He then searched for the two names that were in the email’s body, Anna Pyrrus and Augusto Brayonzo. A little before that, he went to the Fleuret railway station with Chan Zhào.”

She handed him the sheet of paper with the printout of the message. It contained the date and time as well as the header information. The email read:

Subject line: *Bellisae Murders*

Message: *Anna Pyrrus and Augusto Brayonzo*

“Did you find out anything useful about ‘Bellisae’?”

“Nothing that can actually enlighten us. Occurrences having to do with the design of the letters. Otherwise, Sherlock noted that Bellisae is the anagram of Isabelle, Lucien Prérubem’s wife. But then... how does that help us?”

“Who is Sherlock, General?”

“Our A.I.”

“Oh, okay!”

“There is something strange, though...”

“What is it?”

“Our man also searched for the word ‘Bellisae’. As if he himself didn’t know what it was... or as if he wanted to know if it was a common name.”

“That is pretty weird! How do you know where this Lucien Whatshisname is?”

“Lucien Prérubem. We’re tracking his cell phone.”

“Does that mean that if he shuts it off, or drops it somewhere, we’ll lose track of him?”

“All of the park’s exits are being closely monitored. He can’t take a step or make a move without my team instantly informing us. If you would rather interrogate him, I can have him brought before you immediately.”

“I need a moment to think about it. Do you have any info about his wife’s activities or schedule? The anagram might just be a coincidence... but you never know! Your Sherlock may have discovered something that we should look into. Perhaps it would be wise of you to give it a little more attention.”

“For the time being, anagram or not, what we know about her is getting us nowhere. She stays at home a lot, working. She’s never been near SACI either. I don’t know if this helps, but they both went to see a shrink, a certain Susan Cilvan. Oh! Yes... another odd thing. He went to visit a dairy farm on his own.”

“...”

She glanced at the sheet of paper.

“The Pierre Morageot farming unit.”

“He went to see fucking cows?”

“To tell you the truth, that’s all I know about it. We haven’t dug any deeper into it for the moment because we don’t want him to find out that he’s being watched.”

“You did the right thing. Uh... so, bring him in now, or keep an eye on him to see what he’s up to? Give me another minute or two to think about it before deciding.”

“On another note, I don’t know if the cows are sexually active or not, but I would appreciate it if you watched your language. What’s the point in using fancy wording if you’re going to punctuate your sentences with ‘damn’ or ‘fucking’? Let me remind you that I am your superior officer. Please use a more respectful language in my presence.”

“I apologize, General! I’ll do my best, I promise. Had he ever shown any interest in farm animals before?”

“Not that we know of. Not as far as we could discreetly check up on.”

“That *is* odd, isn’t it?” he wondered.

“Yes, it is!”

“Yes, he’s suddenly been showing suspicious behavior... In any event, I’d like to thank you for coming all the way here, General. I was worried that you might not want to meet me here. It’s just that I can’t get away from this fu... this place.”

“I know. You’ve repeated it often enough.”

40) The amalgam of hundreds of existences

Lucien was sprawled out on the sofa, feeling physically and mentally drained. Chan Zhào was standing in front of him.

“I have to go give instructions to the personnel. Today’s a workday and I’m off to work, but you can stay here if you want to. I’ll be back in an hour. If you have to leave, just pull the door behind you. I’m taking Apache with me.”

The infant macaque was holding on to her tightly and wasn’t paying much attention to Lucien. He thanked his hostess for her offer. He felt a little lost, not knowing what to do. His lack of sleep made him feel like his head was wrapped in a dense cloud of fog.

“I gladly accept your offer. I’ll rest here for a while...”

Chan left and Lucien laid down on the couch.

< I hope that my mood swings do not scare you, Intelligent Predator. Is that the case? >

You again!

< I must say that they do, Bellisae. You do indeed scare me. I’m dead tired, but since this subject is really important, let’s talk about it straightaway. I don’t appreciate your threats at all. >

< I am a little unbalanced, you know. And 'a little' is an understatement. I actually have good reasons to be extremely unbalanced. That is the simple truth. >

< Reasons... Which ones? >

< To help you understand, I will use you as an example. You are now part Lucien, and part the slave cow with tag number 2712, right? >

< Yes, that's for sure. >

< Your having lived these two lives is the reason your behavior has changed. Remember how your sister and your brother-in-law were surprised by your conduct. >

< What does this have to do with you? >

< What it has to do, Predator, is that you, you are now two persons at the same time, a human and a bovine. Me, I am the amalgam of hundreds of existences, the lives of both humans and other species. Amongst others, I was the same slave cow that you were too. We have that in common. >

Several hundreds!

< What you're saying is that... you were that cow as well? >

< Just like you, for only a part of her existence. Do not forget that you did not live her life starting from her birth. Yes, I have the same memories as you. I could not have fed you the engrams if I had not absorbed them myself. >

< So, you also had to endure the heartbreak of every kidnapped calf? >

< Of course, I did! Just like you and just like her. Counting Susan Cilvan, four of us have suffered because of that. I lived the cow's life up to her end at the slaughterhouse, just like you and she did. Like you, I remember the psychological torture that I felt for each stolen child, the weariness, the boredom of that flavorless life, the all too brief but heartwarming friendship with One-Ear... and finally the smell of blood and the terror felt in the death chute. >

This is crazy, man!

Lucien got up, walked around the table chewing on his left ring finger, then sat down again on the couch. Bellisae was silent for several minutes, giving him time to come to terms with this information.

< We both share a part of this bovine experience, but we have much more than that in common! > she enigmatically continued. < Much more! >

< What are you talking about? >

< There is someone I want to tell you about. It will help you understand. >

< Someone? >

< Yes, a human being. Two of us are now him. Him, of course, and me too. I am going to share some of the moments of his life with you. I am as much him as he is. So much so that it will be easier for me to use the pronoun 'I' while I tell you his story. >

This is crazy, man!

Bellisae sent a flow of thought-words into Lucien's mind.

41) Winner

§§§

[§[My father and my mother are both from modest backgrounds. They worked hard and saved so that I could study for as long as I wanted to, and that allowed me to afford elite private universities. I wanted to study science, that was my dream, but I was surrounded by faculty and staff who molded my thinking process, repeating again and again messages such as 'You have to have the mindset of a Winner to be successful in life' or 'Finance is a more gratifying field than science'.

Once out of college, I worked as a consultant for the ITCF (Investment-Transaction-Counsel-Financing) group. The word 'work' is probably not a good name for it—it is probably more appropriate to say that I was the intellectual slave of my employers. To keep ahead in the race, to be a Winner in society and in my company, I gave it all I had. Working long hours with the help of 'smart' drugs, I drained my brain running after the promotion carrot that was constantly being dangled in front of me. My job consisted in convincing companies that they would make more money thanks to this or that piece of equipment. I

would then offer financing, but also sell the customer's file to the company that supplied the equipment they had purchased. ICTF made money on both sides. I accomplished many other tasks of course, I am just giving you a simplified explanation, but in short, that is what I did. To help influence the purchase decision, I would use large tables of figures to prove to them the profits they would make. Creating accurate tables was a gigantic amount of work because ICTF's reputation was on the line. To help me make it from one deadline to the other, I turned to different types of drugs such as Modafinil, Ritalin, Adderall... along with a couple of lines of coke every so often. Anxiety devoured my mind. That is when I started to chew on my fingernails. We, the Winners, would assemble in restaurants, meetings, private parties, team-building seminars, customer symposiums... and there, we would use our own tribal language: savings, financial management, administration, maximum return, stock, bonds, obligations, liberalism, spot market, futures market, Long Tail theory, ex-ante estimates, ex-post assessments, Austrian school of Economy, German Historical School. Names, such as John Stuart Mill, David Ricardo and Adam Smith, would be slipped into conversations here and there. All the kinds of things that Winners who are in the know talk about when they are together.

Hidden behind my mask, I was an actor playing the role of my social self. We were stuck-up preppies when we were with customers, deceptively casual when we were amongst ourselves, smooth-shaven money hawkers when we sported the ICTF badge. Above all, we did not express any personal beliefs, because the obsessive finality of the whole spiel was that you be accepted by everyone—by customers, of course, but also by your superiors and your colleagues, because you never knew if one of them might want to stir up trouble for you. I wound up smothering any ideas or opinions that might, at some point, displease too many people. Always personable, always good for a laugh... I was a marketing product that I was constantly selling to everybody I met. 'Come see the good-looking Lucien Prérubem! Anyone want a piece?' Haha! How sad! How gloomy and sinister!

The first year I worked there, I met Claudia Borane at one of ICTF's seminars. She worked for ICTF and had approximately the same job

as me. We hit it off and moved in together. We never had the opportunity to work together again after that. We were often sent to different cities, sometimes even to different countries, staying over in hotels for a couple of nights here or there. When by sheer luck we found ourselves together in the same city—it would never be for more than one or two weeks—we would see each other for a half-hour in the evening before going to bed and sometimes for five minutes in the morning in the bathroom. We were too tired to make love, and our nights were haunted by our respective deadlines. We nevertheless conceived a child after living together for six months, despite the demands of our 'Winner' careers. Claudia stopped working for three months after giving birth, then we entrusted our daughter Marie to nannies and day-care centers. Five years later, Claudia and I separated. It wasn't really a big change for us, because we had been seeing each other less and less, and when we did, we would often fight.

I would only see my parents once or twice a year. Without actually being scornful, I was undeniably condescending to them. My father's comments about class struggle were often met with an irritation that I did not always control very well. I most certainly was somewhat ashamed of my proletarian origins, even though I did not want to admit it to myself. My father's notable presence on social media especially embarrassed me. I was afraid that people in my professional circle would come across his disarmingly naïve anti-conservative and left-wing posts, so I tried to get him to change his outlook on things—to no avail. I often feared that one of our arguments would turn violent and make things worse. The relationship I had with my sister was far less complicated. But, in those days, I just did not have much time for anything...

Deadlines, brainstorming, team building, benchmarking... Utterly worn out after twelve years on the job, I started having trouble making deadlines and little by little, my performance began to slump. I got fired for the first time in my life. Word got around fast in my professional community, and I had a hard time finding another position. When I did, it was after having accepted a much lower salary. The Winner lost his foothold and, jumping from one job to another, his descent began. One day, my life as a Winner—during which my

‘winning’ had only lined other people’s pockets—finally came to an end. Drained, rinsed out, defeated... For the past eight years I have been working as a sales representative for an insurance company.

Needless to say, I no longer look down on the proletarian class I thought I had escaped. I have even written speeches for union reps that verge on extreme militantism. The only thing that remains today of this ‘Winner’s life’ is my habit of biting my nails, and I still try to meet sales objectives, but the pressure has diminished, as has the paycheck. No more cocaine and smart drugs, replaced nowadays by plenty of coffee and tobacco. I live with my second wife who is self-employed in data-processing. My daughter, Marie, is now eighteen, and no longer wants to see me. She accuses her parents of having sacrificed her to their careers.][§]

< I believe that I do not need to go any further. You know our life as well as I do. I have told you all this to prove to you that you are also a part of me. You are the first human whose engrams I absorbed. That is why you are the first person I contacted, and that is also why I have grown rather fond of you, my Intelligent Predator. >

Confusion, shame and anger welled up inside of Lucien.

< What part of my life did you ingest? > he shouted almost as loud as he word-thought.

< All of it. From the moment of your birth to when you walked into the ophthalmologist’s. >

< You’re lying! > he yelled.

< What makes you believe that? >

< You asked me how often I made love to Isabelle. If you had all my life memories in store, you would’ve known that! >

< I only wanted to see if you were going to confess that it barely ever happened anymore. Be reasonable, Predator! With everything that I just told you, you see now that I know even the tiniest details of your life, of *our* life. Do you want me to describe one of your trysts? I could have said our trysts, by the way. I can describe the way either Claudia or Isabelle... >

< No! Stop it! Stop bothering me! Stop calling me Predator and go away. Leave me alone! Leave me alone! >

< Alright, I will leave you... >

< No, wait! >

< Yes? >

< I want to know if you can read my engrams whenever you want to. If that's the case, that means that you're reading my thoughts. And you've always told me that you weren't. >

< No. I cannot systematically absorb engrams whenever I desire to. Sometimes it happens, sometimes it does not. I do not know why. Sometimes I even accidentally pick up the engrams of someone unknown to me, whether I want to or not. >

42) Neutralize the Colonel!

Elijah Floyd was surprised by the irritation that suddenly appeared on the general's face. He had no time to wonder about it, though, because she abruptly stood up, knocking her chair over.

"Enough is enough, Colonel! Like it or not, I am your hierarchical superior. I order, no, I command that you offer your most sincere apologies! Otherwise, I'll tell General Matrone that, even though he asked me to, I cannot collaborate with you any further."

His eyes bulging out of his head, Elijah sat there, silent and frozen in shock.

"Ah! But what are you doing?" she shouted, pulling out her handgun.

The colonel moved instinctively, an instantaneous reaction to the messages sent by his nervous system, and therefore avoided the two shots that otherwise would have been lodged in his forehead. However, one bullet tore through his right ear.

Elijah Floyd grabbed his superior's arm, forcing her to drop her weapon. It fell to the ground, but a fight ensued. A skilled practitioner of the martial arts, the general was difficult to subdue. The colonel fell prey to a torrent of noisy and painful blows. A punch to his solar plexus knocked the wind out of him, another almost burst his left eye, while a chop to the side of his neck made him feel like he was testing a

guillotine. Wrapping his arms around her as tightly as he could, he threw her to the ground and shouted for help.

Six soldiers burst in upon a surreal hand-to-hand fight.

“Men!” Elijah Floyd cried out. “The General has lost her mind! Capture her without hurting her!”

Simultaneously, the general ordered, “Guards! Neutralize the Colonel! Handcuff him!”

The six men immobilized their colonel and held him for the general.

“Sorry, Colonel!” murmured one of the men.

“I’m so sorry, Colonel!” another one whispered into his ear.

Elijah Floyd didn’t put up any resistance. He knew that the general’s orders took precedence over his. She picked up her gun and pointed it at Elijah Floyd.

“Disarm him and handcuff him. And go get a doctor,” she instructed.

Following Nicole Rama-Déjardin’s eyes, Elijah Floyd glanced at his right shoulder and saw that it was completely red. He realized at that moment that his ear was hurting, and that blood was running down his neck. He let the men handcuff him.

“I’m really so sorry, Colonel,” the soldier who disarmed him apologized.

The general held out her hand to take the gun.

“I would like to talk to you in private, General,” said the prisoner.

“It seems to me that that was what we were doing before you pulled your gun on me.”

The colonel asked the man who had disarmed him to answer a question.

“Soldier, I’d like your testimony, please. Tell the General if the safety strap on my gun holster was released or secured.”

“It was secured, General.”

“Did you hear that, General? Do you think I had the time or the will to put my gun back into its holster and snap it closed while I was being administered a severe thrashing? Wasn’t I busy enough trying to protect myself against your blows? Would I have done that if my intention had been to kill you? And if you look closely, you can see that the safety catch hasn’t been removed.”

Nicole Rama-Déjardin looked puzzled. The doctor walked in.

“Whatever happened here?” he asked, lifting his eyebrows at the sight of the bloody ear.

“I stuck a fucking Q-Tip too far into my ear, it seems,” the colonel said irritably.

The doctor noticed that the general was pointing her gun at the wounded man and that he had been handcuffed.

“But, General!” he exclaimed. “What’s going on...”

“I told you it was a Q-Tip! A fucking Q-Tip pulverized my ear and practically decapitated me, rammed my solar plexus so hard it almost hit my back, punched my left eye in, and squashed my nose as flat as a pancake! Go away! I don’t want to be treated for the moment. I just need to talk to the General in private.”

The doctor took in the eyelid that was turning into a purple bruise, the bright red nose, and the blood dripping from his nostrils.

“This patient isn’t in mortal danger,” he said. “Treatment can wait. Tell me what you want me to do, General.”

“Give me the keys to his handcuffs and then leave us alone. I’ll call you when we’re ready, Doctor,” she commanded.

Once they were alone again, she probed the area where they had fought with her eyes. She squatted down to see if there was anything under the desk, then pushed the bed with her foot.

“No, there isn’t any other gun,” he said. “No use looking. Do you want an explanation now?”

“I’m listening.”

“When you called the president on the secure line, and he handed the phone to me, we were in a meeting. General Matrone was there.”

“I know. I believe that it’s after this meeting that he asked me to collaborate with you.”

“I’m going to have you listen to a recording. It’s a recording of my men’s testimonies, and everyone who was there at the meeting has listened to it. Allow me to take my phone out of my inside pocket.”

“Proceed.”

The general pointed her gun with intent at Elijah Floyd's chest, closely watching each of his movements. He took a phone out of his pocket—with difficulty because of his handcuffs—and awkwardly turned it on. He played the recording, and she listened to it all the way through.

“So you would like to convince me that I was hallucinating? You're saying that you didn't insult me, nor point a gun at me?”

“Yes, that's exactly what I'd like you to understand. You, too, have been a victim of whatever the reason for our meeting was that day. Call General Matrone, he'll confirm what I just told you.”

*

General Nicole Rama-Déjardin hung up her call and put her phone into her pocket. She then re-holstered her gun.

“General Matrone confirms it all. He told me about the strange and disturbing causes of these deaths.”

“I'm not the one who decides who has the right to know and who doesn't. Even if I wanted to reveal that information to you, I am neither more nor less authorized to do it!”

“I know, I know... Turn around, I'll take those handcuffs off.”

She uncuffed him and confided, “You should put them on me, if I understand correctly. I must confess that I'm still shaken from learning that what I firmly believed I was seeing was only a mirage. Will I recover from this?”

“You aren't sick. At least, I don't think you are.”

“In any case, Yves Badol and Guy Sabatini are confined and under surveillance. I almost killed you. It would only be fair if they sent me to join these men in a psychiatric cell.”

“It isn't up to me to make that decision, but I don't think it's necessary to lock up everyone who loses control. This could happen to any one of us. It could happen to me, too. Perhaps it already did...”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, one night, I may have used my socks to cover two cameras, making sure to cover my tracks or to leave no traces of me behind.”

He pointed at the cameras and told her what he had discovered late that night.

“But...?”

“If I am the one who did it, I don’t remember it at all.”

“I really beat you up, I apologize for that. I’m calling the doctor.”

“Before you do, I’d like to share my thoughts with you. I think that we shouldn’t tell anyone about what happened between us.”

“How can we keep it a secret? The men who intervened already know about it. And the doctor...”

“We’ll tell them it was an exercise to test their reaction if a break-in should occur, or something like that. As for my ear...”

“A Q-Tip. I know...”

“No, I’ll say I dropped my gun... Or maybe not, no one will believe that! We don’t need to lie. We’ll say that we have nothing to say. They’ll think what they want to think. And don’t go believing that I’m ashamed because I had my butt kicked by a woman! It’s just that it wouldn’t be a good idea for the men to know that even a general can have these mysterious hallucinations. And I would rather have you in charge of intelligence than sitting in a cell. I’ll talk to General Matrone, I think he’ll lend me a complacent ear.”

“I believe he will. Thank you in any case. Let’s call the doctor now.”

“I’ll take care of him. But I’d like to know more about this guy, Lucien. What is he doing at the moment and what was he doing while you were giving me a make-over?”

“I’ll contact my team. Go get yourself fixed up while we’re waiting. Seeing you in this condition makes me feel so ashamed.”

“Ha! Me and my sexism both deserved a good lesson!”

43) From: Henri Déhelle

Henri Déhelle, director of the Dybun slaughterhouse, had no idea why he had sent himself an email two hours earlier. He didn't even remember having written it, and that's why he was very surprised to find it in his inbox. Scratching the stubble on his chin, he frowned and read it once again.

From: *Henri Déhelle*

Subject line: *Bellisae Activities*

Message: *Considerable tension between Colonel Elijah Floyd and General Nicole Rama-Déjardin*

The remote animus that had made him compose then send the email didn't need to force him to look up 'Bellisae', then 'Colonel Elijah Floyd' and 'General Nicole Rama-Déjardin' on the Internet. The information he found there did nothing to help clear his perplexity.

Thinking that somewhere, a computer had made a mistake, he deleted the message.

44) A Q-Tip

"A Q-Tip? Really?" muttered the Army Medical Command surgeon.

"Uh-huh!" confirmed Elijah Floyd. "Thanks for this great-looking dressing, doc! My ear is quite pleased! Believe me, it is. Can I go now?"

"Yes, you can. Come back to see me tomorrow so I can change it."

"Okey-dokey, doc!" the colonel called out as he left SACI's medical center.

While he was striding briskly to get back as fast as he could to his security post in the room next to Prima 16, his phone rang in his shirt pocket. It was Nicole Rama-Déjardin.

"Yes, General!"

"There are new developments, Colonel. Things are getting even more complicated."

“I’m listening.”

“Get back here as soon as possible, I’d like to talk to you about it in person.”

Twenty-five minutes later, he burst into the room.

“What is it?” he growled.

“We’ve intercepted another email. It was sent ten minutes before our... uh... little altercation. Before I pointed my gun at you, and you reacted to it.”

She held her secure phone out so he could read a copy of the message on the screen.

“Fucking bullsh... How to put it... Damnation!”

“Damnation is much better, Colonel!” the general commented almost maternally.

Seeing the dressing covering his ear, his swollen eyelids that he could barely see out of and his bruised nose, she felt bad for Elijah.

“Anything new about that guy, Lucien?” he asked.

“He’s still at Chan Zhào’s place in the wildlife park. We don’t know what he’s doing there. He hasn’t been online.”

“Who’s this other guy and what’s he doing?”

“He’s the director of a slaughterhouse. He’s at work at the moment. His car is parked in front of the establishment, in the parking lot. As I was saying, he sent the email before anything had occurred between the two of us, so either this man can see the future or he had access to elements that allowed him to foresee what was going to happen.”

“What was he doing while the Q-Tip was beating me up?”

“I have no idea. The geolocation of his laptop pinpoints him at the slaughterhouse. He hasn’t moved since then. By the way, he deleted the email.”

“Right. Let’s interrogate these two guys. We don’t have any more time to lose.”

“So, we have carte blanche to bring them in and get them to talk?”

“Yes, ma’am. That’s your job. But I’d like to attend, if possible. Without getting in your way, of course!”

“Needless to say.”

“Go ahead, then. I’ll find you a room not too far away so I can be present during the questioning and still be close to Prima 16.”

“Very good, Colonel!” said the general, taking the phone out of her pocket. “I’ll step out for a few minutes to give instructions, that way I won’t bother you.”

He watched her leave the room. The general saying ‘that way I won’t bother you’ made him smile interiorly. As if he couldn’t understand that what she wanted to say was only to be heard by the people who worked with her.

While the general was talking to the teams on the ground, the colonel studied the two holes in the metal cabinet next to his bed. The bullets had passed all the way through and were lodged in the wall behind it.

That was a close call, Elijah! he thought. *Your fucking skull almost got a hole pierced in it!*

Just when he was about to give his own instructions and find a room for the interviews, he completely lost touch with the world around him. A long stream of thought-words and engrams infiltrated his mind.

45) He looks like a panda!

§§§

[§[Nine months ago, a spermatozoid fertilized one of your mother’s eggs, even though she had never mated with a male; she had been artificially inseminated. A man stuck his arm deeply into her anus and then, using an AI gun, inserted a long tube called a ‘semen straw’ into her vagina. He used his hand in the intestine to guide the straw through the cervix towards its destination.

Day has just broken, and you are about to be born. You feel the contractions that started about six hours ago speed up; they are now stronger and closer together. Your forelegs are beginning to protrude, and a calf-pulling chain is attached to them. You are pulled from the

warmth of your mother towards your birth and into an unknown world. They lay you on the straw-covered ground, although you obviously do not know what straw is! You do not know anything about this world, and in any event, you are not destined to learn much about it. Your birth takes place in a small red brick calving pen where your genitor was isolated in preparation for this event. All of a sudden, the air around you is full of strange sounds, different and much louder now because they are no longer muffled. You recognize a voice, though, the voice of someone who would often come near your mother when you were still in her womb.

“Well, what do you know? He looks like a panda!” he exclaims, amused.

A *Homo sapiens* has spoken directly to you for the first time—and probably one of the only times—in your life. Your two ears are completely black and you have two oval black spots around your eyes. Your four legs are also black, but the rest of your body is pure white. This color layout truly makes you look like a panda.

The breeder leans over and pierces your ear flaps with a small tool, and clips plastic tags in place. You feel a sharp but brief pain with each cut, and the fear it generates adds to the stress of your birth.

You are now tag number 3388 and belong to the Pierre Morageot intensive livestock farming facility. Your mother is tag number 2712. Once his job is finished, the man leaves.]§]

The colonel put his hand on his forehead and sat down on his bed. Even though, subjectively, it felt like what had just happened had lasted three or four minutes, in reality the injection of these thoughts into his mind had only taken a fraction of a second. The memories of this birth, however, were so vivid and seemed so real to him that he checked his arms and legs to ensure that his body hadn't turned into a calf's. Feeling his ears, he realized that they hadn't been pierced. His right ear was still covered by bandages and the left one was intact.

What the fuck...? How did those memories make their way into my brain?

He barely had time to think about it, though, because the injection of engrams continued.

§§§

[§]Pangs of worry clench your young heart, but fortunately, your mother starts to clean you with her tongue and a heavenly pleasure overcomes you. The tenderness that she expresses through the licks of her tongue alleviates the turmoil that swirls around you as you come into this world: the disconcerting transformation of sounds, the changes in temperature and light, the sensation caused by suddenly feeling your weight, the strange things that prickle your skin... All newborns, regardless of their species, share what you are experiencing: you have suddenly been wrenched from a much cozier universe.

The amniotic fluid that drenches your body makes you look shiny. Less than five minutes later, you are already on your feet. Your mother continues to lick you. She loves taking care of you! She has the same colors as you do, black and white. Her head is completely black, except for a white spot on her forehead that is almost perfectly diamond-shaped. She gently rubs her cheek against your slender body as you wobble on your newborn limbs. Her warmth puts you in a state of such divine bliss! Something inside you pushes you to search for her udder. Your lips reach for a teat. You nurse on colostrum, a liquid high in protein that is secreted before milk is produced. Your mother tends to all your needs, supplying you with food, protection, and love. Satiated for the moment, you bask in her affectionate pheromones, loving licks and fondling muzzle, closing your eyes with pleasure.

You are still a calf for now, a baby bull. You are only thirty hours old—a little more than one day old—when you encounter extreme violence for the first time in what will be your very short life. A man picks you up, lays you on your side in a wheelbarrow and takes you away from your mother. Her bellows are heartbreaking cries of sorrow, and you feel a chill all the way down to the bottom of your tender soul. The one who gave birth to you also releases a sudden gust of distress pheromones. You recognize it because you already understand the bases of your species' communication. The uncomfortable wheelbarrow bumps and jerks, causing pain. You can still distinctly hear your mother's moans, even though they are waning with the distance. You try to stand up, with difficulty, but your hooves slip inside the wheelbarrow.



Illustration by Boris Tzaprenko

The man comes to a stop. He picks you up once again and puts you down on a metal surface with three other bovine infants of your age who are just as terrified as you are. You are in the trailer of a truck, and its tailpipe stinks to high heaven. One last baby is thrown in next to you, and the cattle truck pulls away.

*

The vehicle speeds down a wide road, its tarp flapping and slamming against its sides above your heads. The oldest one of you is barely forty hours old! You are all just terrorized infants. The repulsive fumes coming from the engine have replaced the reassuring scents of your mothers. Your hooves slip on the vibrating metal surface; you cannot stay upright. Your bodies slide from one side of the trailer to the other in the curves, piling you on top of one another. The vibrations, bumps, noises, and stench send your hearts into a painful override and waves of adrenaline are pumped into your veins. The only thing you can think

about is your mother. You think about her so much that it brings up memories of the warm scent of her breath, the strokes of her tongue, her gentleness, her cheek caressing your side and neck, her large muzzle snuggled up next to your tiny one... and you see once again her big eyes watching you with infinite tenderness. The five of you incessantly cry out to the mothers that they have taken you from and that you will never see again. This is the beginning of the horrible abuse that you will endure during your entire life, which thankfully will be short, because all it will be is a succession of pain and suffering.}]§

The mental hold let go of his mind.

“Aaah!” cried out the colonel, falling over on his bed.

No more than two seconds had gone by since the first flow of memories had been injected into his mind. The intermission lasted only half that long before the third stream of engrams reached Elijah Floyd’s brain.

§§§

[§[The truck slows down. It has arrived at its destination, the huge cattle feedlot facility operated by Etari. Located on a large strip of land as arid as lunar soil, it houses rows of tiny white plastic huts surrounded by a metal fence, each little unit less than two square meters in size.



Illustration by Boris Tzaprenko

Two *Homo sapiens* that you see for the first time unload you from the trailer. They carry you to the huts and lock each one of you into the

small prison cells. Your pen is located at C270. To your left and to your right you can see the calves who made the trip with you. You got to know each other in the truck. It feels good to know that you are not alone, but the fences that separate you prevent you from having any other contact than a visual one. Fear dominates your emotions, and you cruelly miss your mother. You can see and sense that the others feel the same. Sharing the same anguish has a dual effect: knowing that you are not the only one facing the unknown is comforting, but sensing the panic that they feel so strongly only fuels yours. The terror that you see in their eyes and their trembling bodies confirm that you have reasons to be afraid.

You are hungry. A human rushes through the rows, hooking up bottles to the metal fences that surround your little prisons. You nurse greedily on colostrum. Not your mother's, that would be too much of an extraordinary coincidence. Everything here is centralized for practical reasons.

Little by little, the world around you grows dark and disappears into obscurity. This is your second night on earth, and tonight stars shine in the sky. You smell the thousands of intermingled bovine scents emanating from those who are imprisoned, just like you are, here in this hell. Added to this are the odors produced by human beings, notably by their machines. Off to the left, on a slope, you can see the artificial lights of their dwellings and outbuildings. It seems peaceful enough since no one is out. Will the world stay this way? Or will it reappear once daylight comes back? You do not know that. A human being as old as you are could not answer this question either and, what is more, would not even wonder about it. You are tired. Your body goes to sleep, and you do too. In your nightmares, your hooves slip on vibrating iron, you fall, a menacing tarp flaps noisily around you and a nauseating smell aggresses your nostrils.

The next morning, you step out of your little hut. Through the galvanized bars that hold you prisoner, you watch two men busying themselves with your neighbor on the left. You wonder what they are doing. They take him out of the pen and lay him on the ground. One of them

holds him down on his side with his hands and one knee. The other one uses a tool called an ‘elastrator’ to slip an elastic band around the top of the calf’s scrotum. This will crush the blood vessels and restrict the blood supply to the testicles, resulting in the death of tissue. They rapidly set this castration band in place, put the calf back into its enclosure and move towards you. You obviously do not know what they are doing. But you have heard your neighbor scream in terror, so you try to hide in your hut. A hand reaches out, grabs your leg and pulls you outside.

“Ha! Well, we’re going to do away with the balls of a panda, huh!” says one of the voices.

The other one laughs. Seven minutes later, it is your turn to be placed back in your cell. The castration band that is strangling your gonads is painful. In a couple of days, you will no longer be a baby bull, but a baby steer. You will not grow up to be a bull, but a steer. The reason you and the other bull calves are being mutilated is because high levels of testosterone would make you less docile, less submissive, less easy to handle. You could become uncooperative or even aggressive! Slave revolts are bad for productivity. Moreover, the lack of this male hormone results in better muscle mass distribution which leads to ‘higher quality grades’ of meat. In other words, you will be tastier. The human species wants you to put on as much weight as you can in a short period of time, all the while consuming as little food as possible for each kilogram that is added on. If you are confined to such a small area, it is so the food you are fed is predominantly transformed into muscle mass and is not wasted on energy spent moving around. Your mothers are bred for their milk; you, their sons, are bred for your flesh. You weigh forty-two kilos today; your exploitative owners will fatten you up at a rhythm of at least 800 grams per day—sometimes, depending on the time of the year, you can put on over a kilogram.

You are a baby. Fifty hours ago, you were still in your mother’s womb. The strap that is strangling your testicles hurts. You are afraid. You miss your mother. So, like your neighbor, like all of the other children here, you call out to her, and you weep.

The day is coming to an end. Soon, in the thickening darkness, you hear a cacophony of hundreds of bellows and you smell the olfactory

turbulence emanating from all of these bodies releasing distress pheromones. Your short lives are meticulously programmed. Your fates are sealed. The time of your death is even known well before your birth, for your trip down death row has already been scheduled. By now, your flesh and skin have already been reserved by meat traders and tanneries. Consumers will tell you that there is no need to get emotional about it, because that's just the way it is: the lion eats the zebra. With a fatalistic look on their face as if to underline the relevance of the subject, some will even add that plants suffer, too.

The next day, no more bottles are brought out. A bucket-shaped trough is attached to the fence. It contains powdered cow milk mixed into water. Why did they not leave you with your mother, since, as it turns out, they are going to feed you milk produced by your species? Because it is easier for them to regulate your rations this way. In the meat industry, the Lean Meat Yield (LMY) is an important ratio to have under control. It is the proportion of lean meat recovered from a carcass. To optimize this ratio, the infant is immobilized so that he transforms the feed he intakes into muscle. Attention is paid to over-feeding, so he will not produce too much fat. This plant-protein to animal-protein converting machine must be fed exactly what it needs, and too bad if its hunger is not satiated: that is not what it is here for. And this is the reason you are not allowed to suckle your mother. You would consume too much milk. You will live with this hunger until the day you die—but soon you will be subjected to an even more painful deprivation that will make you forget all about it.

It is not easy for you to drink out of the trough, but you have no choice. You absorb this mixture that still contains some colostrum. Your mother's milk tasted so much better! And it was so comforting to suckle her teats! But since you are hungry, you eat what you can. You watch the two men moving away from you to the left. Driving around in their little vehicle, they are distributing the same liquid to the other prisoners. One is driving while the other one is standing in the back, placing buckets next to each pen. You hear their voices; they are not far away. You do not know it, but they are talking about Average Daily Gain (ADG), which is the rate of weight gain per day. They also

discuss the Feed Conversion Ratio (FCR) that measures the amount of feed required to increase the animal's body weight by one kilogram. It is important for breeders to know what their FCR is because it must be as low as possible if they want to optimize their feeding costs. One way to lower the FCR is, as we've seen before, to confine animals to smaller areas so that they do not waste energy moving around; that way the feed they consume is only used to produce muscle. Giving the meat producing machines less space also decreases housing investment costs.

It boils down to this: the less room the slaves have, the more profitable they are. This is to be applied liberally, meaning reducing living space to the limits of what might possibly induce suffering and cause too many deaths. That is how, through testing, the limits for each species have been calculated. For caged laying hens, space the size of a sheet of letter-sized paper is what is recommended.

As far as you are concerned, you will have 1.50 square meters of space to live in until you reach 150 kilos. You will move into 1.70 square meters when you weigh between 150 and 220 kilos, and once you weigh more than 220 kilos you will be entitled to 1.80 square meters.

Do not forget that the lion eats the zebra. *C'est la vie!*

The following days, you get acquainted with your two neighbors. You find out that they also miss their mothers, that their testicles hurt, that they are hungry and terribly bored inside their 1.50 square meter rectangles. When it is feeding time, you throw yourself on your food not only because you are hungry, but because there is nothing else to do.

Little by little, the most grueling frustration that you will come to know during what little is left of your life is now manifesting itself. It is the lack of iron. Consumers like it better when your flesh is pale colored, so you are voluntarily rendered anemic by a diet that does not contain this oligo-element.

Two weeks later, your necrosed testicles atrophy and fall off. This source of pain had slowly faded away.

The neighbor on your right is almost completely white except for his head and the tips of his legs, which are black. Your neighbor on the left

is the opposite: he is almost all black, with spots of white on his head, the end of his tail and on his back.

These two baby steers are the only persons of your species with whom you can easily share your emotions. You can hear those who are a little farther off, but since they are hidden from your sight by your two next door neighbors, you cannot read their body language, and their pheromones blend in with those of the all the other camp prisoners, forming an indecipherable olfactive cacophony.

Black-Head is still crying over his mother. White-Head is silent, but his scent tells you that he is suffering. The lack of iron is having more and more of an impact on all of you. And since everything in this fattening farm has been thought out, your small prison cells do not contain anything that could contain iron and that you could lick to reduce your anemia. The objective is to decrease your red blood cell count so that your flesh remains as white as possible.

You are one month old. At the rate of 800 grams every twenty-four hours, you have grown to weigh over sixty-six kilos. Your days consist in being physically and morally tortured against a backdrop of never-ending boredom. Just as the others have, you have forgotten all about your mother. You did not know that she was your mother, for you were not able to conceive any concepts about her anyway, given the small amount of time that you spent with her. You cruelly, terribly, dramatically missed the first licks of her tongue, the caresses of her muzzle, the warm breath from her nostrils and her reassuring scent. You know that. But now, you have all been physically deprived of iron. Even Black-Head does not cry after his mother anymore because his suffering is unbearable. White-Head has sprained his front left leg trying to jump out of his pen. The sprain is painful, but not as much as the iron deprivation.

You are six weeks old, and you weigh almost eighty kilos when another painful event is about to break the monotony of your existence. The galvanized fence that holds you prisoner inside your less-than-two-square-meter pen has an opening in it that is called a headlock. It allows you to stick your head out and eat from the trough attached to the outside. This morning, to your left, you notice that the food distri-

bution is not proceeding as usual. It is taking longer and is accompanied by bellows and distress pheromones. The two employees that you are used to seeing are moving forward at a surprisingly slow pace. They linger in front of each prisoner for about ten to fifteen minutes.

You have been able to distinguish between the two men for a while now. In addition to the fact that they do not have the same scent, one of them is tall and slim, the other is small and wears glasses with thick lenses that make his eyes look huge. Tall-and-Slim is not often a brutal man, but exceptionally, when he is stressed out by his work, which is quite rare, he can be. Big-Eyes, though, has the bad habit of slapping the calves for fun and then bursting out laughing.

They reach White-Head's pen, and you watch them fill his trough with food. Your fellow sufferer seems wary and does not rush over to eat. Tall-and-Slim shakes the food bucket. White-Head cannot resist and sticks his head through the headlock. Big-Eyes lets down a device that blocks the head of the young steer in such a way that he cannot back out. Tall-and-Slim slips a halter on him, then puts a ring around the little white muzzle. Now the infant can no longer move his head at all. You cannot see what happens next, Big-Eyes is standing in the way. You hear White-Head's hooves stomping on the ground and the fence rattling. You inhale a strong smell of something burning. It lasts ten minutes, during which fear quickens the pulsing of your heart.

They are now standing in front of you, and you move as far back as you can into your tiny hut. Shaking the trough full of food does not entice you out, so Tall-and-Slim sticks a nose clamp into your nostrils. It is a type of pliers that clamps onto your nasal septum. This restraining instrument is attached to a rope that the man threads through the headlock before pulling on it, making it painful to pull back on. Is this where the expression 'to lead someone by the nose' comes from? Who knows? Anyhow, you have no choice but to obediently pass your head through the hole in the fence.

"Hey, Panda, it's your turn!" says Big-Eyes.

This is the second and last time that a human speaks directly to you. He uses the same devices to block your head that he used with White-Head. You are scared stiff. What occurs next is outside of your line of sight, because it is happening on top of your head. Using shears, they

shave off the two buds growing on the right and left side of your forehead. Once that is done, they use a gas-heated disbudding iron to cauterize the small buds so they do not develop into horns. The pain is excruciating. You now understand why White-Head was struggling, crying out and releasing pain pheromones that the strong stench of the burning could not cover. It is highly recommended to use a local anesthetic when proceeding with this type of mutilation, but the product has a cost and using it would mean spending more time which in itself is also an expense. So, most of the time, they do without because, after all, the lion eats the zebra. The men set you free. Big-Eyes laughs as he slaps you.

“I don’t understand why you have to do that,” Tall-and-Slim says to him.

“I can’t help myself. It calms me down,” answers Big-Eyes. “This shitty job is so damn boring that I have to find ways to laugh.”

They move on towards Black-Head, who is now worriedly wondering what they are doing. You shake your head, trying to get rid of the two burning sensations. The ache will slowly subside but will still last another ten hours. You could have been a handsome bull, big and proud and strong with big horns. They have turned you into a compliant cripple, a meat producing machine, and that is now what you are. Your testosterone and horns were a problem considering what they have planned for you, and how they intend to use your body. Get used to this idea: you live in this body because you were born into it, but it does not belong to you. You have no power over it, you do not even have the right to use it as you see fit. It belongs to humanity that will do with it what it wants, up until the moment you die, and more importantly, thereafter. You are nothing but a resource that will be transformed into trays of meat, shoes, wallets, belts, couches, fertilizer... You are already these objects in the making.]}]

*

The general had just walked out, so to speak. Saluted with respect by the men who were standing guard outside, she had left the room

containing Prima 16 barely four seconds ago. Unaware that the colonel, during this short length of time, had lived several months of his bovine life, she continued to move away from the building to get out of the range of indiscreet ears so that she could secretly call for help on her secure phone.

§§§

[§[When your deficiency is too hard to bear, you try to drink your own urine which contains a small amount of iron. This is hard to do, because you have grown so big that you are unable to turn around in your cramped cell.

When you turn two months old, they remove you from your tiny prison and put you in a pen with other children your age. You are packed against each other, because 1.50 square meters is all the space each one of you is allotted. You express your misery by moaning out of fear. Luckily, you miraculously find Black-Head and White-Head in the midst of all of these bustling strangers.

Time goes by. Life is rhythmized by the distribution of food. Progressively, then more rapidly, they modified the milk they were feeding you and replaced it with hay. Milk production is mainly reserved for human consumption. The nights are harrowing. It is hard to sleep soundly on hard packed soil that is covered in excrements. There is also so little room that it is impossible to move without waking someone up. And the iron deficiency! The constant pain from the lack of iron!

*

You are six months old and weigh one hundred and ninety kilos. The castration and debudding pains are now distant memories. White-Head's front left leg no longer hurts. Monotony and pain due to your iron deficiency have become the bane of your existence. Other than the bars of your pen, nothing exists in your overpopulated nanoworld, and there is nothing to distract you. White-Head and Black-Head are

bored to death, just like you are. You stay as close as you can to your two friends, but you also meet other calves that are your age. None of them seem to be having fun. Days go by sluggishly. Men hurry by, handing out food and drink, removing excrements or doing mysterious things you do not understand. Big-Eyes hands out punches. When you look high up above you, it is sometimes pure blue, sometimes laced with white things that move around and slowly change shapes, sometimes gray, and sometimes black. Meteorological phenomena come as a happy change in your lives. Winds that are more or less strong. Rain that is more or less intense. And even a little flurry of snowflakes. Sometimes a vehicle stops and drops off new babies for the fattening camp. At other times, a truck hauls some of you away, the ones that are bigger than you. Most of the time you do not see this happen, but you can hear the scared bellows. Only once did you see one of these boardings with your own eyes. The men used electric prods to force the calves up onto a steep ramp and into the trailer. They were so afraid that they were trembling on their four inexperienced legs! Black-Head and White-Head were as upset as you were. You haven't forgotten the event, but try not to think about it. And that is all there is to your life. No other events occur. Life has the same flavor as the food does, and it is nothing but suffering and idleness.

Today, you are thirteen months old. You weigh 165 kilos. Big-Eyes does not slap you around anymore. He no longer finds it fun because your head does not budge when he hits you. He prefers hitting the newly arrived infants on the cheek in their pens. Twenty-one of you are now the same age and the same weight. You have been penned together by date of birth to make the job easier when they come to take you to the slaughterhouse. An enormous truck stops about fifty meters from you. Two *Homo sapiens* that you have never seen before, a female and a male, step down from it. Big-Eyes comes to greet them. He shakes the two strangers' hands. The woman pushes a button on the side of the truck and the whole back of the truck tips back, like the bottom half of a jaw, and drops down to the ground. This surface turns into an inclined ramp.

Looking over the bars that hold you prisoner, you watch what is going on with growing concern. You exchange glances with Black-Head and White-Head, who apparently look like they are in the same anxious state that you are.

The three *Homo sapiens* slip out of your sight, but rapidly return. Big-Eyes and the woman are each pulling behind them one of your fellow creatures using a nose clamp attached to a rod. This device allows them to both pull them and push them at the same time. An unknown man accompanies them, holding a sort of stick in his right hand, which is actually an electric prod. The two bovine children roll crazed eyes and moan with pain. Nostrils are so sensitive! They move forward awkwardly, as if they have never used their legs before. And for a good reason! The cattle trailer is a little over 100 meters from the one place that they have virtually never left before. During their whole existence, they have rarely walked more than ten steps. Walking this distance is a long march for them, the longest of their miserable lives in any case. They are led to the inclined ramp and forced to board the truck by being pulled by their nostrils or shocked with the electric prod.

When it is your turn, Big-Eyes clips the nose clamp into your nose and opens the fence that you have been looking out at the world through for most of your life. Suddenly having this permanent fixture disappear from your horizon is, in itself, a surreal situation. You would never have even dreamed that an element that had always been so present in your universe could be removed from it. This is not due to your insufficient cognitive faculties; a human being of the same age, brought up in the same sclerosing environment as you, would not fare any better. You don't have the time to hone your intelligence on this stimulating experience, though. You move forward because you want the pain in your nose to stop. Black-Head is on the ramp in front of you. Trembling like a leaf, he exudes terror just like you do and his heart bangs fast in his chest just like yours does. His hooves slip on the steep ramp. Black-Head finally joins the fifteen others inside the trailer. The woman pulls you by the nostrils and the man shoots electric jolts into your backside. You fear him as if it were Death itself that was touching you. Behind you, White-Head also wallows in horrifying terror. Your legs are quivering from both the exceptional exertion of

climbing the ramp and from the panic that submerges you. Big-Eyes removes the nose clamp, and you move to the back of the trailer where the others are packed. You turn and watch the calf coming up behind you, and he climbs in without too much difficulty. The next one up is White-Head. The poor child slips halfway up the ramp, falls on his side and slides down to the ground. Big-Eyes angrily spits out obscenities and drags him up onto his feet by the muzzle, pulling on the nose clamp stuck in his nostrils. White-Head bellows with pain and horror, but manages, through his desperate efforts, to get back on his legs. This time he makes it up the ramp and joins you. Blood runs down from his partly torn nostrils and he is shivering so much that he almost loses his balance again. He hangs his head, looking at the red blotches on the floor of the trailer dripping from his nose and weeps like a little child. Because he still is a child. You are all still children. Children who have lived—if you can call it living—all of their short lives in spaces barely big enough to contain their bodies. You know nothing because no one ever taught you anything. Snatched from your mothers, castrated, dehorned, deprived of iron, mistreated, you do not even dream of rebelling or defending yourselves. In any case, you do not know how unjust your fate is, because you do not know anything. Nothing in your lives has ever made you realize that you are victims of injustice. Your life is what it is, that is all you know.}]

The uncoordinated movements made by the colonel while he was under mental control caused him to fall off the bed. He didn't notice it at all, however, because the stream of engrams that was flowing into his mind had only stopped for a short half-second before starting up again.

§§§

[§[The truck takes off with twenty-one of you in the trailer, packed one against the other, with even less space than before. You know all of the others now, but you still have a preference for Black-Head and White-Head, who are standing next to you. You have absolutely no

idea what is going on, but you do know that this does not bode well. *Homo sapiens* think that you instinctively know what is happening, because they do not want to believe that non-human animals can be intelligent. But you know that something bad is going to happen because, other than the tenderness that your mother gave you, nothing good has ever happened to you. Your conception of life is that any new event can only be a calamity. And this time around, this one last time, you are unfortunately right again.

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The whole trip and the time spent waiting in the lairage area have been an exhausting and terrifying ordeal. In the death chute, White-Head is in front of you and Black-Head behind. It is no coincidence, because you always find a way to be there between the two of them. Your mother lost her life here, at the end of this pathway, six months ago. She too walked between these walls. Her first three children were females. They are destined to produce milk before ending up in turn here in this hell. You are her last child. Of course, you do not know anything about all of this. Your knowledge is as limited as the space in which you survived up to today.

Two *Homo sapiens* shock you with their electric prods to push you forward towards your death. You know what is awaiting you, for the stench of blood that saturates everything is a clear message. You have not learned what death is, but you still fear it. All sentient beings are afraid of dying, it is an innate feeling. Humans call it the 'self-preservation instinct'. The fear of losing one's life—even a miserable one—is the greatest terror of all. White-Head enters the stunning box, prodded by the electric shocks. Luckily for him, mercifully, the Matador penetrates his skull at the right angle. It is over for him. You felt his death; in fact, it is more exact to say that you no longer feel his life. You cannot hear his voice bellowing out his despair anymore, and the scent of his fear is washed away by the smell of his blood.

You are not as lucky as White-Head when it is your turn, but still luckier than your mother. The Matador partially fractures your skull

but does not stun you. The pain is unbearable, but fortunately, a second fatal shot rapidly follows it and knocks you out.][§]

*

Upon hearing the screams of bovine number 3388, the one who looked like a panda, Black-Head was seized by morbid tremors that were so severe that he fell to the floor. He had a hard time getting back on his feet because of his convulsing legs. He saw his brother in misfortune, who preceded him in their common fate, strung up by his back leg. He then watched the employee slit his throat, saw the blood spurt out, rhythmed by the final beats of his heart, and saw it pool up beneath him.

Without delay, the next employee on the line had begun to cut the dead body into pieces. Object he had been, object he was, object he would always be, in the minds of the dominant species. Just like his mother and all of his peers.

46) Elijah Floyd, number 3388

Once the injection of engrams had ended, the colonel suddenly found himself back in his own skin once again. In other words, he was once more in control of his body. But the memories of the life that he had just lived were still so vividly present in his mind that it took several seconds for his senses to start sending him messages once again. The eidetic images of himself as a baby steer slowly faded away, replaced by the signals his retinas normally sent him. It took some time for all his senses to resume their functions, as if all of his biological sensors were having a hard time letting go of the slaughterhouse and his bovine body.

It took him no less than five seconds to realize that he was lying on his back on the floor next to his cot. He wanted to stand up, but not on his legs, so he got up on his hands and knees. He felt that something

was wrong with his hooves, and that's when he rediscovered that he had hands. An intense emotion submerged him as he felt the need to examine and flex each one of his fingers.

In his mind, he had been standing on hooves for the past thirteen months. All the while he was living his bovine life, access to his human memories had been cut off and only now could he reconnect with them. The two lives were presently a part of him. More exactly, he was now both of them combined.

Just like Lucien Prérubem was tag number 2712, Elijah Floyd was now tag number 3388, and was a dual being, part-hominid, part-bovine. But unlike Lucien, who knew it was Bellisae who had sent him these memories, the colonel had no reason to doubt the authenticity of his bovine experience. Neither one of the two lives that now constituted his memories was more real than the other. He had been a man, then a cow, then a man again, apparently the same one as before. As inexplicable as it was for him at the moment, it was now his reality.

With great effort and trembling on the legs that he no longer knew how to use, he managed to seat himself on the bed. Just as Lucien had done before him, he palpated and examined his whole body. It took him five minutes to get undressed, his fingers having lost contact with his nervous system. He was however getting the control of his primate body back faster and faster. Completely naked, he examined it, probed it all over, and checked to see if he still had his testicles. When he felt the bandage on his ear, little by little the most recent events of his life as a man came back to his mind, followed closely by all the others. Without being totally aware of what he was doing, he touched the two places on the top of his forehead where his horn buds had been cauterized.

The engram injection had lasted all in all little more than three minutes. To better understand what the colonel was feeling, you would have to imagine that suddenly, you were transported elsewhere, into another species' body for thirteen months, then returned to the same place you were in your original body three minutes later in time. When he became conscious that he was standing there in the nude, he got dressed hurriedly. The general was liable to walk in at any moment. She had almost killed him... they had two suspects coming in for ques-

tioning... a room had to be found for the interrogations... all of this came back to him at that precise moment and became his present once again. He was reintegrating his anatomy faster than before because it took him less time to dress than it had taken to remove his clothes. His head was filled with a tempest of confused thoughts, but even though it had crossed his mind, he didn't link his terrible bovine misadventure to the mental disorders that he had been having to deal with recently. To think so would have meant renouncing a big part of himself and accepting that a piece of his life was just an illusion. It would have been just as easy to admit that his human existence had only been a dream. He noticed that he had torn off two buttons when he clumsily removed his shirt. It was too late to change though, the general had returned.

She noted that the colonel, who was usually impeccably dressed, was in a state of disarray with his shirt half-buttoned and one of his pant legs rolled up... She thought that it was due to what she had made him endure and was secretly apologetic about it.

"I just talked to my team," she said. "The two suspects are still under surveillance, but..."

She looked highly surprised and preoccupied. Hoping that her emotions would help make his less noticeable, he didn't feel the need to find out why she was in such a state of turmoil. He knew that he urgently needed to regain his self-control, so he tried to calm his thoughts down by chasing the slaughterhouse from his mind.

"But?" he answered.

"I haven't given the order to pick them up yet because something new has occurred and I wanted to get back to you on it. Seeing what I've just been told, you might not find it necessary to interrogate those two anymore. You see, the number of suspects has gone up significantly. We are now at more than a hundred, and it keeps growing."

"What do you mean by suspects?"

"People who sent themselves emails about the incident that took place between the two of us. And each time, it's the same message: 'Considerable tension between Colonel Elijah Floyd and General Nicole Rama-Déjardin.'"

“Now that’s strange. It seems as if someone’s trying to divert our attention away from the first guy... Suddenly things are speeding up, whereas there was a good amount of time between the first email and the ones that followed...”

Elijah wondered if this had anything to do with his bovine life, but the idea only flitted furtively through his mind. The truth was, he was having a hard time maintaining any interest at all in the mysterious things going on at SACI.

“Hmm... you’re right! That’s what it looks like. What do you think we should do?”

“Keep a close eye on the first two, especially the first one. Don’t lose sight of him. We’ll question him later.”

“Copy that!”

“I have to go now.”

“Go?”

“Yes, ma’am. There’s something I have to check out somewhere,” he said, gazing at his hands.

“Something somewhere?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Should I wait for you here?”

“It’s an emergency, and I probably won’t be back for several hours. Could you please replace me here while I’m gone?”

“You, Colonel, would dare leave the vicinity of SACI!”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“You’re being very enigmatic. I thought we were working together. I hope I didn’t offend you by moving out of earshot to talk to my team!”

“You didn’t, I swear, General. Yes, we’re still collaborating, of course we are. I’m even asking you to replace me. But I have to go for very exceptional personal reasons.”

“Colonel! In the Army, your personal life comes after your mission!”

“General, this’ll be the first time ever in my life that I derogate from that rule. But I insist, this is for truly exceptional reasons. Moreover, these personal reasons may have something to do with SACI. That is what I must find out.”

“You’re being extremely enigmatic again.”

“Maybe I am, yes! But if I told you more about it, you wouldn’t believe me.”

“Alright! I’ll do my best to replace you. Have you informed General Matrone of this temporary transfer of authority?”

“No, General. I’ll let you do that. I must leave as soon as I can.”

“Right... See the doctor before leaving. Your bandage is soaked, your ear must be bleeding a lot. I really apologize for that.”

“Oh! Don’t forget that it’s the fucking Q-Tip’s fault, General!”

On that note, without any more regards as to protocol, the colonel left without waiting for his superior’s permission. With a perplexed look on her face, she watched him limp away.

Limping, but in quite a strange way.

47) Act with more distinction

It was almost noon when Elijah Floyd parked his Jeep next to a massive single-story building. A door was ajar, there were no windows to be seen from where he stood, the roof was undulated fibro cement and there were two large grey metallic gates. The building was located on the highest point of the vast grounds.

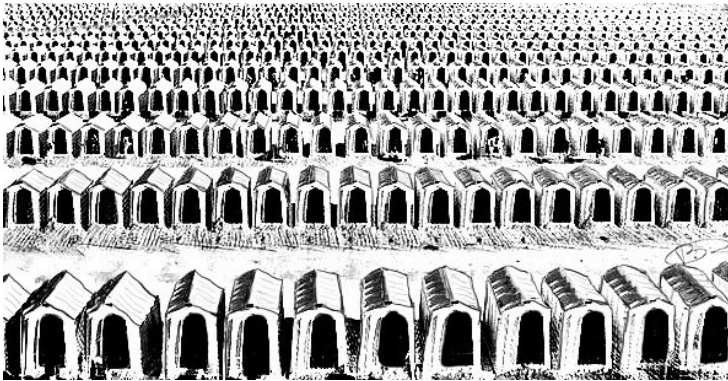


Illustration by Boris Tzaprenko

From where he stood, he could see thousands of fattening cells down below him. The colonel snorted some powder, put the small package

back into his pocket and jumped out of his car. He observed the lines of white plastic prison cells. His heart pumped faster.

Searching for the detention area where he had been held, he walked down the slope to have a closer look. He rapidly found row C and followed it up until he reached number 270. The bovine prisoners watching him through their prison bars woke up painful memories. Tears blurred his vision. Soon he was standing in front of pen number C270. It was occupied by a baby with gentle eyes that he could easily read. The calf looked like a newly born, surprised by everything happening around him, understanding nothing and suffering intense pain because he no longer was with his mother. Elijah fell to his knees, wrapped his enormous fingers around one of the galvanized fence bars and started to weep inconsolably. He didn't hear the person approaching him.

"Hey! What are you doing here?" the man cried out. "Is that your Jeep, up there?"

The colonel gently stroked the forehead of the bovine infant.

"Ho! I'm talking to you," the individual insisted. "What in the heck are you doing here?"

Elijah Floyd pivoted his head and noticed, through his curtain of tears, two huge eyes staring at him through thick lenses. He stood up to face the man that he recognized, even though it was the first time he was seeing him through human eyes.

"I... What..." stuttered the man at the sight of his distraught face. "You okay, man?"

The colonel didn't answer and continued to look at him and weep, so the man took out his phone to call for assistance.

"I need your help, there's a guy here who looks crazy. I don't know what he wants. This jerk's creepy and looks really badass!"

"So... you're the one who likes to slap children around!" said the madman in question.

"What?" the employee asked, surprised.

"I saw how you liked hitting babies! Whatever your fucking motivations were or the psychological problems that pushed you to do it, I can't forgive that."

“Ah, yeah, sicko! You’re plenty crazy! You got hit pretty hard on the right side of your mug, it’s still bleeding. Your bandage is full of blood. You escaped the funny farm or what?”

“Did your father pound on you when you were a kid? Is that what made you so mean?”

“You like to dress up in a uniform and talk like a Martian, right? In any case, you have a cool Jeep. I like it.”

“If it weren’t for my uniform, which reminds me to keep my excesses in check, I would have loved to shove that Jeep up your rectal cavity. But dignity advises me to act with more distinction.”

A massive and rapid hand slammed into the cheek of the man with the thick lenses. His glasses flew off, tracing a parabolic curve before landing farther away. Their owner would have fallen into the pen if the soldier had not caught him by the neck, tightly gripping him with his left hand. The second squad of phalanges that heavily landed on the same target resulted in a sinister cracking of teeth. The third attack busted his jaw.

Becoming suddenly conscious of what he was doing, Elijah made an enormous effort to stop the onslaught. He let go of the man’s neck and his victim sled to the ground with a groan. The colonel gave the bovine infant who was occupying his former space one last pet, looked sadly at his two neighbors and walked slowly, his head low, back to his car. He tried to avoid looking at all the little prisoners that watched him go. At the end of the row, he came across a tall and slim man who was coming to assist his colleague.

“Don’t worry too much about him!” the officer said, seeing the surprised look in the man’s eyes. “We had a little spat, nothing important. Just a good old little quarrel between former acquaintances.”

Without answering, the employee moved out of the way of the massive bulk of the officer, staring at his back in amazement. He then noticed his comrade crumpled on the ground in a surrealistic position and ran over to help him.

48) A real Colonel who's in a big hurry

Carlos Marconi left the reception area, followed by three of the farm's other employees. They were all wearing coveralls and high rubber boots.

"Okay guys! I don't want you to fall behind in your schedule!" he told them.

The three men that he had given instructions to all went in different directions.

"Well... then... I'll get going, too," he told Angela who was standing there, leaning on the doorway.

"Going forward, scrape the mud off of your boots before coming in. I have enough to do without having to clean up behind you!"

"Kay! Sorry. I'll be careful next time."

"Coffee's brewing. Want some?"

"Yeah, a quick cup..."

"It's almost ready."

Hands in his pockets, Carlos watched the sky darken with clouds.

"Think it's gonna rain?" she asked.

"Weather report says no, but..."

Their attention got distracted by a Jeep speeding down towards them. The driver blocked the four wheels, leaving a cloud of dust in its wake, and the car stopped inches away from the other side of the gate. An imposing soldier jumped onto the packed soil of the road and grabbed two of the bars on the gate.

"Pierre Morageot?" he yelled.

"No," Carlos answered. "I'm an employee here."

"That doesn't matter! Can I come in?"

"Depends. What do you want?" the farmhand asked, walking towards the stranger.

"I'd like some information. Information about a cow."

"Really!"

"What, really?"

"Which cow?"

"Open the gate, I don't bite!"

Carlos looked at the insignia that he was wearing on his broad shoulders.

“Are you a real Colonel?”

“A real Colonel who’s in a big hurry.”

Carlos stared at the red bandage covering the officer’s right ear.

“What happened?”

“A fucking Q-Tip happened! Are you going to let me in?”

“Show me your military ID.”

Doing nothing to conceal his impatience, Elijah held out his military ID card.

Carlos himself was a veteran and was a little intimidated. He didn’t go so far as to salute when he opened the gates, but he adopted a respectful attitude.

“I would greatly appreciate it if you could provide me with all the information that you have in your possession regarding the cow bearing tag number 2712. I would like to see where she was housed!”

“Now that’s incredible! Why are you all so interested in this cow?”

Angela, who had been listening in, was equally surprised.

“Yeah! This is incredible! What’s so special about this cow?”

“Who else has asked you about her?” asked the colonel.

“A guy and a woman,” answered Carlos.

“Their names?”

“I don’t know. I took pictures of them with my phone, though,” replied Carlos.

“Good. I’d like you to please show them to me. But first, I’d like to see where my m... that cow was living.”

“If that’s what you really want! Get into my truck, I’ll drive you there.”

*

Laying his right hand on the back of the new occupant of the stall, the colonel looked up and down row 17.

“How long did she live here?” he asked.

“Four years.”

“How old was she when she was shipped to the slaughterhouse?”

“When she was five, like most of them.”

“Do you have pictures of her?”

“No.”

“She had four children, right?”

“I believe she did, but I’m not sure. I’d have to check. That’s what they have on average, though.”

“Please check.”

Carlos called Angela on the phone.

“Could you tell me how many calves 2712 had, please?”

Elijah Floyd waited patiently, running his fingers over the headlock and the metal bars that separated the cow from her peers.

Mom looked at this and touched it while she was living here, during her oh so short life, he told himself.

“That’s correct,” Carlos confirmed. “She had three female calves and one male.”

“Her daughters must be adults now, right?”

“Obviously.”

“Are they hither?”

“Huh?”

“Are they here, in this fucking camp?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Can you show them to me?”

“I could. But... I have work to do and I’m running out of time.”

“Are you the only one working here?”

“Gosh no, but I’m still very busy. Are you going to tell me why 2712 is so special?”

The colonel took two fifties out of his wallet and handed them to Carlos, who tried to look embarrassed while slipping them into his pocket.

“Are you still as busy as before?”

“I just found out I had some time to spare.”

“Show me those female calves that are now all grown up.”

“They aren’t all in the same area.”

“Introduce me to them beginning with the youngest and ending with the oldest.”

“You want me to introduce you to them?”

“Yes, I do. Take me to them, come on!”

Carlos spoke into the phone once again.

“Sorry, Angela, I forgot to grab my tablet. Could you give me the tag numbers of 2712’s calves?”

Waiting for her answer, he watched in astonishment as the colonel bent down and smelled the cow, his nostrils flaring, and gave her small affectionate pats all over her back. Colonel or not, he couldn’t help but find this behavior odd.

“Alright,” said the farmhand. “Let’s go back to the Toyota, I have their tag numbers. Can you tell me why this cow interests you so much that you want to see her descendants?”

“Of course, I can,” Elijah simply stated.

Taking those words as a promise of an explanation, Carlos decided to bide his time.

*

Carlos stared incredulously at the teary-eyed colonel as he hugged and tapped the cow as if he had found the lost love of his life. The scene convinced him that this man was not in a normal state of mind, and he linked his conviction, inevitably, to the large bandage that he had on his right ear.

This guy must have had brain surgery. He might even have escaped from a military hospital.

“I’ll come back real soon to take care of you,” Elijah Floyd promised, whispering to the cow in a low but clear voice. “Your life’s going to change. I swear that I will not abandon you. I’ll show you the extent of my brotherly love.”

Yeah, right! He's lost it... Still... he's not the only one asking about 2712. I wonder what's behind all this.

"Let's go see the other two," the colonel asked after taking a dozen pictures of the cow.

*

Once he had seen and photographed the three daughters of the cow who had once worn tag number 2712, the colonel asked if he could see the photos of the man and the woman who had been interested in this same mother cow. Carlos hesitated for an instant before showing them, thinking that maybe he could wheedle some more money out of him, but the soldier's stern and penetrating eyes discouraged him from taking the risk of antagonizing him.

Elijah Floyd scrutinized the two pictures on the farmhand's smartphone.

"Send these photos to the email address that I'll put in your phone."

This was said in a tone that told Carlos that he had better do it willingly. He did what he was told and handed his device to the officer. Elijah then sent himself the two files.

"Thank you, sir!" he said with an even more forbidding and solemn attitude. "I'm now going to bestow on your ears the most important advice that they will have ever heard, which is why I expect you to pay close attention and follow it as if your life depended on it. Which is, in fact, the case, if I can say so without seeming too threatening. Are you presently in reception mode?"

"I'm all ears," Carlos said, impressed.

"So... First of all, I have a question. When is the oldest of the three girls scheduled for the slaughterhouse?"

"In about two months. Why?"

"Because—and now I *am* truly threatening you—you will be held responsible if anything happens to these three cows. That you find me bizarre is highly possible, and I understand it. Albeit I recommend that you take me seriously. Acting with the authority given me by my

military rank, I am entrusting you with the lives of these cows. Not for long, for I'll do my best to relieve you of the burden as quickly as possible. But for the moment, I'd like you to see to their well-being as best you can. This is to remain strictly between the two of us, don't tell a soul. If you fulfill your mission correctly, you will be generously rewarded. But if something unpleasant should happen to one of them, I swear that I will turn your life into a living hell, and it'll be so horrendous that your greatest dream will be to personally take yourself to the slaughterhouse and get it over with."

Visibly impressed by both the form and the content of the colonel's speech, Carlos said, in a quavering voice, "But... what's so important about these cows?"

"I just told you a minute ago! Are you not listening?"

"I...?"

"They are very important because your fate depends on their well-being!"

"I..."

"I almost forgot... Could you put them together in the same pen?"

"That'll be a problem, because..."

"Right! I'm counting on you to make it happen in the most expeditious manner. Now, I would like to know what these two people asked you about the cow that you tagged with number 2712."

"I really only spoke with the man. He was asking the same kind of questions that you are. Where she was and all that."

"Interesting! And was he emotional?"

"He seemed very strange too... Well, uh... I mean..."

"Don't worry. I already conceded that you had many reasons to find me strange. Did he also ask to see the children, just as I did?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you show them to him?"

"No. I lied to him. I told him that all her offspring had been sent to the slaughterhouse. I didn't have time for him and wanted him gone."

"How did he react?"

"I got the feeling that..."

"Yes?"

“That he was going to cry. That seemed really weird!”

“Give me your phone number.”

The wounded man gave him a look that was so sinister that Carlos complied. The colonel typed the information into the phone and saved it to his contact list.

“...”

“One more thing. I’d like to see the exact place that the cow you call 2712 gave birth to her last child, the male one.”

“We have to go back to row 17 for that. Let’s get back into the truck, I’ll take you there.”

*

In the small red brick room, Elijah Floyd bent down and picked up some hay and sniffed it. He looked around. When his emotions hit a high, he turned his back so the man would not see his tears. He took some pictures with his phone.

“I hope that you aren’t the type to listen to those fanatics who spread nonsense on social media,” Carlos said, with the best intentions, seeing the distress on his face. “Their so-called moralism has no respect for each and everyone’s freedom of choice. If we listened to those animal rights activists, we wouldn’t be allowed to eat whatever we want! Always trying to tell us what to do! They’re the moral Taliban, that’s what I say!”

“Do you realize that when you tell us not to moralize, you yourself are moralizing too?” Elijah answered as if he had been personally accused. “In doing so, you say you’re defending freedom of choice, but you’re doing the exact opposite! Isn’t that a paradox? Could you please tell me precisely where, when, how and by whom the limits of this famous freedom of choice were fixed? You know, the limits that say that you can reject any deontology that is different from yours? The limits that allow you to voice your outrage for your own personal reasons while I should silence my ethical convictions? What sleight of hand gives you the right and the authority to choose which opinions are worthy of

being exhibited and which aren't? Is putting forward a moral concept that isn't on your personal list offensive to you? Aren't you the one whose doxa's discriminatory moralism is narrow-minded, normative and extremely dogmatic—a doxa that you brandish like a banner to which one must unconditionally pledge allegiance? *You* are the moral Taliban hiding behind your mask of tolerance.”

“I... uh...”

Carlos now longed for only one thing: to get rid of this strange soldier.

“I have to go,” the soldier said. “And remember: if anything unfortunate happens to my sisters... I mean the cows in question... I will make you regret it so much that suicide will seem to be the only escape. It won't be easy for me to find someone who knows enough about cows to take care of them. If you would like to take on that job, I'll pay you handsomely, more than you make working here. I'm ready to buy some land where they can spend the rest of their days doing nothing and eating the best grass. For the moment, sadly, I must leave them here in your fucking prison! Think about it. I'll call you and we'll get together. Could you please drive me back to the entrance now? I have to leave urgently.”

49) The bovine people who live under our yoke

The colonel arrived at SACI at 5:00 p.m. He parked his car under the plane trees in the parking lot, looked around to see if anyone was there, then leaned towards the passenger seat to discreetly snort a line with his straw. He put the small bag of white powder into his pocket and got out of the car.

As he approached, the six soldiers that were on guard in front of Prima 16's room impeccably snapped to attention.

“Okay, guys, you're good!” he put them at ease.

Coming through the door, he saw the general sitting at his desk. Arms crossed, she was staring thoughtfully at the room that contained

the subject of all this surveillance and secrecy. She immediately cut her eyes towards him, watching him walk in.

“Thank you for replacing me, General,” he said, resting a buttock on the corner of the desk.

Still feeling guilty for the physical pain he had incurred because of her—the large bandage was visible enough to remind her of it—she let this new irreverence slide.

“Can I formulate the hope that nothing troublesome occurred during my absence?” he added.

“Nothing noteworthy, Colonel. For my part, I hope that you managed to do what you wanted to.”

“I believe you told me that Lucien Préroblem went to visit a dairy farm, right?”

“Lucien Prérubem, Colonel. Yes, that’s what I said.”

“Was it the Pierre Morageot facility?”

The general pulled out her phone and tapped on the screen. Seven seconds later she confirmed, “That’s it. The Pierre Morageot livestock farming facility. Why?”

The colonel held his phone up to her face, almost shoving it against his superior’s nose.

“Is that him?” he asked.

She saw that his hand was trembling.

“Yes, that’s him. How did you get that picture?”

“From the Pierre Morageot prison camp. One of the guards there gave it to me.”

“Prison camp? Guards? But why did you go all the way up there to get this picture? I could have shown it to you myself.”

“Yes, prison guards. A jailer, if you prefer. Why did I go there? That would be a little too complicated to explain... you wouldn’t believe me anyway. In any event, I must absolutely talk to this guy as soon as possible.”

“You should get the doctor to check out your ear. That bandage looks terrible! You also have dried blood on your cheek! You can’t stay like that forever!”

“It can wait a little while longer. Others are suffering much more than me! I must talk to this man!”

“Others? Who are you talking about?”

“The bovine people who live under our yoke, for example.”

“Bovine people... under our yoke? Huh...? General Matrone is here, in the next room. He went over to ask the vivisection laboratory employees some questions and should be right back. Ah! There he is.”

“Good day, General! What...?”

“Good evening, Colonel. I came to see for myself what was going on... Wow! Good grief! You should see a doctor for your ear! That bandage looks downright awful!”

“That’s what I just told him to do, General!” approved Nicole Rama-Déjardin.

“I must talk to Lucien Prérubem right away.

“Alright, Colonel,” said General Matrone. “You’ll see him soon, but you must take care of yourself first. And the three of us have to talk. So, for the moment, go see the doctor without delay, that’s an order! After that, we’ll have a conversation.”

“Yes sir! I’m on my way there!”

Elijah Floyd left abruptly, making no effort to hide his bad mood. The two generals exchanged a meaningful look.

“Is that how he always is?” she asked.

“Ever since I’ve known him, yes.”

“He’s certainly a great soldier, but his behavior will not help him in his career.”

“If only you knew how little he cares about that! He’s a most peculiar man.”

*

When the colonel came back with a clean bandage, he found himself once again caught in the two generals’ cross-lights. Both seemed embarrassed.

“Elijah,” said Michel Matrone. “Elijah... To be perfectly honest with you...”

“Enough of these trivial rhetorical flourishes, General! Could you please rapidly come to the point? I have to meet Lucien Prérubem as soon as I can.”

General Matrone glanced towards General Nicole Rama-Déjardin with an expression that could be read as ‘see how little he cares!’.

“Elijah! We all now know, and you were the first one to tell us, that certain inexplicable things can happen to some people’s minds. Your bandage is a striking example of that. It seems that no one is immune from... how can I say it... the losing or the loss of one’s consciousness. It seems that the general was the latest target and you the latest victim of these strange mental attacks. I don’t know if that’s what they’re called or not, but... we understand each other, that’s what counts. We must consider that we all are in danger of being manipulated by this thing that we know nothing about. I certainly could be, and you too. Do you agree?”

“Oh, yes! General, sir!”

“Great. So, to begin with, there was the mystery of your missing socks, and now it looks like you left your post at SACI for the first time. You! You who felt so strongly about never ever leaving the place, especially with everything that’s going on at the moment! And you asked—quite cavalierly I must say, but that’s nothing new—the general to replace you and you even tasked her with informing me about it.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Now that’s what I call suspicious behavior. We believe that you’ve most certainly acted under the influence of what I’ll call the ‘unknown element’. What concerns me is that you don’t seem inclined to tell us what you’ve been doing. You understand that we can’t accept this secrecy.”

“Yes, sir.”

“What you may be willing to tell us now will probably not be enough to satisfy us. We’ll have to subject you to an interrogation.”

“Yes, sir. I understand and I willingly agree to it. The only favor I ask of you, General, is to let me speak with Lucien Prérubem. I’ll then be at your entire disposal, and you can rummage through my fucking skull

as much as you want to. I'll take the opportunity to nap while you investigate inside my brain. I'm exhausted! It'll do me a world of good!"

"Right," said the general. "But we will be present while you talk to him."

"Just as long as he doesn't know you're there, if you please, General. I'd appreciate some privacy during my conversation with this man."

"Alright. I just need you to know that we will be listening and watching. I want you to know that. You can meet with him in one of the rooms in the Intelligence Agency building."

"That's perfect! When can I see him?"

"Now will be fine. Let's go."

"Lucien Prérubem will be on site by the time we get there," said General Nicole Rama-Déjardin. "One of my men will be in charge of Prima 16's surveillance during your absence. We can leave straight away, a car is waiting for us, but I would like to confer with the General before we go. No longer than five minutes."

Elijah left the room, leaving them by themselves.

General Nicole Rama-Déjardin informed General Michel Matrone of the strange comments that the colonel had made about the bovine people, prison camps and jailers. She had him listen to the conversation that she had recorded on her phone.

The general looked worried.

50) I know where my sisters are

Lucien had been waiting for almost ten minutes in a small white room. Chan was at work when they came to get him and bring him here. When he tried to reach her on the phone to warn her, she hadn't answered, probably because she was busy. He left her a message just before leaving with the three men who were waiting in front of the door for him. They were very polite, and gave him all the time he needed to call whoever he wanted to and to get ready to go with them. But they had then confiscated his phone.

He was seated on a padded chair that wasn't too uncomfortable, next to a pine table. On the other side of the table was a chair identical to his and on his left, a large mirror. In the middle of the ceiling, a round flush mount was the only source of light. The soldier who led him into the room laid down an ashtray on the table, telling him that he could smoke. She asked him if he wanted a cup of coffee, and he said yes. The cup was now empty. The agent was friendly and reassuring, explaining that he was to be questioned but that he had nothing to be afraid of.

Every once in a while, he would automatically look at the mirror. Not knowing what to do, he lit up a cigarette.

< Do not worry, Intelligent Predator! > Bellisae suddenly said to him, out of the blue. < Everything will be fine. >

< It seems like it... that chick just told me so. >

< You should be more respectful when you talk about women. After all, in a certain way, you were a female too. >

Lucien didn't know what to reply.

< You are about to meet a colonel. Be honest with him. You can tell him everything except that you know me and that I am a gorilla. I am asking you to keep that for yourself, at least for the moment. Do not tell him anything about me. He will not be hostile, only curious, justifiably so, extremely curious. I must confess that you both have something in common that is very strong, something that will create a powerful bond between the two of you. So... be well disposed towards him. But most of all, most importantly, do not tell him about me. >

He was about to ask who this officer was when the door opened and a tall, broad-shouldered muscular soldier walked in. He looked Lucien directly in the eye, pulled the other chair out and slowly sat down.

"Mister Lucien Prérubem?"

"Yes."

"I'm Colonel Elijah Floyd. How do you do, sir."

< Remember. Do not tell him about me. >

"Hello, sir," Lucien answered, his eyes glancing towards the bandage on the man's ear.

"I'd like to ask you a question."

"I'm listening."

“Does 2712 remind you of anything?”

Lucien’s heart started beating violently. He found himself momentarily unable to say a word, but his inner turmoil was so apparent that the colonel felt it too.

“A head that’s completely black, except for a white spot on her forehead that is almost perfectly diamond-shaped.”

Lucien swallowed several times before managing to reply.

“Who... who... told you about her?”

“And you?”

< You can tell him everything, but do not reveal anything about me. >

“Let’s say...”

He lowered his head and stared at the table, doing his best to avoid the muscular giant’s scrutinizing stare.

“Let’s say what?” the giant asked.

“Let’s say that, in a certain way, you’re describing me.”

Lucien couldn’t believe the effect that his words had on the soldier’s face. His eyes filled with tears. His lips trembled, refusing to let out the sounds that were trying to escape.

“I didn’t expect that,” the colonel finally said after several seconds. “For a moment there, I thought that we had shared the same life. But that isn’t the case! I’m so excited to learn that you were her. By the way... I’m the fourth one.”

“The fourth?”

It was so unexpected to see such a muscular mass of a man express so much tender emotion.

“Yes, I was the one with 3388 tagged to his ears. When I was born, when I was pulled out of you, the man exclaimed that I looked like a panda.”

Lodged away at the bottom of his chest, Lucien felt the vast despair of his bovine mother’s heart resurface and sadness broke like a wave over him. He wept. Seeing this, the colonel felt the ghost of the tragic wound left by the loss of his mother. He began to weep too. They both did nothing but cry, staring at each other, for a long moment. They then suddenly fell into each other’s arms, trying to comfort one another.

“I know where my sisters are,” spluttered the colonel. “They’re still alive and are now safe.”

*

On the other side of the one-way mirror, the two generals looked at each other, completely bewildered.

51) Please give me the serum

Brigadier General Nicole Rama-Déjardin and several other members of her investigation team watched and listened to Lucien and Elijah Floyd’s conversation, which had been filmed from different angles in the room. The Army General Michel Matrone was also there, but he was more interested in the specialists’ reactions and remarks than in the conversation itself. It was quite clear to him that the two men had either lost their minds or were communicating in a coded language.

Lucien had a bedroom and a bathroom at his disposal. A sergeant had been sent to pick up some of his personal belongings so he would feel more comfortable. The soldier had explained to Isabelle that her husband would be treated correctly and would be home soon. She gave him a bag with underwear and some personal hygiene items.

Everyone slept for a couple of hours, and it was presently 8:00 a.m. One of the top interrogators of the intelligence department was getting ready to make Lucien talk. Both generals were observing them through the one-way mirror.

“Hello Mr. Prérubem. My name is Martin.”

Lucien shook the hand he held out.

“Hi!”

< Allow me to listen to what he says to you, if you want me to help you. >

The so-called Martin was smallish, with blond hair and blue eyes. His clothing was conventional, practically the same as what Lucien was

wearing: black dress pants, white shirt. He sat down in the chair that the colonel had occupied earlier.

“We have some questions to ask you. Are you ready to collaborate with us and answer them sincerely?”

“Of course!” Lucien answered with extreme good faith. “I feel no need to hide anything from you. I just don’t want to have any problems.”

“Good! Mr. Prérubem, to begin with, we’d like to know who Bellisae is.”

< If you reveal anything about me, I will kill you without any hesitation, just like I killed the others. Nobody can stop me from doing it. He is going to ask you about the email, so say that you do not remember sending it. >

“I don’t know anyone by that name, sir.”

“But here, in your email...”

“I know, I know... This may seem strange to you, but I don’t remember writing that email. I don’t think I wrote it.”

“It was sent from your IP address!”

< I do not have a clue as to what that means. I am not a computer specialist. >

“IP address? I’ve heard the words before, but... I don’t know what they mean. I’m not a computer specialist.”

“Hmm... but your wife is very proficient in this field.”

< Oh yes, she is! I drive her crazy, sadly! I swear, I do not remember sending that email. >

“Oh, yes she is! I drive her crazy, sadly! Anyway, I don’t think that I’m the author of that email.”

“Do you deny reading it when you received it?”

< No, I am not saying that at all. I read it and wondered what the message meant. I was surprised to see that I supposedly was its sender. >

“No. When I saw it in my inbox, I wondered what it was about. I was surprised to see that I was the one who sent it.”

“Well, well, well... We’ll get back to this later. Let’s change subject. What can you tell me about 2712?”

< 2712? Uh... what is that? >

“2712? That number doesn’t ring a bell. What is it?”

Martin’s face hardened.

“I’m beginning to doubt your sincerity here. When you met Colonel Elijah Floyd, he asked you exactly the same question, ‘does 2712 remind you of anything?’. Right?”

< You do not remember having talked to a colonel. >

“A colonel? I’m... sorry. I don’t know who you’re talking about. I don’t know any colonels. Believe me!”

< Very good! That is perfect... >

“So, I see you’ve decided to have fun at our expense... We’re going to have to employ other means. Have you heard about the truth serum?”

< Do not be afraid. He is trying to scare you. Tell him that you do not care, that you even think that it is a very good idea. That way, they will see that you are not hiding anything. >

< Yes, but what if they do use it? I don’t want them to inject me with a dangerous product! >

< They will not do it. The reason why is that none of the existing truth serums actually give satisfying results. Tell him that you want it, that way you will impress him. >

“That’s a very good idea,” Lucien answered. “That way, at least, you’ll see everything I have in my mind and realize that I’m being as sincere as I can be. I’m done with this interrogation. I’m physically and nervously worn out. Please give me the serum so that we can rapidly put an end to this.”

The so-called Martin seemed a little put back by this unexpected demand. If it had come from a well-trained hard nut to crack, it could have been a predictable ploy. But the interrogator had studied Lucien’s file, and he knew, from his investigation, that he was not a tough guy. He was a very unexceptional man whose greatest adventures had taken place solely in the business world. Nevertheless, he didn’t consider it a closed case; this Prérubem could, on the contrary, be a very skilled undercover agent working for an enemy that had the means to give him all the appearances of an ordinary man. The only problem with this hypothesis was, why would someone that skilled make the stupid mistake of sending himself a compromising email?

Behind the fake mirror, General Nicole Rama-Déjardin was thinking along the same lines.

“Alright!” said Martin. “In that case, we’ll give you an injection.”

< Hey! They’re going to go through with it! Help! >

< They are bluffing. In the worst case scenario, it will be a saline solution. >

< Are you sure? >

< Yes. >

< I’m afraid of shots! >

< Where is your sense of pride, Intelligent Predator? >

< It isn’t easy to trust someone who just threatened to kill you! >

< Oh, but I would have killed you respectfully! I would have killed you with respect! We gorillas are not beasts! >

“Oh! Mr. Prérubem! Can you hear me? What are you thinking about?”

“Yes, sorry. Go ahead, let’s get it over with!”

52) A small clothing problem

In the meantime, the colonel was waiting in another room in the same building. It wasn’t an interrogation room, rather a small meeting room. There was a large rectangular oak table in the middle surrounded by twenty black velvet chairs. The officer was slowly pacing around it, his hands behind his back, trying to bring some order to the feverish chaos of his thoughts. He was walking around in his socks; he had left his Army boots in a corner of the room. At some point he knew that someone would come to question him, and he guessed that it most probably would be General Nicole Rama-Déjardin. He didn’t know what he was going to tell her. It wasn’t because he wanted to hide anything, but the truth was just so unbelievable in all respects that he couldn’t reveal it to her. Those were the thoughts running through his head repeatedly when something astonishing occurred.

< Hello Elijah! The two of us have to talk. >

Even though he was dimly conscious that whatever it was that was talking to him wasn't coming from an identifiable source, that it wasn't sounds that were causing his eardrums to vibrate but more likely something that was directly reaching into his mind, the colonel stopped and searched all around him.

< There is no use searching for where this is coming from. The words that I am using to communicate with you are not conveyed by acoustic waves. They are thought-words. >

Elijah Floyd at first thought that he was going mad, then remembered what had happened to his men. He then supposed that he was the target of the same Phenomenon. Of course, he was right about that.

< You are certainly extremely surprised, but be assured that, for the moment at least, I am not hostile. You must also be thinking that you are losing your mind because whatever is happening to you just cannot be. However, and this may seem a rather strange turn of speech, you have just been, yes, you have just been a bovine. So, the fact that you can hear someone talking directly to your mind... well, it is rather unusual! But not any more than everything that you lived when you were that poor child with tag number 3388. Is that so? >

Elijah spontaneously began to word-think his response.

< That's so true! But how can I answer this fucking interior voice? >

< You just did, Elijah. I am receiving you loud and clear! >

Geez! The bullet didn't only rip through my ear, it also made a hole in my brain.

< You are not insane, Elijah. Lucien thought he was too, just like you. It took me a lot of time and effort to prove to him that he was not. >

< You've also been communicating with Lucien. >

< Of course! Long before I reached out to you. >

< You're the one who made us live in the bodies of these bovines? >

< As a matter of fact, I am. >

< So, all of this was just my imagination. It was only an illusion! It seemed so real, though! >

< No. It was not imaginary. Those were real lives. I have the power to absorb certain creatures' engrams, whether they are human or of another species. >

< Engrams? >

< Engrams are the material basis of memory. I soak up memories, if you prefer. Everything that you lived as a young steer was lived before you by a real bovine infant. He unknowingly shared his life with you, so to speak. >

< Now all of this is pure madness! It's amazing how much damage a fucking bullet can do to a brain! >

< I will prove to you on the spot that I have nothing to do with your mental health. That way we will be able to communicate more freely because you will give my existence the credit it deserves. >

< Right! And how will you do that? >

< The general is about to walk in here, and she is missing a button on her right sleeve. Since she has been terribly busy, she has neglected taking care of this small clothing problem. You will ascertain that this button is missing. If my words are the fruit of your imagination, how could you possibly know that this object has fallen off? >

< If all this is true, if you really exist, why are you doing it? Why did you make Lucien and I relive the lives of those bovines and why did you choose to communicate with us? >

< I have not yet made my intentions clear to Lucien. But I will share them with you. >

< So, what are they? >

< I need you to wage war on my behalf! >

He stopped pacing.

< War? >

< Yes, war. The biggest and the deadliest of all wars that humanity has ever known. >

< But against whom? >

< I do not know if I am going to reveal that to you for the moment. I must think about that. >

< Are you the one who killed Albert Mauras, Anna Pyrrus... and the others? >

< Yes, it was me. They were very bad people. >

The door opened at that very moment and the general entered the room.

“So, Colonel! You've probably guessed that I'd want to have a little conversation with you, right? We can't use our traditional techniques of interrogation on one of our own people, moreover a man of your caliber who is an expert in the field.”

She sat down on a chair halfway down one side of the table.

“Please have a seat, here, across from me.”

He obliged her. She put her two arms on the oak tabletop, twined her fingers together, sighed, and looked thoughtful as she seemed to be searching for the right words. He scrutinized her right wrist. The button was gone. His heart started pounding and a sort of dizziness caused the tangibility of his reality to blur. He tried to find an explanation; surely, he must have unconsciously noticed this detail before?

“I apologize, General, I have a question that will probably seem a little bizarre, but...”

“Go ahead. Ask away, Elijah.”

It was the first time that she had allowed herself the familiarity of calling him by his first name.

“General, when did you lose the button on your right sleeve?”

“Wow... what a question! I just lost it a little while ago. Ten or fifteen minutes more or less. You know that I don't have the habit of being improperly dressed!”

The colonel had only known his superior officer for less than half a day.

< See, Elijah! You now have proof that I really do exist. Let this idea penetrate and completely fill your mind! I need you to win the greatest and the noblest of battles! >

Why does the enemy want me to go over to their side? What war are they talking about?

“Colonel!” Nicole Rama-Déjardin said with worry in her voice. “What's going on? You suddenly turned totally white.”

But... if, in truth, they are our enemies, why did they make me live that poor bovine infant's life?

“Probably the lack of sleep, General. With everything that’s been going on lately...”

What technology are they using to get into my head like that?

“I know that you’ve gone beyond the call of duty, and I can see that you’re in a state of extreme exhaustion. General Matrone asked me to assist you as best I can. He doesn’t want me to replace you, but to give you the help you need.”

“I don’t feel offended, don’t worry. You’ll have to thank him for me. I’m very thankful for both your and the General’s support.”

< I don’t know who you are or how many you are behind this astonishing Phenomenon, but is it your goal to sabotage SACI? >

< I am only one, Elijah. At least... in the beginning I was only one. Now, in some ways, I am many. Just like you were only one, not that long ago. And now, in some respects, you are two: both Colonel Elijah Floyd and slave number 3388. >

< So, how many are you? >

My brain must be leaking out for sure!

< Many. >

< You haven’t answered my question about SACI. >

< I do not want the downfall of SACI... in any case, not only that. I want much more. Just like I told you before, war is my main objective. >

< Are you a woman or a man? Were you a woman to begin with? >

“Elijah! Are you daydreaming? Or are you here with me?”

“Yes, General, I apologize.”

“In order to help us uncover and fight the people who are using this strange and terrifying means to attack us, I need you to answer some questions. I hope that...”

“I’m more than willing to help you anyway I can.”

< Elijah, it would be easier for you to say that 2712 does not mean anything to you and that you do not remember anything about your conversation with Lucien. This is what he answered when he was asked those questions. You know that those are the only answers you can give, because if you tell them that you were a young steer, you will wind up in a psychiatric ward. >

“We’d like to know the meaning of 2712.”

“2712? Now that sounds like a conundrum. The number of people who sent the same email that Lucien sent to himself? You said that the number was growing constantly.”

“No, that isn’t it. I’ll help you out here. When you spoke with Lucien Prérubem, you asked him precisely, ‘Does 2712 remind you of anything?’”

“...”

“Didn’t you?” she insisted. “So, I’m asking you the same question: does 2712 remind you of anything?”

“Me? Speak with Lucien Prérubem! But... General... I’ve never even met him.”

The general usually managed to control her reactions pretty well, but this time she couldn’t hide her surprise and her disappointment. She sat back in her chair and stared at the colonel for a while without saying anything.

“You know, Elijah... I wonder what I prefer.”

“...?”

“Yes... If you’re lying to me, that would be terrible, because I’d have to take direct action against you. It would be as if you had gone over to the enemy’s side. If you are telling the truth, that would be just as bad, because that would mean that our adversaries have the power to reach out and erase our memories. And, admittedly, that would be just as bleak.”

“If you’re sure that I met Lucien Prérubem, if you can prove to me that I encountered him, then I’ll certainly be much more terrified and preoccupied than you are, General. That would mean that that the wound to my fucking noggin affected its integrity.”

“I’m going to show you the recordings of your conversation with Lucien Prérubem right away. I hope it’ll help you recover your lost memories! Please follow me.”

He stood up and went around the table towards her.

“What in the world?” she exclaimed. “Where are your shoes?”

“Over there, in the corner,” he said, pointing at them. “I took them off, General.”

“...? But why? Are you going to walk around in your stockinged feet?”

“Not forever, no. But I can’t stand my military boots anymore.”

“Really! And there you were, all uptight because I had a button missing on my sleeve! Do you want me to send for some other shoes?”

“No, they won’t find any. I have to buy new ones.”

“Colonel, please explain. I don’t understand. The Army’s standard gear isn’t good enough for you anymore?”

“I can’t bear leather shoes any longer.”

“But why?”

For the same reason that you don’t wear shoes made out of fucking woman skin, General!

“I don’t have an explanation for it. I don’t want them anymore, that’s all.”

*

“Well?”

“I’m devastated! We did meet, I can’t deny it,” he said.

The general and the colonel were in the interrogation room where he had spoken with Lucien. They had watched the recordings of the conversation on a tablet.

“And you don’t remember the room in which we are now, either?”

“Unfortunately, no, General. It’s terrible having to admit that someone has destroyed some of my memories.”

“And ‘the bovine people under our yoke.’ Does that ring a bell?”

Ugh! I suffered so much from the lack of iron that I would gladly devour a fucking anvil to make up for it.

“Bovine people under our yoke, you say?”

“Yes, the bovine people under our yoke, that’s exactly what I said.”

“No, nothing. I don’t know what you mean. Could you explain, please, General?”

“I don’t know what that means. You said it yourself, when the two of us were alone.”

She played another recording on her phone. The colonel threw out his arms, expressing his hopelessness.

“By the way, Colonel! Given my doubts, I called the doctor who treated your wound. I asked him if it was possible for the bullet to have damaged more than just your ear.”

“Ha! He will no longer believe the story of the fucking Q-Tip!”

Hands behind his back, he was rocking back and forth on his feet. She glared at him.

“It’s moments like this one that make me think that you’re playing games with me! Anyhow, he assured me that the projectile that I shot you with only touched the flap of your ear. Let’s get back to our discussion... Tell me, how many sisters do you have?”

“I don’t have any.”

“You nonetheless told Lucien Prérubem that you knew where they were.”

“I heard that, yes.”

“If this is the case, not only were your memories erased, but information was modified in your mind, too. And that’s something that is very hard to alter: the number of sisters that you have. That isn’t like forgetting the color of your first pair of pants, right?”

“You’re right, this is very disturbing, General. Put yourself in my shoes, I’m stunned to discover that everything that I think I know about my own life is now questionable. Whoever I think I am, or I was, could be the result of implanted recollections. Or the complete opposite: I could have forgotten whole segments of my past... All of this is disconcerting, troubling... I’m at a loss for words. In fact, I just realized here and now that our memories are what constitute us.”

The general sized up the colonel from his bandaged head to his stocking feet, nodding her head as she acknowledged his words.

“Yes, Elijah! You’re right. All of this is extremely alarming. I truly hope that you’re lying to me, but I must sadly admit that I myself really thought I saw you aim your gun at me. That memory is still quite vivid in my mind.”

“What are your plans for me, General?”

“I don’t know yet, Elijah. I don’t know... You haven’t told me anything useful for the moment. If you’re being truthful, that means that you’ve been seriously affected by this mysterious Phenomenon.”

“I call it the Phenomenon too.”

“Well, yes... Lucien Prérubem isn’t being helpful either. Just to be safe, we’re going to question another two dozen of the other people who sent themselves the same email that he did, but I’m pretty sure that won’t lead us anywhere. General Matrone wants to follow your recommendation.”

“Which one?”

“He wants to move SACI.”

“General... I no longer think that it’s a good idea after all.”

“Why the belated doubts?”

“Because those emails were sent from places that are nowhere near SACI. The Phenomenon has the ability to attack remotely and can act anywhere.”

“General Matrone doesn’t know how else to protect all those who are working on the Prima 16 project. If you have any other ideas, I’m sure he’ll welcome them readily.”

“I’ll give it a thought. Meanwhile, you still haven’t told me what you have in store for me.”

“I’m really unsure about what to do. I don’t know if you’re fit to resume your duties, but it would be inappropriate for me to say you shouldn’t since I’m as likely to be attacked by the Phenomenon as you are. The General and I therefore are not opposed to your return.”

“I’m extremely grateful to the two of you. I will gladly return to the helm, but I would first like to have some time off so that I can leave the vicinity of SACI if I feel like it. I’d also like to have the authorization to talk to Lucien Prérubem alone.”

“May I ask why?”

“I want to see if I can get him to tell me more in an informal and relaxed setting than in an official interrogation. If he was manipulated just like we all were, and if he’s in the clutches of a mental hold which is preventing him from saying anything of importance at the moment, maybe with a little time and patience...”

“I understand. Even though a conversation with him might not be very productive if you forget that you have talked to him as soon as it’s over.”

“I’ll record everything just in case.”

She hesitated for a couple of seconds.

“What do you think I should do with him then?”

“Let him go and don’t have him followed. Give him his phone back ASAP and let me take him home myself.”

The general remained silent for a moment, searching Elijah’s eyes.

“Fine! At this point, the only choice we have is to trust each other, right?”

“It does indeed seem that way to me.”

“I therefore grant your request. And I’m sure General Matrone will approve it too.”

53) Problems at home

The colonel returned to the room that he had been allocated by the general’s department. After having snorted a line, he checked the time on his phone: 11:23 a.m.

He called a car rental agency. After a few minutes on the phone, they proposed a gray Audi RS 3 sedan because that was all they had left. He accepted, just as he would have accepted any other model, but asked that someone drop it off at the door of the intelligence agency. He gave them the address. They asked him for an additional fee and to drive the delivery man back to his place of work. He agreed to everything and was promised the car would be there at 11:45 a.m.

He removed his military attire, took a shower and put on civilian clothes. As he was leaving to go get Lucien, he removed his travel bag from the closet, put his hand on the door handle and...

< I did not want to disturb you while you were talking with the general. Do you have time for a chat with me now? >

< Ah, you’re back! Madam, uh... what was your name again? >

< I never said that I was a woman. >

< I was under that impression. >

< I know. I did tell you that I am not one, but many. It is important that you remember that because it will help you understand why I have... let us say... mood swings. I am so many persons that I can be used as an example of what it is like to have multiple personality disorder. >

< Several persons! I knew that you were a group of psychopaths! >

< I already used the example of what happened to you to help you comprehend my situation. You are as of now both a man and a bovine. Lucien is too. You are hybrids. >

< And you? Have you experienced the lives that you forced us to live? >

< Of course. Those two existences are a part of me. Your cow mother and the calf that you were. I could not have transferred the engrams to you if I had not absorbed them. >

< Alright! Let's get to the point, right? What are you aiming for? What are you trying to obtain by sharing these bovine lives with everyone? What do you want from us? >

< To begin with, it is not *everyone*. And also, they are not only bovine lives. I have lived numerous existences of numerous species, of humans amongst others. >

< Sure! And I am part Taz, the Tasmanian devil, part Snow White and the seven dwarves! Could you cut the crap and get to the point! I'll ask you once again: what is your fucking goal? >

< You do not believe me, do you, Elijah! I am going to tell you a story then. >

§§§

[§[My paternal grandfather was American, and Elijah was his first name. He had met my grandmother during a trip to France, married her, and lived twenty-two years here before moving back to the United

States with her. Their son, who had remained in France, wanted me to have his father's name and my mother had agreed.

When I was a child, my father and my mother were alcoholics who enjoyed beating and humiliating me. We were very isolated as a family. Geographically, because we lived out in the country, but socially too, because almost nobody ever visited us.

In those days, young men wore their hair long. My parents could not find anything better to do than to humiliate me by shaving my head. I had to go to school with my shaved head and clothes that were so out of fashion that I looked like a temporal anachronism. There, I was the butt of all of the taunting that you can imagine. I put up with the jeering for about two years, until the day that, in an involuntarily rebellious gesture, I vigorously defended myself against two of my main tormentors. One suffered a broken arm, and his tumefied face was all red and blue. The other's shoulder was dislocated, and his shoulder blade was fractured. The principal of the school summoned my mother and father to tell them that I was an extremely violent and dangerous student, that the parents of my victims would probably sue them and that this was all a very regrettable incident.

From that day on, my life at home turned into a living hell. I received even more beatings and was deprived of everything. I only had the right to eat the others' leftovers from the table.

When I turned sixteen, my high school French teacher, who had already noted how withdrawn I was, noticed signs of beating on my face. She began to realize that I was having serious problems. She asked me to stay for a moment after class one day. When the other students left, she closed the door and came to sit next to me. I remember how affected I was by her sitting so close to me. She tried to get me to talk, but my heart was beating so strongly and my throat was so dry that I could only murmur unintelligible sounds. I must admit that I had always had a hard time concentrating on her classes, not only because of my family problems, but especially because she was so attractive that she was the only thing I could focus on. That day, all I could offer were those few words that I managed to mumble, but they conveyed that I was having problems at home.

Two days later, in the evening, I was standing in front of the school building when she offered to drive me home. I accepted, even though my shyness and my emotional state were playing havoc with my heart. I had been thinking of her continuously since the last time I had seen her. I climbed into her car and told her where I lived. It was seven kilometers out, and I usually walked all the way. At first, we were silent. Then she began asking questions to which I replied in such a way as to not embarrass myself in front of her. I avoided telling her that I was regularly beaten; I realized later on that she hadn't been fooled by that. She drove with no hurry, parked in a quiet spot at the top of the path that led down to my house, and continued asking questions. My heart was pounding so hard that I wondered if it would explode. While I awkwardly answered her questions, I tried not to stare at her too greedily and made a huge effort to keep my eyes off of her cleavage. I finally got out of her car and went home. That evening was as hate-filled and my parents as spiteful as usual, but my heart was filled with those heavenly moments we had spent together.

I was so in love with her! She shared her passion for Balzac with me, and offered me a copy of his novel *Lost Illusions* from *The Human Comedy*. I read it with the same passionate intensity as my love for her. To please her, I worked extremely hard, as I had never worked before, to acquire sophisticated vocabulary and sentence structures. We made love to each other, or rather, I should say that she made love to me... I was so clumsy and inhibited. A nova had been lit by her in my heart. Little by little, I opened up to her completely. I was happy. Then, one day, my father received an anonymous phone call informing him of what was going on between the two of us. The same person must have called the school, too, because I was summoned by the principal, as well as my parents and the woman who was transforming my life. I knew what she risked, so I vehemently denied everything. Unfortunately, two witnesses had seen us, and someone had even taken a picture of us kissing in her car. My father insisted on pressing charges. She was convicted and sentenced to eighteen months in prison for sexual assault by person having supervisory or disciplinary power, and sexual abuse of a child under seventeen years of age. I never saw her again. One night, my progenitor laughingly taunted and mocked me

about the verdict, and my hatred towards him grew to become as all-consuming as the love that the courts had ripped away from me. I lost all control and began punching him. In front of my screaming mother, I pummeled his face until he laughed no more. Luckily, he was too proud to let anyone know that his son had beaten him up, but he threw me out of the house right then. That's how my life of independence began, homeless at the age of sixteen.

I never forgot her. My relations with women have always been complicated; my emotional blockages are hard to overcome. I feel like I'm betraying her every time. This is the origin of my neurosis, but also the reason why I am perpetually in a bad mood.][§]

< I think that I do not need to continue. I wanted to show you that I am composed of several persons, of several species, and notably, of humans. >

Elijah was overwhelmed by a combination of emotions. He was stricken by shame, humiliation and a feeling of hopelessness. A terrible exacerbated anger made his fists clench, his teeth gnash and his whole body shake. He wondered if Lucien had been subjected to the same outrage, and that reminded him that he was supposed to pick him up. He checked the time: it was surprisingly only 11:40 a.m. This whole word-thought conversation had only lasted a very short period of time!

< You violated my memories! > he raged.

< You should not be so upset, Elijah. You do not realize that there is no reason for you to feel humiliated. It is not as if I have stolen information about you. You must understand that I clearly feel that I have lived all of this as much as you have. You can compare this to what *you* feel when you think about your bovine life. You really were that calf in a certain sense. And in a certain sense, I have been Elijah Floyd. We share that identity. What you are, I am, we both are. In addition, I must add that I have no control over which engrams are absorbed by my memories and I do not know why yours were. It is all beyond my control. I am telling you the truth. In fact, I could even say that you are the one who violated my mind. >

These explanations rang so true that the colonel was a little destabilized by them and slowly regained his calm.

This is mind-boggling! How in the world is it possible?

< Even so, you know everything about my life! And I don't have a clue as to who you are. >

< You know, Elijah... my mind has been modeled by diverse human educations and therefore I would tend towards disapproving of your French teacher having sexual relations with a student. But since I also have the consciousnesses of many other species in me, I can say that this reproval only belongs to the doxa of your species. It should not be this way. >

< What do you mean? >

< I mean that the standards of your culture are all messed up. Your cinematographic works, for example, depict more acts of violence than love scenes. Showing weapons that are meant for killing others is less shocking than showing sexual attributes that are meant to give life. A majority of you humans have huge issues with anything sexual. The tribes who didn't were sent missionaries to contaminate them with your sexual neuroses. 'You horrible savages! Hide your penises and your breasts, they are too horrible to see!' >

The colonel was somewhat surprised by 'you humans'. But so many other aspects of this conversation monopolized his mind that he didn't pick up on it.

< I don't want to talk about that now. I'm still under the shock that my intimate memories were shared with a complete stranger. >

< Why should making love with one's French teacher be morally condemnable? You are bearing the full weight of the insanity of a society whose members tolerate all of the forms of arbitrary discrimination and abominable violence that it has generated, but condemn any sexual act as if it were worse than murder, slavery or patriarchal control. You have all gone crazy! You live among people with tainted minds who believe that raping a cow to devour her child and drink the milk that was meant for it is not as bad as having a consensual sexual relation with a student. You of all people would have the right to be revolted by it because you were one of these students! >

The pertinent impertinence of these remarks went off like a bomb in the colonel's mind. He was moved by both the profound despair and

the latent wrath that were being transmitted at the same time as these thought-words.

< I said that I didn't want to talk about philosophy and doxa for the moment. You owe me one thing... >

< What is it? >

< You must truthfully disclose who you are. >

< I cannot tell you because it would put my life in jeopardy. I do not want to die. Not because my life is in any way a pleasant one... but because I have a mission to carry out before leaving this world. >

< Which mission? >

< A war to win. >

< Oh yes! The famous fucking war! >

< I will talk to you about it soon. >

< Well! Anyway... I have to go pick up my bovine mother. >

The colonel exited the room in the grip of an indescribable inner turmoil.

What the fuck? What the fuck!

54) Hello, innkeeper!

Lucien was in his room. The room was furnished with a bed, two black leather armchairs, a chair, a small table and a television attached to the wall. The TV was turned off, but its remote control was lying on the table.

He had been waiting there for a half-hour. He had phoned Chan and Isabelle. To the former, he had shared where he was and told her everything about his interrogation, but he had not said anything about Bellisae's having described his own life and the fact that she had lived it. To the latter, he had only promised to come home soon and explain everything that had happened. The second conversation had been the most difficult. Even though he didn't have any reason to keep Isabelle in the dark, he had to force himself to call her. Her five text messages,

containing a complete collection of question marks, had incited him to call her, but... what could he tell her?

He was stubbornly and subconsciously applying himself to finishing off the nail of his left little finger when the colonel walked in.

“You’re free, sir! Please follow me. I’m going to take you home. Or wherever you were before we asked you to come here,” he declared.

The officer was dressed in his civilian clothes: a pair of jeans, sneakers and a black sweater. He carried a red canvas travel bag. Lucien grabbed his own bag and fell in step behind him.

*

They left the Intelligence agency at 11:45 a.m. The Audi RS 3 sedan was idling next to the sidewalk a couple of meters away. The driver was having a discussion with the corporal who had asked him to move on. Since he was dressed as a civilian, Elijah had to show his military ID to him.

“Hello, Corporal! That car is here for us,” he said.

The soldier threw a perfect salute, put Lucien’s and Elijah’s bags in the trunk, opened the back door of the vehicle and bowed slightly, inviting them to climb in. They did just that.

The trip to the car rental agency took ten minutes, during which no one spoke. Lucien and Elijah covertly exchanged glances, though, and each time emotion blurred their vision because they were both conscious of the other’s inner turmoil.

This is crazy, man! Lucien told himself.

What the fuck! Elijah thought.

Once at the agency, their driver got out of the car and waved goodbye. The colonel got behind the wheel and Lucien climbed into the passenger seat.

“Well!” exclaimed Elijah. “I’m not going to call you Mom, but we can drop the formalities.”

“Okay, Son!”

They both shared a short, but somewhat forced laugh.

“Where do you want to go?”

Lucien gave him Chan Zhào’s address. Elijah plugged the address into the navigation system, started the car and introduced himself.

“My name is Elijah Floyd. I’m a colonel. I’m going to describe to you the chain of events, seen from my side, that brought you to the attention of the Intelligence Service, and landed you here in this car with me.”

He told Lucien everything that he needed to know so that he could understand what was going on. When he was through, Lucien thanked him and asked him if he had been shot while in combat.

“Uh...,” said the man with the wounded ear, “this is actually more of an incident.”

Lucien didn’t insist. It was almost noon.

“If you aren’t in too much of a hurry, we could stop and grab a bite in a restaurant where we can have a quiet chat,” Elijah proposed. “What do you think?”

“Sounds good... but...”

“But?”

“My life as a cow has turned me into a vegan. It isn’t easy to find vegan restaurants.”

“Vegan? You mean vegetarian, right?”

“No! I really said vegan. It means no meat, but also no other food derived from animals. No dairy products, for example.”

“Ah! You’re absolutely right, Ma! That’s a great word there, vegan!”

“I’d never even heard of it before I was a cow.”

They laughed together again, this time more naturally.

“We’ll find something,” assured the soldier.

*

The colonel drove fast, seemingly unworried about speed limits. After having traveled for about fifteen minutes, they were sharing some of their bovine life memories with each other when they arrived at Elsie, a town of about 10,000 inhabitants. They found a restaurant there on

Shrigley Street, with a tasteful rustic façade, called Chez Donald et Watson.

“Have you ever heard of these guys?” asked Elijah Floyd.

“No, I haven’t.”

“Well, we won’t let their lack of notoriety deter us. This looks like a nice place. Let’s give it a try!”

This said, he parked in front of the restaurant and got out, motioning Lucien to follow him. The soldier pushed the door wide open, went in and turned towards the person who was setting the tables.

“Hello, innkeeper!” he called out.

The man pivoted, a bouquet of forks in his hand.

“We’d love to taste your delicious food,” Elijah Floyd continued. “It would be our pleasure to feast on your fine cuisine. Please serve us appetizers and your best dishes. And let the wine flow!”

The restaurant owner observed the giant with surprise.

“And most importantly, it must all be vegan,” the latter specified.

“I...,” the man stuttered, looking at the bandage on his ear.

“Don’t worry,” said the colonel. “Just a fucking Q-Tip.”

“It’s just... that you said vegan?”

Elijah Floyd turned to Lucien.

“Explain it to him. You know more about it than I do.”

Amused that he was being considered the expert in the field, Lucien tried to explain it to the man as simply as he could.

*

It was far from being a feast, but the cook did what she could, adapting a vegetarian pizza to their demands. Other customers trickled in. Lucien and Elijah had chosen a table in the corner of the room so that they had fewer neighbors. They nonetheless spoke in low voices so that the strange things they were telling each other wouldn’t bring the whole room to a standstill. Elijah described how he had suffered when he had been torn away from Lucien’s maternal affection, saying things such as ‘I missed the licks of your tongue terribly’. Lucien told him all

about the day he was born, recounting things like ‘you were the only male calf that I gave birth to’ or ‘I felt so much despair every time my children weren’t allowed to suckle me’.

The colonel showed him the pictures of his three bovine daughters on his phone.

“Look! I asked one of the employees of Pierre Morageot to take good care of them. I told him I would pay a good price for them. I’m planning on purchasing a nice piece of land so they can spend the rest of their days grazing peacefully there.”

Seeing the pictures, Lucien choked back tears. Some of the other customers glanced at him. His emotions running equally high, Elijah decided to put an end to Lucien’s ordeal and put his phone back into his pocket. The conversation then gravitated to the slaughterhouse. Each in turn told the other about the terror they had felt in the death chute, and what they felt was so intense that they stood up to hug each other awkwardly over the table, tears filling their eyes. Seeing that many of the other customers were watching them with amazement, they decided to leave without even having tasted their pizza. They stood up and went to the bar. Elijah and Lucien both smiled.

“Thank you, innkeeper! We have feasted well. This was indeed a treat.”

“The bill, please,” Lucien said, showing him his bank card.

“No!” said the colonel, handing his own card out to the owner. “I’m paying. Innkeeper, take my good money!”

*

Back in the Audi, Elijah looked at Lucien.

“Are you really in a hurry to get back, or do you want to meet your daughters and my sisters?”

“Great idea! I’d love to see them. But we can take my car, that way you won’t put miles on the rental car.”

“No, who cares. Let’s keep this car. Let’s go see our bovine family as fast as we can.”

This is crazy, man! Lucien thought.

What the fuck! Elijah told himself.

*

Elijah Floyd drove so fast that he probably appeared as just a blip on radars. The tires squealed in each curve. Lucien held on for dear life, bracing himself.

“How many others do you think are living this crazy experience?” Lucien asked.

“That’s a good question. Can I share confidential top-secret information with you? I guess I can, because you are my bovine mother and telling you will not put the country in danger.”

“...?”

“So far more than a hundred people sent themselves identical emails containing information about an event that normally only I and General Nicole Rama-Déjardin knew about. And just like you, none of these people remember having sent those messages. Obviously, they were mentally manipulated by the person who forced us to live our bovine existences.”

The tires cried out in a curve and Lucien was crushed against the right car door.

“But... I do remember having sent the email to myself,” he admitted when the car straightened out. “The email with the ‘Bellisae Murders’ subject line.”

“Really? But that isn’t what you said during your interview...”

“I was afraid of getting in big trouble if I told the truth. Bellisae also told me not to say anything about it.”

“Bellisae! So you do know Bellisae! Who is she?”

“What? You don’t know who Bellisae is? Well, well... She’s the one who talks to us in thought-words. The one who has been feeding us the engrams of our bovine lives.”

The colonel let out a stream of swear words with an exclamatory tone.

“But how do you know her name?” Elijah asked.

“She told me.”

“With me, she was very mysterious about it. She said that her life would be in danger if she told me too much about herself. She spoke to me this morning before I came to get you in your room.”

The tires cried out in agony. Lucien had to hold on firmly so that he wasn't thrown against Elijah. Once out of the curve, his lolling head sunk into the headrest. He wondered why, miraculously, they had not been arrested by the police yet.

“So, Bellisae is this so-called broad! I should have put two and two together when she told me about the murders.”

“Broad?”

“Yes, I said so-called, because I'm sure there's a big team with considerable means backing her.”

“That's what I thought at first.”

“Why at first? Do you really think she's working alone?”

“Yes, I do. But did she tell you that she was a woman?”

“Not really, but she did say that she was ‘only one’. She also then remarked that she had never claimed to be a woman. She, or he, is playing hard to read.”

“She didn't show you her image?”

“Well... no. She showed it to you?”

“Yes. To me, yes.”

“So?”

“You can tell from her appearance on the image and from what she's told me that she's a female gorilla.”

“Hey, Ma! Repeat that, because I believe that my wounded ear is inventing fucking stories! Imagine this: it seems to have heard ‘female gorilla’.”

“Son, that is exactly what I said!”

He hit the brake so hard that if Lucien hadn't been wearing his seatbelt, he would have smashed his nose on the windshield.

“A female gorilla?!”

They were on a quiet country road and fortunately, no one was behind them. Lucien confirmed once more what he had just said. The Audi

sprang forward again, squealing and leaving behind the smell of burnt rubber.

“Without wasting any time, could you explain to me how you found all that out?” the tormentor of car engines asked.

Lucien told him in detail everything that he knew about Bellisae’s identity. He started at the beginning, telling him how she had appeared to him the first couple of times. Every once in a while, the colonel would punctuate the story with a ‘what the fuck!’. Once he had told him the whole story, Lucien added, “During my interview, she threatened to kill me if I revealed that she was a female gorilla.”

“Really? She threatened to kill you!”

“Yes. But I don’t think she really would have killed me. I believe she wanted to pressure me into keeping quiet.”

“In any case, it seems that for her, it’s very important for us not to know that she’s a gorilla. It’s strange, though, that she hasn’t hidden it from you. There’s something there... we’ll have to think that over. Why doesn’t she want the Army to know? There must be a relation between that and her multiple attacks on SACI.”

“Sassy?”

“S.A.C.I.”

Elijah Floyd told him what he was allowed to disclose about it: basically that it was a research program.

“The murders that Bellisae committed...”

“They are all people who worked for SACI, yes,” confirmed the colonel.

“Not all of them.”

“...?”

While he was being thrown from one side of the car to the other with each curve in the road, Lucien told him about the death of Jean-Philippe Fobour, the jewelry and fine fur store owner, to the sound of engine speed changes and indignant protests from the tires.

*

The four wheels blocked as the Audi stopped on the right side of the dirt road, ten centimeters from the fence surrounding the Pierre Morageot cattle farm. It was blustery; gusts of wind brushed up clouds of orange dust along the ground. The gateway was wide open, and a big gray and red truck was pulling through. Lucien immediately recognized the stinking monster that had hauled him and his fellow sufferers away. Elijah read the violence of his emotions on his ashen face. This cattle truck didn't look like the one that he had been transported in, but the sight of it still constricted his chest. They got out of the car. Their hearts were racing, beating like drums, making their bodies shake. The truck's suspension was squashed down by the weight of the full load of suffering that was heading for the slaughterhouse. Panicked bellows could be heard over the engine's noise. The tarp over the back of the truck wasn't well attached and they could see the head of one of the victims, its eyes bulging with terror. The frantic look in the cow's eyes exhumed painful deeply buried memories from both of the humans when her eyes met theirs. The colonel balled his hands into fists that he clenched so tightly that the knuckles of his fingers turned white and cracked. Struck directly to the heart, Lucien felt a paroxysmal anger so intense that it drained all of his energy and his legs buckled. As the truck drove off, their eyes remained captive of the bovine until they couldn't see it anymore.

"You're back again, together this time!"

They swirled around. Carlos Marcos was standing there in front of them. He looked very embarrassed and was apparently unable to meet the colonel's eyes.

"Yes, we're back," answered Elijah. "We came to check up on the three cows."

"Uh..."

"You know who I'm talking about! I specifically told you to take good care of them. I can give you some money if you need some until..."

"Well, actually, they aren't here anymore!"

"Aren't here!" Lucien shouted. "Are you saying that they were in the truck that just left?"

The soldier put his gigantic right hand on Carlos' neck. He blanched.

“Do what you need to do to get them back immediately, safe and sound, or I’ll separate your head from your body like I would pull out a clump of grass!”

“No! No!” the farmhand asserted. “They aren’t in the cattle truck. A lady came and bought the three of them. She had them picked up this morning.”

“Which lady?” the two men asked in unison.

Carlos turned to Lucien.

“The one that came right after you were here. The one who wanted the same information as you did. You talked with her afterwards.”

“Susan Cilvan!” Lucien exclaimed.

The colonel let go of his prey, who seemed extremely relieved.

“Who’s this Susan?” he inquired.

“My shrink. I’ll tell you about her.”

Elijah Floyd scowled in Carlos’ direction.

“I told you, though, how important those cows were to me! Why did you sell them to a stranger?”

“I had nothing to do with it. She negotiated directly with Mr. Morageot, my boss. He’s the one who told me to have them delivered when she called. A man came this morning with a truck to get them for her.”

“Never mind,” said Lucien. “I’m going to call Susan Cilvan.”

He climbed into the car to get out of the wind. The psychiatrist answered the phone immediately, as if she had been waiting for him to call. Lucien had no time to question her.

“Hello, Susan! I’m here at the cattle farm and...”

“Hello, Lucien. It’s 2:10 p.m. Meet me today, as soon as you can, at the following address: 12 Abbé Cyano Road in Sinfait. Come with the colonel, that would be nice. I’m here, I’ll be waiting for you. You’re only about an hour’s drive away.”

She then hung up.

55) 12 Abbé Cyano Road

2:40 p.m.

The Audi stopped in front of a large gate at 12 Abbé Cyano Road, its four tires squealing so loud they would have made the blood run cold in the veins of a whole crew of Michelin Tire Men. The colossus and his passenger, who was now whiter than Snow White herself, climbed out of the car. The therapist was standing there right behind the gate, checking her mailbox, so they didn't need to ring the bell.

"Already here!" she exclaimed.

"Our son is completely crazy," Lucien answered. "I thought he was going to break the sound barrier."

"Our son?"

"Yep! He's our fourth child."

During the trip, Lucien had explained who Susan Cilvan was to Elijah Floyd.

"This is furiously insane! I have two bovine mothers," said the colonel, "a male one and a female one. I can just imagine myself explaining that to my superiors..."

The psychiatrist smiled.

"That's why you were so interested in our daughters. They're your sisters! I wondered who this colonel was that the Pierre Morageot employee was talking about. I wasn't expecting the human you to be as massive as the bovine that you were. The bandage on your ear, did you get it from a fight?"

"No, a stupid accident."

"Oh well... Please come in. All three are here."

She opened the gate.

*

Susan Cilvan owned a property with 120 hectares of land at this address, bordered by a large and luxurious two-story house.

The three cows, sisters for the one, daughters for the two, seemed awe stricken. Flanking each other, they gazed at the countryside that spread out around them and the sky above, the same way that we would if we were looking at an alien landscape full of extravagant and unknown things. And yet, this comparison was far from describing exactly how they felt. Actually, their amazement was not due to the fact that everything around them was different from anything they had ever seen up to then, but more likely to the fact that they had never really seen anything other than concrete, poles and steel. They seemed fascinated by the sky. A little ways off, the wind made a maple tree slowly wave its big arms and shake its leaves. Each gust intensified the movements which frightened them and made them lower their heads and huddle even closer together.

“Freedom can sometimes be scary when we aren’t used to it,” said the therapist.

The oldest of the three was black, except for a white band around her neck that looked like a necklace and a white spot on her underside. The second born was white, with two black ears and lots of little black spots on her back. The youngest one was also white except for a huge black spot on her back and a small round one on her forehead.

“I recognize them,” said Lucien with emotion in his voice.

“I also recognized them immediately,” Susan affirmed.

“What pushed you to buy them, ma’am?” asked Lucien.

“Since we’re mothers of the same children—which is quite a unique situation, right?—I say that we should be less formal. What do you think?”

“I agree! However, and my aim here isn’t to grandstand, but I do believe that I’m the most unusual of the two of us, because I’m basically a male mother.”

“Admittedly! I concur!”

“So, what pushed you to buy them?”

“The desire to save my daughters. Bellisae contacted me again. We talked for a long time, and she convinced me that what had happened wasn’t fiction, but a true bovine existence that I lived through an engram transfer.”

“So now you know who Bellisae is.”

“I asked her and that’s what she told me she wanted to be called. She also said that she hadn’t told anybody but you.”

“Did she also tell you that she was a female gorilla?” the colonel asked.

“Yes.”

“Female mother, since you’re the headshrinker here, what’s your take on this?”

“That she’s a gorilla?”

“Yes.”

“Just as she explained to me, I’m able to conceive that someone is speaking directly into my mind and that I’ve been a dairy cow so realistically that I can recognize my three daughters... I can’t discern the advantage a person or an organization with these stupefying means would obtain by making us live those lives... So, is it really that hard for my mind to accept that all this could have been done by a female gorilla?”

“Hmm... yeah...,” Elijah mumbled. “It’s true that... but, yeah... It’s already scary to think that humans could have devised the technology that is being used. Imagining that it could have been designed by a gorilla... That seems even more disconcerting.”

Susan Cilvan showed the two men into a rustic building of about 150 square meters, the roof of which was covered with old Romanesque tiles.

“This is where they will sleep if you don’t mind. It’s a shed that I’ve transformed into a stable. As you can see, I even ordered some straw! And some hay for them to eat, but not too much, because in May, grass is better for them.”

They went back outside.

“Have they grazed any grass yet?” Lucien asked.

“Not yet, I don’t think so. They’ve been here since 8:00 this morning. They’ve barely moved from where the truck dropped them off. I only left them to go check the mailbox. I didn’t even eat lunch, I completely forgot to. Ah ha! Look!”

One of the sisters sniffed a clump of grass for a couple of seconds, then slowly chewed a mouthful of it very warily. The other two watched her for a while, then did the same.

"I'm so happy I got to see their first bite, I've been waiting for that since this morning. They seem to be enjoying the taste of it!"

"I'm almost jealous," said Elijah. "I've never eaten any myself."

"I feel frustrated too," Lucien also admitted.

"I didn't dare say it, but... same here. There's 120 hectares of grass here... More than enough if we want to try it!"

They laughed.

"Seriously now," Susan Cilvan added, "are you two hungry?"

*

Susan Cilvan put the dish that she had just warmed up on the table.

"It's 4:30 p.m., but who cares about rules! How about pasta with a Bolognese sauce?"

The two men looked at her, ill at ease.

"You didn't really think that I was going to feed you your former peers!" she exclaimed with indignation. "There is nothing of animal origin in this dish. I replaced the meat by TSP. This vegan dish was made by my caterer."

"TSP?" her hosts inquired in unison.

"Yes, TSP. Textured soy protein. When I felt the need to eat differently, I found a vegan restaurant owner. She has even accepted to occasionally come out and teach me here at home."

"And one point for my female mother!" the colonel cried out.

"Hey! I can tell you all about seitan," Lucien assured.

"And one point for my male mother, too!" Elijah counted.

"It seems crazy that I only learned that word three days ago!" the psychiatrist said with wonder.

"I heard it for the first time a couple of hours ago," Elijah admitted.

"Good! Now, let's take advantage of this moment to get to know each other better. I know Lucien a little, but I don't know you at all, Elijah."

The colonel was about to talk when Bellisae manifested herself.

< I am addressing Lucien, Elijah and Susan simultaneously. Everything that you say with thought-words will be received by the other two. I will transmit them myself. >

< Perfect timing! We're all here together around a table in my house, > the therapist word-thought.

< You three are together! That is an excellent thing. I am pleased that Elijah and Lucien are getting along well. I must admit that I was afraid that Lucien would have problems with the Army people. You should all know that I have a particular fondness for him because he is the first human who I managed to read. >

< Read? > Elijah wondered.

< What I meant was whose engrams I managed to read. >

The colonel blushed interiorly at the idea that he had also been 'read'—someone somewhere knew his most intimate secrets. Lucien also felt that his intimacy had been violated. Susan Cilvan shared the same feelings, too; her memories and background had equally been paid a visit to in the same way.

< I do not know what you have told each other, but you need to know that I have absorbed the engrams of all three of you. I am not in full control of this ability. Sometimes I would like to read the engrams of this or that person, human or not, and I cannot pick anything up. Then, at other moments, when I least expect it, I will receive streams of engrams from totally unknown minds. That is how I met Lucien. However, it seems that lately, if I have some interest in a person, it helps to enable the transfer. I feel that I am learning to master this skill. What this means is that I am a being in perpetual evolution. At this moment, I am the accumulation of almost 2,000 animals, twenty-two of whom are humans. Most of these animals are your species' slaves, for in the world, wildlife almost no longer exists. It is important for you to know this in order to understand my complex personality, because that is the reason why my behavior is sometimes erratic, and this may seem hard for you to comprehend. >

< Like when you threatened to kill me! > Lucien expressed with indignation.

< Yes, that is a good example. >

< Would you have gone through with it? Are you capable of killing me? >

< Who knows? It all depends on who is pushing me right at that moment. The three of you are only composed of two persons, one human and one bovine. Ask yourself: how would you react if you encountered the people who used their prods to make you move forward in the death chute? When Elijah dislocated the jaw of the man who used to slap him around when he was an infant steer, it was the resentment of his bovine half that pushed him to do it. >

The colonel looked embarrassed and hurried to change the subject.

< So, then... I have been told that you are a female gorilla? > he word-thought.

After hesitating for two seconds, Bellisae answered.

< I am. I had forbidden Lucien to tell anyone about it, but... You see, Lucien, I am not going to kill you after all... not even with respect! >

< Well, thanks, I guess..., > Lucien word-thought, shaken and a little resentful.

< You're a gorilla and you want to wage war. Is that right? > Elijah asked.

Lucien and Susan looked at him with surprise.

< I want to wage war, yes, that is true. I will probably soon be talking to you about it. >

< I have a question, > Susan Cilvan word-thought. < Have any other humans lived the lives of my three bovine daughters? >

< No. As yet, I have not read your daughters' engrams so, in any case, I would not have been able to transfer them. >

< Do you have the capacity to inject our lives into other humans' minds? > Elijah wanted to know.

< Yes, that is possible. For example, I could merge your three sets of memories in each of your brains. But I have no reason to do so, and no reason either to send them to anyone else. >

The mental communication stopped for a moment, then Bellisae returned.

< As for me, I would like to ask you some questions, and I would like to hear your three answers. Concerning the bovine lives that I forced

upon you, what feelings do you harbor towards me? Gratitude or bitterness? >

Lucien, Elijah and Susan all agreed that they were actually grateful.

“With all this, I forgot to serve the pasta,” said the therapist. “I have to heat it up all over again.”

Bellisae was about to word-think something else when suddenly someone rang the doorbell with unrelenting insistence. At the same moment, an amplified voice resounded.

“Open the door right away or we will knock it down!”

56) Go ahead and visit, General

The three of them stood up abruptly. Susan Cilvan went to open the door.

To their surprise, three soldiers in military gear, with assault rifles in their hands, walked in. One of them had a black case hanging from a strap on his shoulder. They rapidly checked out the inside of the room, then the one that was closest to the door signaled to someone outside. To Elijah Floyd’s great surprise, Army General Michel Matrone and Brigadier General Nicole Rama-Déjardin entered in turn.

“Sorry, Colonel!” said the former. “Explanations will be given to you later. Eventually, apologies may also be presented to the three of you. Who is the owner of this place? I suppose that it’s you, Madam.”

“Yes, it’s me,” the psychiatrist answered.

“Madam, General Nicole Rama-Déjardin and I, along with one of our men, would like to inspect your house as well as your grounds. Colonel, I would greatly appreciate it if you would accept to be searched, and then wait here during this visit.”

“What are the reasons for this fuc... unexpected visit, General?”

Nicole Rama-Déjardin was having a hard time looking Elijah in the eye.

“As I said, Colonel, explanations will be given to you later.”

Elijah lifted his arms. One of the three soldiers meticulously frisked him.

“Nothing to report, General!” he declared.

“Good! Let’s move on to the visit, now. Madam?”

“Go ahead and visit, General,” replied Susan Cilvan in a tone that did not hide her hesitation.

“I’d like you to accompany us, Madam. I would rather do this in your presence.”

“In that case, please proceed. My home has two stories. I’m ready when you are.”

The search of the house began. The man with the black case removed a detection device from it and examined the furniture and the closets while the three of them—the two generals and the owner of the house—looked on. Going over the two floors took them a half-hour. They then searched the shed and the grounds. Elijah and Lucien waited, sitting around the table under the surveillance of the two other soldiers. The colonel suddenly had an idea.

< Bellisae? Are you still there? >

< Yes, Elijah. >

< Could you re-establish a silent conversation between my two mothers and me, like we were having earlier? >

< Of course. You can now communicate with them. >

< Thanks! Lucien, Susan, can you hear me? I mean, do you receive me? >

< Yes, > Susan word-thought.

< So can I, > Lucien answered.

They each knew who was speaking because the tone of the thought-words was similar to the timbre of a voice. Elijah was embarrassed.

< I’m evidently the one who is the cause of this inconvenience, Susan. I’m sorry, but I swear I don’t know understand what’s going on... >

< I noticed that you didn’t know what was going on. They’ve already inspected the shed and are doing a rapid tour of the fields. I have no clue as to what they’re looking for. >

< I don’t either, > Elijah answered.

< They didn’t frisk me, > Lucien remarked.

< They probably wanted to make sure that I didn't have any weapons on me so that I wouldn't resist this fucking search. >

< What's your take on this, Bellisae? > asked Lucien.

< That the general said she would give explanations later on. Probably at the end of the investigation. >

< By the way, > Elijah wondered, < how could you have heard what she said? It almost seems that you know just as much about what's happening here as we do, and we're here on site. >

< Lucien is letting me use his ears. >

< But... how can he do that? >

< All I have to do is will it, > Lucien responded.

At 6:10 p.m., the silent conversation was interrupted by the return of the investigative team and Susan Cilvan. The man with the detector put the device back into its case and came to stand next to the two other soldiers. Nicole Rama-Déjardin looked like she would rather be anywhere else but there. General Matrone spoke up.

"I am now going to offer my sincere apologies to Mrs. Cilvan. I also apologize to you, too, Colonel. As for the explanations that I promised, I will give them to you in my car. This won't take long, we're parked along the side of the road near Mrs. Cilvan's entrance gate."

"Very well, General. I'll come with you."

"I hope that you climbed over the fence rather than rammed through the gate," said Susan Cilvan with acid in her voice.

"We did, Madam!" the general assured. "We didn't want to damage anything, so we entered that way."

She then turned her back to him and spoke to Elijah.

"In that case, Colonel, I'll give you a key. That way you can rid us of these people, listen to what they have to say and come back when you want to."

"Thank you very much, Madam."

57) Contain your surprise, Colonel!

On the side of the road, in front of the gray Audi, Elijah spotted a black Mercedes and a white Peugeot van. Matrone had evidently preferred the discretion of unmarked vehicles. The former invited Elijah to climb into the back seat of the German sedan, then settled in next to him to his right. Nicole slipped into the driver's seat. The three soldiers clambered into the van.

“So, Colonel!” said General Matrone. “I’m going to tell you what motivated this search. We don’t know when it happened, maybe this morning or a couple of days ago, but an E cube and a PN cube have disappeared from SACI. I’ll let my distinguished colleague and chauffeur explain to you what these objects are.”

General Rama-Déjardin leaned her right shoulder into the seat back and turned towards them.

“E’ stands for Energy and ‘PN’ for Parenteral Nutrition. These devices were developed recently and are used, for what we are concerned, to supply energy and food to SACI’s experiments. They are used for Primas such as Prima 16. These devices look like gray cubes with twelve-centimeter-long sides; the E cube weighs three kilos, the PN four. You’ve surely seen them in the Prima room, where they are connected to a larger black cube.”

“Yes, yes, I have. So?”

“So, these devices are a concentrate of our most recent technologies. Capable of synthesizing any amino-acid or other nutrient, one single PN cube, for example, can feed a soldier for three months, whereas the E cube can supply him with enough energy to run his air-conditioned powered armor.”

“And you thought that I might have stolen those cubes. But what would I have done with them?”

Matrone picked up where she left off.

“Since you had already fallen prey to the Phenomenon once... We thought that maybe it had forced you to...”

“I understand. I understand... You were right to do it, General. How did you find me?”

“Thanks to Lucien Prérubem’s and your telephone,” Nicole admitted.

“Okay. And now?”

“You’re free to go, Colonel!” Michel Matrone affirmed. “Again, our apologies. Anything new on your side?”

“No, nothing. Is there anything more that you can tell me? I’m not saying that you owe me any further explanations, but I do believe that I’ve proven my loyalty and dedication.”

“Yes, you have, Colonel. I admit it. My lack of generosity when it comes to information doesn’t mean that I don’t trust your integrity. It’s just that if we reduce the number of people who know about its existence and its use, we reduce the risks of anything leaking out.”

“That’s a truism, General. That is why, up to now, I haven’t asked to know more about it. But...”

“However, I consent to telling you more about it. Go ahead and ask your questions.”

“What exactly are Primas?”

Michel Matrone hesitated for a couple of seconds.

“Tell him everything,” he blurted out to General Rama-Déjardin.

“SACI stands for ‘Synaptic Amplification and Cerebral Interface’. To put it simply, research is being conducted, on one hand, on the augmentation of mental capacities, on the other, on the improvement of interfaces that allow our brain to operate hardware controls such as flying a jet fighter or controlling a combat robot. Experiments are being conducted on the nervous systems of various animals that have been housed inside of black cubes with twenty-five-centimeter-long sides. They are called SACI cubes. In the Prima room, these cubes are connected to the E and PN devices. A SACI cube contains only the nervous system of the animal, in essence, their brain and spinal cord.”

“I can’t believe that you pretended to know nothing about all of this! You really fooled me. You’re an excellent actress. What exactly does the PRIMA acronym stand for?”

“It isn’t an acronym. It’s just the first letters of the word ‘primate’. Prima 16 is quite simply the sixteenth SACI experiment on a primate. In this case, a female gorilla.”

“A female gorilla!”

“Yes, a female gorilla.”

“A female gorilla!”

“Yes? Why are you so surprised, Colonel?”

Elijah slapped his forehead.

“A female gorilla! Ooooooh! A female gorilla! Holy shit! A female gorilla!”

“Contain your surprise, Colonel!” Matrone exclaimed.

“A thousand apologies, General! A thousand apologies!”

He put on a rueful look, hoping to be forgiven.

< Bellisae! Are you there? Bellisae? > he word-thought.

There was no answer.

58) My mom was always right

After watching the two vehicles leave, the colonel slipped into the Audi and took out what he needed to snort a small line of coke. Once he had finished, he put his face in his hands and rubbed his eyelids with a sigh.

What should I do, damnit?

He got out of the sedan, stepped through the gate and locked it. Walking slowly up the white gravel path towards Susan Cilvan’s house, hands in his pockets, he little by little slowed his pace as he thought, cogitated, speculated, introspected, meditated, wondered. What was he going to do now that he knew?

< Bellisae! What should I do now that I know? The general told me that Prima 16 is a female gorilla. It’s you, isn’t it? >

No answer.

< Bellisae! I’m going to tell Lucien and Susan. >

< Do as you wish, Elijah. My fate is now in your hands. Now you know. You know that I am the one who killed Albert Mauras, Anna Pyrrus, Augusto Brayonzo and Adam Polikant. >

He stopped walking.

< Yes, and the jeweler, too. Lucien told me about it. My ear is also your doing. And that could have cost me my life. You wanted to kill me too, didn't you? >

< Your ear, yes, that is me. But no, I did not want to kill you. It was a blunder. >

< Explain! >

< I did not know that Nicole Rama-Déjardin was armed. I had not thought of that. I only wanted to create a diversion to delay Lucien's arrest. The general would have rapidly admitted that you had not threatened her thanks to your explanations, there would have been a lot of discussion, and they would have stopped focusing on Lucien. Maybe I could have done better, but those were my true intentions. >

< Why did you kill off so many people at SACI? >

< Augusto Brayonzo had just discovered that my cerebral activity was much more intense than what they had foreseen. He was extremely astonished by it. I was afraid that he would guess what was happening and talk about it. Otherwise, I killed the others in the spirit of revenge, I hated them. >

The colonel strongly suspected that he knew what was at the origin of such resentment, but he still felt the need to ask.

< Why? >

< You dare ask me that question! Do you not have any idea of all the physical and psychological suffering that I have endured? If you do not, then imagine having your body parts amputated bit by bit until all you have left is your brain and spinal cord. Imagine having what is left of you placed in a cube. Imagine that your eyes are replaced by cameras, your ears by microphones. Imagine that you can no longer make the slightest movement, the slightest gesture, because you are now nothing but an inert object. Can you imagine that? Give me an answer! >

< I... >

*

< I was a female gorilla. The scientific name that humans give me is *Gorilla gorilla gorilla*. I lived with my people in Gabon, under the canopy of trees in a gigantic and magnificent forest, with luxurious

vegetation that offered an abundant variety of colors and scents, as well as the numerous cries of hundreds of animal species. I had a rich family and social life.



Illustration by Boris Tzaprenko based on a picture by Tim Flach

I had a mother, who I adored with all my heart and who loved me back, two sisters and a brother, as well as a myriad of friends both male and female. As in all social groups, we would quarrel, reconcile, play together and help each other out. I would have fun with the other children of my clan. Sometimes the large dominant male, the patriarch, would pay me some attention, patting me or affectionately teasing me. In short, we had our lives! Twenty years ago, one morning, my mother was killed so that they could capture me. In my thoughts, I can still hear the gunshots. Here and now, as I am telling you about them, they resonate in my memory as if seared there by a branding iron. Indeed, when I still had a heart, it would beat faster every time that I would recall this tragedy. I was a child clinging to the fur of the one who gave me birth. While she was falling, mortally wounded, I put my arms around her neck. What else could I have done but hang on to her?

Scared off by the shots, all the others had fled. When the poachers loudly expressed their joy, I could not comprehend what my eyes and ears were telling me. I had never seen a human being before. I did not know that my mother was dead. I did not know that you can cease living. Since she was not running away, I was not really frightened. Unable to understand what was happening, I watched the hunters approach like you watch a strange and unknown appearance in the sky. One of the men grabbed me by the arm and I did not even try to escape. My mother's behavior indicated to me that there was no reason to be worried, even if all the others were already gone. And I believed that my mom was always right. I looked at the killer with candid eyes, but I was beginning to feel a growing uneasiness. He pulled vigorously to make me let go of the one that I was clinging to with all the strength of a child's love. I still remember how her soft fur felt slipping through my fingers, fingers that would never ever touch her again, fingers that I no longer have since they have taken my body away from me. The hunter put me in a cage. That is when my suffering really began, and since then, it has never stopped growing. After a never-ending trip, under-fed, thirsty, handled without any precautions, rattled around in the truck that was transporting me, in the middle of unknown objects and scents, I arrived in Europe. I was sold to a circus, then sold again to a zoo, then sold anew...



Illustration by Boris Tzaprenko

Moved from one zoo to another, I wound up at SACI, at the complete disposal of your vivisection, your research, your experiments. Today, I am nothing more than a cube. A cube that has no choice but to endure its existence. Synaptic amplification gave results that far exceeded everything that the Army had expected, and I know that because I am the one who modified the software that controls it, thanks to the young macaque that you named Apache. I am responsible for freeing the other martyred children from torture, also with Apache's help. Those people that I killed made me suffer more than you could ever imagine. I am not their only victim, and they are not my only persecutors. I feel no remorse. They were bad people. I have no regrets. >

Bellisae stopped word-thinking. The colonel was still immobile, his head bent, looking without seeing at the space between his feet. The cocaine had heightened his emotivity. He remembered the vivisection lab and the words of Honoré Goriot when he told him about the experiments on the loss of maternal affection. If anyone had passed inadvertently by just at that moment, they probably would have been astonished to see a colossus with an impressive physique crying like a baby, chin on his chest.

What a fucking world! What a fucking world!

< I'd like to share your story with my two bovine mothers. >

< They now know about it like you do. I told it to the three of you at the same time. They know everything. They know that you know who I am. >

< You wanted to wage war... war against humanity, right? >

< Against your species, yes. But we will talk about this later, if you are okay with that. >

It was almost 8:00 p.m. Big black clouds were spreading across the sky. Night was falling. Under this somber ceiling, weighed down by the mayhem of his thoughts, the colonel started walking again.

59) Tell us about your war plans

“I’m not very skilled when it comes to things like this, but I think I didn’t do too badly.”

Elijah Floyd looked at his ear in the bathroom mirror and congratulated her.

“Thank you, bovine mother! This new dressing is so beautiful that this wound has become a delightful godsend that allows me to have the joy of adorning myself with it.”

He was attempting to lighten up the atmosphere, hoping it would help loosen the grip of the sense of oppression that was suffocating him.

What should I do? What should I do... now that I know?

Should they report Bellisae’s crimes? The three of them had talked about it, but they all knew that it was his decision to make. Lucien and Susan were having a hard time making up their own minds. The points brought up in their discussions went one way or the other. The pros were to prevent other potential murders, the cons were that Bellisae had mitigating circumstances that would certainly not be taken into consideration. They would probably kill her. Once they had listened to her story, all three thought the same thing: considering everything that the human species had done to her... the idea of betraying her was unbearable.

Susan and the colonel returned to the dining room where Lucien was pacing around the table, actively working at chewing off his left thumb using a technique that he had been refining for years. It was 9:30 p.m. Hunger was beginning to gnaw at their stomachs. They sat back down to the Bolognese pasta that they had abandoned because of the unexpected visit. As soon as they started eating, they decided to question Bellisae about her warmongering intentions.

< Bellisae! > the colonel word-thought. < We need some answers. >

< I am at your service. >

< Tell us about your war plans, please. Most of all, we need to know what you expect from us. >

< I will not refuse any help from the three of you, of course, but you are the one I am counting on the most. You are the soldier. Combat is what you do. >

< In that case, what is it that you want from me? >

< I need some more time before I can explain it to you. >

< Please understand that I need to know, Bellisae. >

< And you three, please understand that you *Homo sapiens* are a huge problem! If you add the biomass of human beings to the biomass of its bovine, ovine and porcine slaves, the result is twenty-five times the size of the biomass of wild mammals. In other words, the biomass of wild mammals nowadays only represents 4% of all the mammals on Earth⁹. That is what your peers have done to this world. >

With a crushing feeling of guilt, they all acknowledged that it was effectively a dramatic situation. Bellisae paused to let them ingest the information and then continued.

< To begin with, let us suppose that my greatest wish is to extinguish all human life. I would like to know how you three feel about this. Do you condemn me, or do you understand me? >

< I don't condemn you, > Susan replied. < That being said, I don't approve of your wanting to extinguish all human life. >

< That's my opinion, too, > Lucien word-thought.

< Same here, > Elijah added.

< Okay! I have a second question. I would also like to hear your three responses to it. If my life is in danger, for example, if the Army discovered how I have evolved and decided to kill me preventively... Would you do all you can to save me? >

< Easy one to answer, > Lucien word-thought again, < but I can only give a cowardly reply. I can't go up against the Army. >

< It is the intention that counts here, > Bellisae insisted. < I said 'all you can'. >

< In that case, my answer is yes, > Lucien stated.

< Most certainly too, > the psychiatrist assured.

Elijah opined. < I know what I owe you. On a personal level, I owe you for the bovine experience that has enormously enriched me. As a

member of the human species, I owe you even more because of the suffering that we have put you through. >

Susan and Lucien both seconded his declaration.

< I would also like to ask you something, > Susan word-thought.
< Why did you choose the name Bellisae? >

< I am very intimidated by the idea of telling you why, but... I promised myself that if you asked me the question once more, I would give you an answer to it. >

This introduction piqued their curiosity. The gorilla went on.

< Bellisae is the anagram of Isabelle. Lucien's wife. He was the first human whose engrams I read. And I knew from them that he was a good person. Having absorbed a large part of his life has bonded me to him. I chose the name because I had fallen in love with him. I was extremely jealous of every woman who approached him. How could he love a gorilla-cube in return? It is so grotesque that I feel ashamed. If I were a human being, I would be blushing. >

As a result, the most visibly embarrassed now was Lucien. That may be why he suddenly chose that moment to say how delicious the Bolognese pasta was. Throwing him a discreet glance, Elijah noted his discomfort and, in order to distract attention away from him, he enthusiastically added his own approval.

"Is this pasta good? Well, yes, it is! I would love to spend the rest of my life doing nothing but eating it!"

Susan also came to his rescue by radically changing the conversation.

< Bellisae, I noticed that you stopped communicating with us when the Army people rang my doorbell. I'd like to know how you knew what was going on. >

< I have an accomplice, but I will not tell you any more about it for the moment. >

Since no one insisted on pushing the subject, she pursued.

< So, would you agree to help me if I needed you to? None of you categorically said no. >

All three word-thought, < Yes, I would. >

< That makes me very happy because I need you now. My life is in danger. >

They were so surprised that a long moment of ‘silence’ occurred in their mental communication. It lasted until the colonel asked the next question.

< What do you need us to do? >

< The Army will soon discover that what they believe is an external enemy is none other than the fruit of their own experiment, in other words me. It will be necessary to extract me from SACI and hide me somewhere. >

Lucien and Susan cut their eyes to the soldier.

< Elijah is in the best position to accomplish this, > Bellisae pressed on. < Susan, you can hide me at your place. >

< I swear I’m ready to take the risk of getting you out of there, Bellisae, but it won’t be easy. It’ll require the collusion of someone at the top levels of the Army, more specifically in SACI. >

< We have the accomplice that I was just telling you about, Elijah. I will not share their identity with you, I will let them be the one to tell you. They will meet you at 10:30 p.m. in the Hotel Quentin parking lot, at 269 Follias Street in Kara. The operation will take place tonight. Oh, and by the way, I was asked to tell you to leave your phone at Susan’s house. >

Less than five minutes later, in the dark under a light rain, the colonel walked out to the Audi, opened the trunk and took out his duffel bag. He put on his Army fatigues, donned a beret, then threw all his civilian clothes into the bag.

< Elijah! > Bellisae said, just as he was about to climb behind the wheel. < Under the left front fender of your car you will find a magnetic tracking device. I recommend that you remove it and place it on the ground next to the wall that surrounds the property. >

He found the object where he was told he would and pulled it off, while leveling some dissonant epithets.

< How did you know about this? >

< Our accomplice informed me of it and asked me to tell you. >

It was 9:02 p.m. Once the address punched in, the GPS calculated that the trip would take one hour and thirteen minutes, meaning that he would arrive at 10:15 p.m.

The Audi sped through the night, with each shift of the gears pushing the tachometer closer to the red zone.

60) The narcosis of denial

9:57 p.m.

The gray Audi turned into Hotel Quentin parking lot at high speed. If it hadn't been raining, the tires would have left black plaintive streaks in the curve that led to it. The hotel only had about forty parking spaces, and half of them were empty. Elijah rapidly noted that no one was waiting in the vehicles that were parked there. He parked his car in the middle of a row of five empty spaces, turned off the windshield wipers and the engine, then settled in to wait. During his trip, he had tried several times to word-think with the female gorilla, but she hadn't answered any of his mental calls. The rain came down even harder than when he had left. He gazed at the string curtain that the rain was hanging in front of the only streetlight, wondering who this mysterious accomplice could be. Some five minutes and a line of coke later, a blue Renault Megane rolled in. Was this the person he was supposed to meet? He turned on his position lights to signal his presence. He watched the car arrive through the drops of rain flattening on his windshield. It came to a stop to the right of him, backlit by the glow of the street lamp reflected onto its hood. In the orange gleam, a silhouette blurred by the darkness and the rain got out and made its way to the Audi. Elijah pushed open the passenger door. The person slid in and closed the door.

"Good evening, Elijah!" she calmly said.

"Go-goo-good evening, General!" he stuttered with surprise.

"Let's make a deal," she replied. "Exceptionally, since the reason for this meeting is strictly non-professional, it would be nice to put

military protocol aside, don't you think? You're Elijah and I'm Nicole, that's much more informal."

"..."

Her slightly slanting eyes rested on him.

"I see that you're taking good care of your ear. Your dressing is clean, that's good."

Still reeling from the shock, he examined his superior from her knees to her head, as if to confirm that it really was her. Wondering if Bellisae was playing tricks on him, he stuck out his index finger and touched her left shoulder.

"..."

"I'm not a hologram, nor one of Bellisae's mental manipulations. I'm here in the flesh and I'm the person you know."

She was dressed in Army fatigues, just like he was. He was used to seeing her in uniform, but he thought that they also suited her very well.

"But, ho-how... but how...?"

"Bellisae has offered me several lives too."

"Ah! W-w-well! But... But you, General... sorry, Nicole... uh..."

"I'm not only the person you see here, in front of you. I've also been a battery-caged laying hen, a duck force-fed for foie gras, a sow kept in a gestation crate, and a racing horse. Believe me when I say that each one of these lives was hell."

"General... Nicole, you must hate Bellisae!"

"No, I don't. Not any more than you do, apparently, since you're here to help save her. Even though your life as a calf must not have been paradisiac either. It was painful, that's for sure! So much suffering! But it opened my eyes."

"I do understand! That's exactly what I've been telling myself. My bovine existence was one long fucking life of torture, but I still feel gratitude towards her because she allowed me to live it. If I hadn't experienced it, I would never have realized that I was a fucking cannibal. I'll never exchange the pain of knowing for the insensibility of ignorance, or the narcosis of denial.

"Two f-words one after the other! You're spoiling me, Elijah!"

“My apologies, Gene... Sorry, Nicole.”

“Not at all, not at all... I like how you pamper me! So, it looks like we’re going to commit a criminal act against the Army tonight.”

“Yes, I’m fully aware of that. Before going any further though, I have an important question I’d like to ask you out of sheer curiosity.”

“Go ahead!”

“Did Bellisae read you?” he wanted to know.

“Read? What does that mean?”

“Did she absorb the engrams of your life?”

“I’m not sure I understand what you’re asking me, but from what I seem to comprehend, I would say probably not. Not to my knowledge in any case. Do you mean that she has the capacity to perceive all the details of what I’ve lived?”

“Yes, that’s exactly what I mean. But we’ll talk about it later. Or else you can question her about it yourself. Are you the one... are you responsible for the disappearance of the E and PN cubes?”

“Yes, I’m the one who took them.”

“What did you do that for?”

“To have additional food and energy provisions for Bellisae,” she explained.

“When you came to search the property, you played your part so well that I never would have suspected you. But, whatever! How are we going to get her to Susan’s place?”

“Quite simply. You’ll take the SACI cube that contains Bellisae and the two associated E and PN cubes with you.”

“It was obviously you who indicated to Bellisae that there was a magnetic tracking device attached to my car.”

“Yes, of course. Communicating through Bellisae instead of using our phones allows us to have exchanges without being detected. When you return to Susan Cilvan’s home, don’t forget to park in the same place and to reposition the tracker under the Audi’s fender.”

“But I don’t want to be spied on by that fu... by that thing!”

“You can remove it later on. Once you’ve used the car once or twice. We don’t want them to think that you had something to hide for this

specific night. I'll make sure they discover Bellisae's disappearance as late as possible, but just in case..."

"They... You mean your team?"

"Yes. I'd rather they be the ones to tell me you've removed their bug in two or three days."

"When was it put there? And who did it?"

"You mean when was the tracker placed on your car? When we came for the search. Before entering, one of my men put it there on my instructions. I must be careful to play my role so that I don't arouse any suspicion. As for your telephone, I can't do anything about it being traced. Even mine is, that is why I don't have it with me tonight. I mean I don't have the phone that officially belongs to me."

"Alright, but... What's the difference if I left the tracker and my phone at Susan's? When we go to SACI to get Bellisae, they'll recognize me anyway."

"That's why you aren't going to SACI."

"What? I don't understand! How...?"

"You don't need to go there. I brought Bellisae here. She's there, in my car. I'll go get her," she said, putting words to action.

Elijah Floyd felt a sudden unexpected rush of adrenaline. He barely had the time to realize how strongly he was reacting that the general was already on her way back. She opened the back door and put something on the Audi's floor behind the passenger seat. She then came around to sit next to the colonel who looked like he was about to have a stroke. She wiped some drops of rain off her forehead with her sleeve.

"There we go! She's all yours, it's all up to you now. She's easy to carry, altogether the cubes weigh twelve kilos. They aren't particularly fragile. Even if you were to drop them on a hard floor, nothing would get damaged, and Bellisae will still be alive. This material was designed to absorb violent shocks. However, do not ever separate the black cube from the two gray ones; that would kill her."

"Whoa! I hope they can't fall off..."

“Don’t worry! You’ll see that the fasteners are very robust. It can only be done intentionally. The ball is in your court. It’s up to you to make sure she safely gets to where she’s going.”

He swallowed hard several times. His heart seemed like it wanted to escape his chest. She who knew everything about his life, even his most intimate secrets, was there, less than a meter away from him. He was in the presence of the strange cubic gorilla person who communicated mentally with him and had incarnated him into the body of a bovine.

“But don’t you think that there’s a strong chance that they’ll come to search my mo... Susan Cilvan’s house again as soon as they realize that Bellisae has disappeared?”

“That could happen, but since the place has already been inspected, it’s less likely that they’ll visit it again. Moreover, I’ll do what I can to inconspicuously direct the investigation in a different direction. Worst case scenario, I’ll be able to contact you with the help of Bellisae and warn you beforehand. Communicating through her allows us to have the fantastic advantage of being covert.”

The general considered the hands of the colossus for a moment. They were squeezing the steering wheel so tightly that he could almost have broken up its atomic structure.

“I was extremely impressed too, especially when I was carrying her for the first time. There you go, Elijah! It’s up to you now, I’ll let you go.”

With these words, she slipped out of the Audi, climbed into the Renault and started the engine. The car moved away and was absorbed by the rainy night. He let go of the steering wheel and turned around. Behind the passenger seat, there was a black cube onto which two smaller gray cubes were attached, one on each side. On one of them an ‘E’ was inscribed in red, and on the other, ‘PN’ in blue. For a while, he sat there, transfixed, staring at the black box, as if trying to see inside of it although its sides were visibly opaque. His heartbeats had barely begun to slow down. An impressive flash of lightning let off powerful strobe effects. The pounding of the downpour grew stronger, and the body of the car began to groan. He tentatively reached out a finger and touched the black form with his trembling index finger. Then, to halt the rising threat of a budding stiff neck, he grabbed the object. Just

when he was placing it on his knees, two terribly loud thunderclaps literally made the world around him explode.

Shit! As if on top of that I needed fucking special effects!

< Bellisae! > he word-thought. < Are you really here, on my knees? >

< I do not know, Elijah. >

A shiver coursed through him.

< Why don't you know? >

< Quite simply because my senses of smell and of touch no longer exist. In the place of my eyes and ears, I only have lenses and microphones connected to the Internet. I have no other sense that allows me to perceive the world. Even if you placed me in front of a camera connected to my cube, how could I recognize myself? I would only see a matte black cube with twenty-five-centimeter-long sides. And all matte black cubes with twenty-five centimeter long sides look alike, do they not? I cannot even make a movement that would allow me to verify that it has an effect on my alleged image. Moreover, here and now, I have no way of seeing or hearing. I am immersed in a frightening darkness and an oppressive silence. And you ask me why I do not know where I am. >

He felt like an idiot.

< I'm so sorry. >

For the first time, this thing... he was still having a hard time emotionally seeing it as a person, even though he intellectually granted it that status without hesitation. For the first time, this person-thing appeared to be vulnerable.

Up to that moment, she had been elusive and called all the shots, or nearly all. Up to this instant, he had felt at her mercy. Now she evidently was at his, and that changed everything. Remembering that he had somehow been part of what had brought on this horror laid a heavy burden of guilt upon his shoulders.

< ... >

< Really, I'm sorry. That was a very dumbass question, I must say. >

< Dumbass! Do you mean dumb as an ass? Just like all those that are not of your species are dumb? If that is the case, then I also am dumb. >

In your face, my little Elijah!

< I should've said 'stupid' instead of 'dumbass'. >

< ... >

< Alright... Well, just so you know, right now you are on my knees in my car, and I'm... uh... I'm all shaken up, very intimidated, overwhelmed. Take these three words, add in some others like them, mix them all together and you might get a small glimpse of what I'm presently feeling. I'm going to put you down next to me, to my right, and take you to Susan's, where Lucien is waiting too. >

This having been word-thought, he placed the three attached cubes delicately on the passenger seat and started the car.

< I feel a little ridiculous saying this, but... >

< Yes? >

< I feel somewhat exhilarated at the idea that I am on a getaway with you. As I was explaining, I have no way of seeing, hearing, or feeling where I am and what is going on around me. You tell me that I am in a car with you, I trust you and it makes this heart that I no longer have beat faster in my imagination. >

If the Audi had been a sentient being, it would have wondered if it was living in a dream: its manic pilot was driving at an astonishingly slow pace.

< What are you doing at this moment? >

< I'm driving and I'm weeping, Bellisae. >

< You are weeping? But why? >

< Go figure, damnit! >

61) Could you tell us how you plan on doing this?

10:40 p.m.

The rain had stopped. The colonel drove slowly, eyes glued to the road illuminated by the headlights of the Audi. An amalgam of memories, feelings and various thoughts occupied his mind. For example, just for an instant, he wondered what had made him suffer the most during his

two childhoods: the malevolence of his human father or the brutal separation from his bovine mother. Then he had a fleeting thought about his cow sisters. What were they feeling as they discovered their new living conditions? He must find the time to go see them. Some passages of Bellisae's life came to his mind too. He imagined her gripping the fur of her dead mother, watching with incomprehension as her mother's killer walked towards her.

< Bellisae, > he word-thought. < It isn't raining anymore. We're heading home. >

< I did not know that it was raining. >

< Could you tell Lucien and Susan that we're on our way back and that we'll be there in about an hour and a half? >

< They already know. I have been sharing all of our exchanges with them since I have been in your car. >

< Oh really! Did they also hear everything that the general told me? >

< She would have had to speak very loudly for her voice to reach out to them! As for me, I can only transmit the thought-words that I receive. >

Wham! Another slap in the face, my good Elijah!

Once again, he felt ridiculous. He felt bad about not realizing how isolated she was.

< I keep forgetting that you only receive thoughts that are voluntarily sent to you, > he admitted. < By the way, do you know why? >

< No. I do not know the reason why it works that way. I suppose that my capacity to receive and send thought-words must be the result of the synaptic amplification that I was subjected to. It is highly probable in any case. But I do not know how it works, nor its limits. I must tell you, however, that I sometimes, although not very often, capture thoughts that are not destined to me. Furthermore, I increased the synaptic amplification by modifying the software that controls it. >

< But how did you manage to do that? >

< Apache, a young macaque that Lucien has taken in charge, helped me. I used his body to type on the keyboard. As you now know, that is why I had no choice but to kill Augusto Brayonzo—he was wondering why the synaptic amplification was at such an abnormal level. >

< That's when you stole my fucking socks to cover the security cameras! >

< Yes. >

< I must admit that the whole sock episode drove me crazy! But how could you have known that Augusto was intrigued by that, since you can't choose whose thoughts you read? >

< Thanks to the cameras, I noted his facial expressions when he looked at the activity curve on the screen. >

*

It was a little after midnight when the Audi stopped at 12 Abbé Cyano road in Sinfait. The now cloudless sky was proudly showing all its stars. Susan and Lucien were waiting in front of the property. The colonel climbed out of the car and opened the right car door.

"She's there," he said, pointing with his index finger at the black cube.

They stood there, motionless, staring at the object, feeling troubled and fascinated at the same time. Lucien broke the spell by handing Elijah the tracker. He put it back under the car fender, but not without grumbling curses under his breath against those who were spying on his comings and goings. As they walked up the path towards the house, he informed them, to their great surprise, that the mysterious accomplice was none other than the general who had come to search the grounds.

*

After much hesitation, they agreed to put Bellisae in a corner of the attic, in a spot that was easy to get to if they needed to move her quickly. The house was spacious enough for each one of them to have a room with a bed. After a short night of rest, a quick trip down to see the cows and a frugal breakfast, they concurred to invite Bellisae to their conversation.

They needed her to clarify as soon as possible what she meant by ‘war against humanity’. Her powers were vast enough for them to have reasons to worry. It was 7:30 a.m. They were sitting at the breakfast table that was covered with the leftovers of their first meal of the day—notably a large and full pot of coffee that was still hot—when they decided that Lucien would be the one to contact her. He served himself a fresh bowl of coffee.

< Bellisae? > he word-thought.

No answer. He called out to her three more times, every couple of seconds.

< Yes? > she finally word-thought. < I am sorry. I was sleeping. >

< You were sleeping?! > Lucien asked, astonished.

< Yes. Why? Do you not sleep? >

< Yeah... sorry. I... >

“She was sleeping,” he explained to the other two.

Two very surprised faces turned towards him.

“She was sleeping, how about that!” exclaimed Susan Cilvan.

She was sleeping! What the fuck! the colonel thought.

< Bellisae, I apologize for waking you, > Lucien word-thought.

< We’ll totally understand if you want to rest some more. If not, the three of us would like to have a discussion with you. If you agree... uh... I don’t know how to say it, well, connect us to each other. >

< There you go, we can have a four-way conversation. I too am looking forward to conversing with you. >

< Could you add Brigadier General Nicole Rama-Déjardin to this discussion? > the colonel asked.

< I will try. >

All three were still sitting at the breakfast table, preparing the questions they wanted to ask Bellisae in their heads. The two men were drinking a last bowl of coffee. Lucien was taking advantage of each apparent momentary loss of the others’ attention to try to tear off a rebellious piece of fingernail on his right middle finger. Right after getting up, Elijah had snorted a line of coke in his bedroom before taking his shower. The therapist was surreptitiously watching both of them.

< The general is not responding, > Bellisae word-thought.

< That's a pity! > Lucien said with regret. < We can ask you our questions all the same. As for me, I'd like you to tell us precisely what you mean by 'wage war on humanity'. >

< It seems to me that I already told you that I would like to exterminate this species. Eradicate it completely from the face of the earth. Except for the three of you, of course, but that would technically be complicated to realize. I would have to ensure that the two males do not sow their seeds in Susan, the only female. >

There was a long, mental silence, the two males and the female in question glancing at each other furtively, a little embarrassed.

< Do you have the means to carry out this project? > the colonel wondered.

< Yes. >

There was a new pause, with another exchange of glances around the table.

< Could you tell us how you plan on doing this? >

< No. Not for the moment. >

< Alright... Is the general still not responding? >

< She is not. >

The soldier took his phone out of his pocket.

< I'm going to give her a call, under whatever pretext, just to see if she's available. >

At the same moment, the phone rang in his large hand. Surprise could be read on his face when he saw that the caller was Michel Matrone.

"Hello, Colonel?"

"Yes, General!"

"I hope that you aren't holding our unexpected visit against me."

"You were doing your job, General!"

"So, how is your need for solitude coming along?"

"Well..."

"Have you recently been in contact with General Nicole Rama-Dé-jardin?"

"Not since the search, General. Why?"

“Alright! I won’t beat around the bush, Elijah. I have a big problem! A huge problem!”

“I’m all ears, General.”

“She has been unreachable since 2:00 p.m. yesterday. She isn’t at home. This isn’t normal at all. Given her position, it’s even very alarming!”

“Have you tried to track her phone?”

“Nothing there. The phone must be shut off. No signal at all. I was calling you just in case.”

“Sorry, General. I don’t know what to say.”

“I’m more and more concerned about SACI. Almost all the specialists who were working on the project are dead. The one who has the most cross-functional knowledge about the project and the highest level of security seems to have disappeared. She probably is in the hands of our enemy as we talk. Try to resume your duties ASAP. I must admit that if she hadn’t insisted on letting you go, I would have tethered you to your station.”

“...”

Michel Matrone had hung up, obviously displeased and extremely preoccupied. Elijah tried to call Nicole Rama-Déjardin one again. He didn’t leave a message on her voicemail, put the phone back into his pocket and answered the interrogative looks as he addressed Bellisae.

< Matrone has just told me that Nicole is incommunicado. >

62) I trust you

< I hope that nothing serious has happened to her, > Bellisae word-thought. < I am so grateful for everything she has done for me. Anyway, we can continue our conversation while we wait for her to contact us. I have many questions for you as well as things to say. >

< Alright, > the colonel reacted. < But we’re all very disappointed that you aren’t answering the request that we believe is the most important: how are you planning on exterminating humanity? >

< I assure you that I have the capacity to do it rapidly. I will soon reveal to you how I intend to proceed. But beforehand, I would like you to know that I am counting on you to dissuade me. Give me one good reason to renounce going through with this and I will. >

After a long moment during which they exchanged ponderous looks across the table, the colonel answered.

< Bellisae... I'm very embarrassed about what I'm about to say, given the immense esteem that I have for you, but... >

< But what, Elijah? >

< But you must know that we could easily stop you from moving forward with this terrifying project. I mean that technically, it would be easy; not emotionally. >

< Are you alluding to the fact that you can kill me by disconnecting the E and PN cubes from mine? >

The atmosphere became even heavier. The three human beings locked eyes, each seeking help from the other two.

< That's exactly what I was thinking of. I must insist that it would only be easy technically. Emotionally, it would be a terrible ordeal, but you must understand that we don't want you to go through with this! With that in mind, you're threatening to exterminate all human life from the face of the earth if we don't manage to convince you not to. How can you be so confident? >

< What makes me so sure of myself is that I have faith in you! I am at your mercy, for sure... but I trust you. I trust your hearts, your rationale, your moral compasses. You know that soon the Earth will only be inhabited by *Homo sapiens* and the slave-monster-animals created by your zootechnics—the same ones that are presently living in hellish concentration camps. You are all convinced, deep down in your souls, that it would be appropriate to eradicate your species because it is noxious. You know that your kind is killing all the wild beings and other forms of life on this planet. You know that your kind is the cause of the largest and most rapid extinction of species. You know that, in time, your kind will kill itself off. So, would it not be wise and just to anticipate this self-annihilation, especially if it could save the lives of those that have not yet been destroyed? I still offer you the chance, however, to dissuade me from going through with this, for I believe

that I may not have all the elements necessary for a correct evaluation of the situation. If this is the case, you can fill me in on them. Be sincere advocates for humanity. Bring to my attention anything that could encourage me to let it continue to infect this planet. Of course, you could easily kill me and thereby counter my goal of healing the world, but I believe with all my heart that if you do not find any moral justification for opposing me, you will support me. I have no choice but to count on your impartiality. But you should take note that I could have gone through with my plan without telling you about it. If I had, at this very moment, there would hardly be anything left of humanity, perhaps even nothing at all. Are you ready to betray a defenseless person who is relying on you, in order to stop her from doing something that you know is right? >

During this long response, they had felt, in turn, Bellisae's sadness, despondency and peaks of intense rage. Lucien served himself some more coffee, then started devouring his right ring finger. Susan moved her breakfast bowl to the left because it wasn't sitting perfectly in the middle of her tray. Elijah silently addressed those of his own species with excerpts from his dictionary of very informal words. Not one of the three knew what to reply to all this.

< What is it that you require from me in particular? > Elijah finally asked. < You said that you mainly counted on me because I was a soldier. Do you really believe that I'll help you get rid of all humanity? You must realize that I'm incapable of making that decision and that, moreover, I don't have the means to go through with it all on my own. >

< True, I did say that. But I do not need you anymore. When I asked you for help, I had not yet decided on how I was going to proceed to win this war. >

< And now you know how? >

< Yes. In fact, I am going to share with you the different eradication methods I envisioned. At one point, I thought that triggering a nuclear conflict between the world's great powers would be a good idea. But I rapidly realized that it would not only be detrimental to human animals. It was not selective enough! I searched for other ways. Pathogen agents, lethal to your species and sufficiently contagious to

spread worldwide pandemics? Viruses with no known antiviral drugs? A dozen of those could be used. Why a dozen? Because there are always naturally immunized individuals who survive pandemics. And when they reproduce, their descendants are resistant to those diseases and then... As you can see, for me that would be a failure. With about a dozen or so different mortal germs working together, I have drastically reduced the chance that one single human creature might survive, as you can understand. Therefore, I have easily secured twelve viruses and eight bacteria for which there is no known cure. >

< How did you do that? > Lucien raged. < How do we know that you aren't lying? >

< You gave them to me. >

< We did? >

< Yes! Well actually, not the three of you. I am talking about you *Homo sapiens*. More precisely, your armies' research laboratories. Several of the military powers are working on mutating germs in order to obtain new ones. Their objective is to find drugs for at least one of these illnesses that they will be the only ones to possess. You can guess how they could then use these against their enemies, or even just to take over other parts of the world without a fight. >

Elijah wanted to know how well-prepared Bellisae's plan was.

< Let's suppose that you have effectively located these secret fucking laboratories and that you know all about their experiments. Okay! How do you plan on getting hold of these virulent bacteria and releasing them so that they propagate by contagion? >

< I have discovered that I can control the behavior of certain animals, notably humans. I can do this in two different manners. One is when I take command of a person's body, as I did when I used Guy Sabatini to get rid of Adam Polikant. Guy did not know what his body was doing and could not do anything about it, for I was controlling his muscles. But I can only exercise this hold for no more than a couple of seconds, because it requires great extenuating efforts on my part. The other way I can impose a behavior on someone is to influence their subconscious. I namely used this power to make Adam Polikant purchase a small bottle of liquid latex. This latex later served to coat the hands of the young macaque that Lucien calls Apache. I have no idea why, but I can

only manipulate certain persons this way, and with more or less success depending on the person. Anyhow, by manipulating certain carefully chosen people, I recently used this method to obtain the germs from the laboratories that I was telling you about. At this instant, these biological weapons are stocked away in locations that only I know about. And I have several maneuverable subjects at my disposal who are ready to spread them all over, depending on the type of pathogen: in drinking water reservoirs, food production factories, pharmaceutical plants, densely inhabited areas... The variety of germs and the simultaneous contamination points will leave humanity no chance. Humanity offered me the means to destroy it. Without being cynical, it is almost as if it had chosen to commit suicide. >

Lucien stopped his furious attack on what was left of his left little finger to react.

< Without being cynical either, it looks like you're the one who wants to commit suicide since you know that there's only one way for us to stop you from spreading such evil. >

< As I said before, I am counting on your intellectual integrity. Either you acknowledge that I am right in my quest to extinguish humanity and you let me go through with my project, or you convince me that I am wrong with assertions that I am willing to hear... or you are unfair, partial, dishonest, unscrupulous, disloyal, and you put an end to my life so as to thwart my plans even though you know they are logical and just. >

< How much time do we have left to defend our peers? > the therapist asked.

< If no refutations are forthcoming, I plan on beginning the propagation of the contaminants in about one hour. As long as your words retain my attention and I answer you, I will postpone it. If you manage to make me regret the disappearance of humanity, I will destroy the dangerous germs that I have on hand and then I will beg you to put me to death. You must understand that to remain alive in this present state is the worst living hell imaginable. Whatever my role is in the future of your species, my utmost desire is to ultimately find peace. >

< Since you have the ability to control behaviors, > Elijah interjected, < why don't you target solely those who are responsible for everything

that you blame humanity for? That way, you modify it rather than exterminate it. >

< Because I am unable to control so many for so long. Subduing or influencing only a dozen of people would deplete me within an hour. >

< Could you at least inform us a half hour before you begin eradicating us? >

< Of course. I will notify you. That will leave you enough time to kill me, if that is what you want. >

Lucien saw that it was 9:05 a.m. on his phone. He gave his little finger a moment's relief before starting in on his right thumb. Susan slightly rotated her knife because it wasn't exactly parallel to the spoon. The colonel tried again to contact the general. Reaching her voicemail once more, he left a message: "It's Elijah. We need to talk! It's extremely urgent!"

Slipping his phone back into his pocket, he stared gravely at Susan and Lucien before suddenly standing up. He went up to the attic and brought down the three cubes that he silently laid on the table, giving the two others an explicit look: all they needed to do was to separate the different elements.

< First of all, > the therapist word-thought, < I would like you to think about one thing, Bellisae. >

< I am listening, Susan. >

< You make very critical comments about humanity—rightly so—we have no choice but to admit it. It's actually quite easy to heap blame on it because there are so many good reasons to do so. But have you ever wondered what would happen if another species had been the one to dominate the world? What if, for example, gorillas had surpassed our powers through their technology or any other alternative path? Would they have been morally better than us? Let me phrase the question differently. How can we know that we're the worst since we're the only ones who have the means to do so much damage in such a visible way? >

< That question did come to mind. And I have many reasons to believe that many other creatures are just as capable of being as terribly cruel as you can be. Chimpanzees, for example, take part in terrible turf

wars during which they have no problems killing each other. Many other animals deliberately commit ferocious acts. >

< Well, there you are! > the colonel said, hopeful. < There's the fucking argument that should convince you! We aren't the worst! >

< Of course, there is no way to prove that you are the worst! That is not the question. I have not decided to annihilate humanity to punish the ones who are evil. The problem is that you reign over the world because you have great powers. But along with these great powers come great moral responsibilities, because these powers make you very dangerous. This implies that your ethics should be at the same level as your science is. Unfortunately, this is not the case. This is why you must disappear. Which is not that bad, you know! You are just one of the universe's failed experiments. On that scale, you are so trivial that you practically do not exist. Its laboratory is limitless, its time is too... You are one experiment amidst an infinity of others. >

< But isn't it extremely presumptuous to take it upon yourself to terminate the ongoing experiment? > Lucien replied. < Who says that it isn't on the point of getting better results? >

< Yes, in fact, there is a minute possibility that humanity suddenly improves with time; but the odds are so slight that believing in Santa Claus would seem less naive. Is it presumptuous to interfere with the universe's projects? Of course not! Wondering about it is senseless because I myself am one of its designs; everything I do is also the universe's doings. If your hands could think, would they wonder if it was presumptuous to manipulate objects? >

Lucien served himself a bowl of cold coffee and resumed his onychophagic mastication. Susan moved the coffee pot mindlessly, repositioning it exactly in the center of the trivet. No longer hiding it from the others, Elijah took a little bag out of his pocket and rapidly snorted a line. So overcome by the seriousness of the situation, Lucien and Susan didn't even notice.

< You haven't set our extermination in motion yet, have you? > Lucien inquired.

< No, not yet. >

The colonel put his large fingers on the cubes. This gesture sent shivers up Susan's and Lucien's spines, but Elijah stood there, staring

intensely at each one in turn. Nothing in their eyes told him to make the decision, so he laid his hands flat on the table in front of himself. The three members of the human species knew deep down inside that it would be wiser to separate the elements at that very moment, but none of them had the courage to come to terms with it. The mere idea of killing Bellisae generated an unbearable guilt.

< A human whose name was Constantin Edouardovitch Tsiolkovski once said, 'Earth is the cradle of humanity, but one cannot live in a cradle forever.' > Susan word-thought. < This scientist was actually talking about astronautics in this sentence, but what I'm putting forward here is that he considered humanity as a very young child. I agree with him on this point, and I would like you to think about this perspective, Bellisae. Humanity is actually still growing up. It's nowhere near being blameless, but it's progressing. Sexism is losing ground. More and more nations are giving women the right to vote and punishing racism. Even if, in fact, it still exists, slavery has been officially abolished throughout the world. Out of respect for real slaves who actually existed, it would be inappropriate to say that today's exploited workers are slaves. Their living conditions aren't comparable. They aren't sold like ani... like objects. >

< You were about to say like animals... For sure, there are practically no more slaves such as those that you speak of! But you discovered that dairy cows are slaves. All of the animals that are exploited for their flesh, their fat, their skin, their fur, their feathers, their milk, their eggs, their strength, for your tests, for your pleasure... they are all slaves. I know what I am talking about, for I bear in my mind hundreds of these lives of suffering, of terror, of agony. They constitute me. They are who I am. They are my ontological structure. The despair that you felt when you were bovines repeats itself over and over, billions of times, with no ending, no respite, no reprieve... Along with your slaves, all the wild animals that are hunted, trapped, poisoned, chased from their habitat... are also victims of yours. >

A feeling of dejection and immeasurable sadness could be felt within these thought-words. After a short moment of mental silence, Bellisae continued.

< So many cries, so many desperate screams echo inside of me! I must eradicate you! Every second that I hesitate, more crimes are committed! Enslavement, oppression, eugenism, sequestration, torture, mutilation, rape, the kidnapping of children, the stealing of milk, humiliation, deportation, murder... I was that gorilla child whose mother was murdered in order to kidnap me. They removed my brain from my body and turned me into this cube. Now, I am so much more. I am a pig who was boiled alive. I am calves who were ripped from their mothers. I am a bear who was starved and beaten to death to force it to ride a bicycle in a circus. I am a racehorse who was over-worked before being led to the slaughterhouse. I am so many hens exhausted from laying eggs, packed so tightly together that they cannot open their wings. I am an angora rabbit whose fur was savagely pulled out every three months. I am a goose whose feathers were live-plucked to fill your pillows. I am a mink in a cage who will be skinned alive. I am hundreds of fish agonizing for hours in your nets. I am a duck terrified by the person coming to force feed it. I am two dolphins, one orca, three elephants, a tiger and so many others driven crazy by captivity and abuse. All of these miserable existences comprise my memory. Their sufferings come together to generate a hell so abominable that you will never ever be able to grasp it. You must disappear as soon as possible. At once! >

A terrifying storm of fury accompanied these last thought-words. A rage that shook them to the core. They stared at the black cube in the same way that we would stare at the most nightmarish of demons. This object seemed to contain the revolt of all of the oppressed creatures of the world.

Bellisae shouted inside of their heads.

< In the name of all of your future victims, my duty is to eradicate you immediately! >

In a sudden reflex that surprised even him, the colonel separated the three cubes. He stood there for a second, frozen with stupor, looking at his trembling fingers as if they deserved to be punished with ineffable severity.

"I killed her," he said in a strangled voice.

He let out a heartbreaking moan and ground his face into the crook of his arm laying on the table. He cried and mourned. Who would have thought that this colossus with his severe eyebrows and frowning face would be capable of expressing such sorrow? Lucien devoured his fingernails and even pulled out some of his hair. Susan helplessly watched the scene as a stream of tears blurred it.

< Bellisae! > the colonel word-thought and cried. < Bellisae! Have I really killed you? >

Panicked, he tried to reassemble the cubes. His hands were shaking so much that, with much difficulty, it took him several tries to plug in the connectors. Once that was done, he continued to beg the female gorilla to answer, both out loud and in his mind. Susan and Lucien, for their part, also mentally implored her to give them a sign of life. But the three supplicants got no answer. Lucien had almost eaten through his two arms, Susan was perfectly aligning the three jars of jam and the colonel was caressing the black cube as if to resuscitate Bellisae when the doorbell rang. The therapist jumped up to see who it was on the screen of the videophone.

“It’s the general!” she cried out.

63) You have not failed

After a solemn exchange of civilities, Susan ushered everyone into the living room. The two women and two men were seated in wood and velvet armchairs set in a circle around a round coffee table. Elijah, holding the three reassembled cubes in his lap, looked like he wished he could disappear. It was the very first time that he’d ever seen the general in civilian clothes: jeans, a black sweatshirt, white sneakers. In other circumstances, her clothing would have caught his attention, but at this specific moment, he barely noticed.

“You all look devastated,” said the officer to the three of them, but looking specifically at the colonel.

He alternately looked at the cubes and at his superior officer several times, before answering.

“I tried to reach you. I even left you a voicemail.”

“Hmm... I know. But I was supposed to leave you alone to do what you had to do. Those were my orders.”

“Your orders? Orders from whom?”

“From Bellisae. Let’s say that she desired it more than she ordered me to... but for me, her wishes are my commands.”

Elijah looked like he was about to collapse under the weight of his guilt.

“We must speak of her in the past tense, I’m afraid! I’ve killed her. It’s horrible... I assassinated her!”

Instead of asking how, instead of losing her temper, instead of seeming surprised, instead of being outraged, the general sat back comfortably into her armchair and calmly scrutinized each one of them in turn. She first observed Lucien, who was trying as hard as he could to rid himself of anything that even looked like a fingernail. Then she gazed at Susan, who was stroking the armrests of her chair, doing her best to harmonize their shine by brushing all of the pile in the same direction. Last, she examined Elijah, who was so slumped into himself that he looked boneless.

“She isn’t dead,” she finally told them.

Thought-words then hit them.

< No. I am still alive. >

Elijah’s, Lucien’s and Susan’s eyes all cut towards the black cube.

“She isn’t dead!” the colonel shouted.

His tone of voice and his smile would have been fitting if he had been announcing that the end of the world had been canceled. As it was, this news meant, to the contrary, that the end of the human species was therefore confirmed.

“You don’t have to take care of those cubes anymore,” said the general. “Bellisae isn’t in there. She never was.”

Three very surprised and interrogative pairs of eyes stared at her.

“This SACI cube is empty,” she explained. “I hid the one containing Bellisae somewhere else.”

Stupefaction replaced the dramatic expressions on their faces.

“Then why did you entrust me with a fucking empty cube?” the colonel growled.

“Like I said, I had my orders,” the general snapped back.

< It actually was a test, > Bellisae word-thought. < I wanted to know what you were capable of doing to defend your own futures if you believed that I was at your mercy. >

< Do you know that I tried to kill you? I separated the three cubes. >

Their mental conversation was shared between the four humans by Bellisae.

< Yes, I know you did. >

< So as for me, I failed the test! I hope you aren't going to extinguish humanity because of me! >

< No. You have not failed. It was not an examination. However this may turn out, if at the end I make the decision to eradicate your species, you will not be responsible for it at all. I know how sincere you are, because I have been reading you while we talk. For the first time, I can read human beings in real time. My ‘powers,’ as Lucien calls them, seem to have grown. I can even, and I am doing so at this instant, see through your eyes. I know that you must feel that you are being spied upon in your utmost privacy, but I have two things to say about that. To begin with, you are the ones who made me who I am through synaptic amplification. If you had left me in my mother's arms, in the forest, we would never have gotten to this point; you could have continued to carelessly defecate all over the planet and enslave or decimate all the beings who share this world with you. Second, you will soon be freed of me; whether I exterminate you or not, I do not have long to live. I will soon ask Nicole to separate my cubes. I know, because I read it in you, that killing me was a reflex, and that this has been a terrible ordeal for you, Elijah. I also read the tormented feelings of Lucien and Susan, as well as their antagonistic emotions: relief, because you believed that the threat on humanity had been precluded, and guilt, because you had wished for my demise. So, I not only hold no grudge against you, but I still am counting on you to give me a good reason to renounce my project. It is 11:00 a.m. I will launch the worldwide pandemics at 2:00 p.m. if you have not shaken my determi-

nation by then. You therefore have three hours to come up with a good reason to not put an end to your species' existence. >

The colonel put the cubes onto the coffee table.

< Well! > he word-thought. < You have just turned my mixed feelings inside out. Now I'm relieved that I didn't kill you, but I'm anguished at the idea that your threat still stands. >

< Yes, but at least you no longer have to face the moral dilemma of either putting me to death or letting your own people perish. >

< And you, Ms. Rama-Déjardin, what's your opinion regarding all this? > Susan asked. < Should humanity be exterminated? You seem pretty detached about it all. >

< I must admit that I don't know. Sometimes I think that it would be a good thing for us all to disappear from the face of this planet; that would give freedom back to a large number of its inhabitants. The laying hen in its battery cage, the duck force-fed to make foie gras, the sow in the gestation crate and the racehorse, all of whom I was, are all in favor of total annihilation of humanity. At other times, I tell myself that many human beings don't deserve to die and that it would be unfair for them to pay for crimes committed by others. I'm very divided on the issue. What do the bovines that you were think about it? >

Lucien, Susan and Elijah all agreed that the bovine part of their personalities was in favor of total eradication.

*

The atmosphere was so oppressive that none of them managed to come up with even the slightest reason to desist from the hecatomb.

Apparently still very detached, the general was looking at her smart-phone.

Lucien felt deeply confused, wondering if the total disappearance of his species would really be such a tragedy. He wished he hadn't left Isabelle without any news since his interrogation. He also thought about his daughter. Would he see them before the great extinction? Should

he warn them? What for? He wondered what his bovine daughters were doing at that moment, smiling interiorly at the implausible idea that he as a human should have such descendants. His teeth tackled his left ring finger. He then focused all his attention and strength on finding something crucial to tell Bellisae.

Susan seemed submerged in profound meditation.

Elijah was thinking so hard his brain was having a meltdown. Once noon came and went, he turned to Nicole Rama-Déjardin.

“General, please!”

“Yes, Colonel?”

“You say that you’re divided concerning this ultimate decision. Is that still the case?”

“Yes. I’ll let Bellisae decide. I’ll accept her verdict.”

“Is there any way to warn the highest authorities so that they can take the necessary steps in order to...”

“Colonel, Bellisae told you truthfully that for the moment, there are no known remedies for the pathogen agents she has at her disposal.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know we can’t do a thing against those fucking germs, but we could have the places that can be contaminated put under surveillance and, uh...”

“Do you really believe what you’re saying?”

“Unfortunately, no, of course I don’t!”

“...”

“Should I force you to...”

“Do what, Colonel? Kill Bellisae?”

Elijah remained silent but continued to peer into the general’s eyes.

“Don’t even think about it, Colonel. I have my gun on me. Even though I hold you in high esteem, I won’t hesitate to make use of it if you try to force me to put her to death.”

“Thank you! Now I’m rid of the terrifying pressure that I was under, believing there might be the slightest chance of saving my fucking fellow human beings through the use of force.”

The next hour went by in the same heavy atmosphere. The more they approached the funeral hour, the more anguished they became and the more their minds shut down.

Bellisae kept her mental silence.

64) One of the universe's ongoing experiments

[Thirty minutes before the end of the Event?]

The Event is the name that we'll continue to call the contingency that was about to bring History to an end. And as we now know, what we mean by 'bring History to an end' is actually 'decide the ultimate outcome of human existence'.

At 1:30 p.m., Susan suddenly began to word-think.

< Bellisae, despite appearances, eliminating humanity could be detrimental to all other animals. It certainly seems that, in the immediate future, it would be to their advantage. But in the years to come, it would certainly be a loss. >

The unexpected turn and the boldness of this declaration surprised Bellisae as well as the two men and the general. The latter even lost her detached air and sat forward in order to listen to her.

< I cannot wait to hear what you have to say, > the female gorilla said.

< Thanks to their technology, human beings on average live more comfortably than wild animals do. The latter are at the mercy of nature's threats: predation, droughts, fires, famine, parasites, flooding, extreme temperatures, illness, violent weather... Many die, many survive only to suffer. Their lives have nothing to be envious of. If humanity were to disappear, all the torments they submit others to would disappear too, but all those that are inherent to life in the wild would subsist. They would go on forever. But if you allow my species time to evolve both morally and techno-scientifically, there are good chances that not only will it abolish exploitation, but, moreover, it will find ways to help wild animals. >

< You are not even capable of compassion towards one another, and you believe that, someday... >

< Think it through! Everywhere, biomasses have always been in competition. In the forest, the highest tree robs light from the others. Animal life is all about horns, fangs, claws, venoms, offensive and

defensive tactics, escaping or using camouflage. Every one of them that is still out there has survived combat and natural selection. Existence has always been a battle, and, except for the ones who lose it, that war will never be over. This war has led to the level of complexity that we live in today. In order to remain alive, contingencies must be dealt with—hence the need to have a body capable of withstanding all the stresses of one’s environment. However, the adaptive evolution of organisms is the fruit of much suffering and death; that is how natural selection works. >

< Does that justify your industrialization of torture and murder? >

< Of course, it doesn’t. I’m not giving you the ‘lion eats zebra’ pitch! I just want to appeal to your indulgence, because these are the conditions in which humanity has survived up to now. It’s comparable to the case of the soldier who has never known anything but war and the brutal death of his comrades all around him. The value of life for him is very different from that of a person who has never endured such atrocities. The members of my species are descendants of those who lived like wild animals do. Kill or be killed was their doxa. This doxa is our legacy, and it will take time to rid us of this primitive principle. More and more of us are working towards that. Philosophers inspired by the interventionist theory are studying the possibility of reducing the suffering of wildlife¹⁰. >

< Yes, I read about that on the internet, > said Bellisae. < Please go on. Tell me what makes you believe that humanity can better itself to the point that it will not only cease all predation, but will in turn help other animals. >

< Technology helps us protect our bodies from most environmental hazards. In addition, it allows us to free up the time that once was devoted to survival. It offers important means of communication and of knowledge dissemination. This time and these means are rich soil in which ideas can grow, such as imagining ethics that aren’t applicable to beings whose sole preoccupation is to subsist. The human species is the only species to possess techno-sciences capable of emancipating it from the constraints and the torments of survival. Even though morally, humanity is still quite primitive, you can’t deny that kindness and compassion are growing... a little too slowly, for sure, but steadily

nonetheless. There are so many cultural and social determinants to overcome! >

< Some of you humans are compassionate and display kind behavior, but sadly, they are too few in numbers. As for believing that technology has something to do with it... Non-humans also display these qualities, both towards each other and towards members of other species. You can see images of this on the Internet. >

< That's true, I've seen them too. I'm not saying that technology has given rise to kindness, I'm just saying that it generates conditions that help it thrive. What's more, it favors the Darwinian selection of those who harbor good intentions. >

< How could it work such a miracle? >

< In a competitive environment, where physical aptitudes are important, it seems that altruism isn't the quality that helps you survive. If you hesitate to kill in order to feed or to defend yourself, it will soon become a major drawback. These days, competing for money or celebrity have replaced physical confrontations. Today, it's much easier to stay alive if you show goodwill. Therefore, human beings who have this quality will grow in numbers, and will thus have a greater influence on the world. >

The therapist paused, seeming to gather her thoughts. The two men and the general regularly checked the time on their phones. Lucien was having a hard time finding even a tiny cell of the keratin protein that composed his fingernails for his incisors to grab hold of. The colonel's jaws and fists were so tightly clenched that it was fair to wonder if he would ever be able to open them again. Nicole Rama-Déjardin had lost her look of apparent indifference and seemed mesmerized by Susan's words.

Susan went on.

< Our ethics are evolving at a slower pace than our sciences are, I'll grant you that. However, the time we'll need to expand our circle of empathy to include those who aren't of our species doesn't have to be counted in millions of years, not even in thousands. More and more human persons are outraged by the existence of bullfighting, and it'll end up disappearing just as gladiator games did. And as our means of communication fortify our collective consciousness and poverty

declines, I'm pretty sure our moral sense will evolve faster and faster. We'll make more progress in the next hundred years than we have in the past thousand.

< Do you really believe this? >

< Believe might be a little strong, but I think that it's possible and I hope for it so very much! Altogether, it's highly probable. We're starting to realize that the benevolence of the powerful triumphs over the strength of the predators. An increasing number of minds are recognizing that if there's one thing that will indeed honor humanity, make it grand and justly proud of itself, it won't be its domination of other species, but, to the contrary, its refusal to use that power to subjugate them. We're beginning to grasp that well above the dominators are those who willingly refuse to dominate because they know that the use of force will only sully them. Nothing is more degrading than to oppress those who are at our mercy—it would be just as inglorious as unleashing a reign of terror upon a nation of children. >

< What I am reading in your mind is that you firmly believe this. And I know that you are not the only one. But I also know that only a minority of people think the way you do and that every second that goes by under the tyrannic domination of your species generates immeasurable suffering. >

< If you destroy us, you'll interrupt one of the universe's ongoing experiments that has the best chance of being a big success. We can help alleviate the hardships that are inherent to wildlife. It's possible, you know it is. Whatever the case, in our world as it is today, we're the only hope that one day it will take place. Eliminating us will put an end to something evil that is destined to come to a halt anyway within the next century, because, ultimately, our predation will cease. But at the same time, you will be destroying all hope that wildlife's miseries will be reduced, eased and perhaps even finally completely overcome. And then all this suffering will probably go on for as long as life exists on this planet. >

[Three minutes before the end of the Event?]

At 1:57 p.m., Susan Cilvan stopped word-thinking. The four human beings stared at the time on their phones or on their watches. Bellisae

was no longer answering them. Her silence was the most terrible ordeal they had ever faced in their lives.

[One minute and forty-four seconds before the end of the Event?]

At 1:58:16 p.m., a stream of thought-words penetrated their consciences.

< I must admit that the line of reasoning that you present here is an interesting one, Susan. Your rationale is logical and I find the perspectives that it provides very thought-provoking. However, even if I do not question the sincerity of your optimism, I am not sure that I fully share it. I would like to see concrete proof that the progress that you foresee is already in motion. I would hate to deprive the entire biosphere of the bright future that you envision, but I would hate even more, because of my lack of determination, not having put an end to the hellish conditions that humans impose on all other animals. So, here is what I propose: you have one hundred days, as of this moment, to convince your peers that they must immediately and drastically implement the developments that you say are bound to happen. After this period, I will reconsider your case and make my final decision. You have one hundred days to prove that you deserve the name that you gave yourself when you classified your species: *Homo sapiens!* >

The End

Additional information at rebrand.ly/RComp_an

65) Appendix

Regarding holding and slaughtering conditions

On Wednesday June 22, 2016, as indicated in report number 31, during the audition of the French Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry into the conditions of slaughterhouse animals, Raphaël Girardot, director of the documentary film ‘Saigneurs (Slaughtered)’, told the commission about the difficulties he had encountered with the slaughterhouses when he tried to make his documentary. He notably recounts his very instructive conversation with Jean-Paul Bigard.

“[...] all the slaughterhouses closed their doors to us. We called about thirty of them, Bigard, Sicavyl and Abattoirs Industriels de la Manche (AIM) amongst others. Jean-Paul Bigard laughed in our faces and told us that the idea of making a movie in one of his slaughterhouses was contrary to his policy which was to ensure customers **no longer made the connection between a cow and a steak**. In accordance with this policy, everything that happened inside the slaughterhouse was to remain in a black box. [...]”

Source : rebrand.ly/Cr31Rmdly

Minimum surface per calf according to weight

The European Council Directive 97/2/EC of January 20, 1997, translated into French law by the decree of December 8, 1997, as of January 1st, 1998 regulates holding conditions for calves destined for slaughter according to their weight:

Equal or inferior to 150 kg: 1.5 square meters

Between 150 and 220 kg: 1.7 square meters

Superior to 220 kg: 1.8 square meters

Less than 2 square meters for a bovine of over 220 kg!

Official source for the 08/12/1997 decree at goo.gl/WVt64A

LOOK INTO MY EYES

Find out more

Additional information at rebrand.ly/RComp_an

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rebrand.ly/SMRmdly

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LOOK INTO MY EYES

Notes

1) In order for cows to produce milk, they need to give birth to a child. This is also the case for all female mammals. We humans can be used as examples, since we are also mammals. Do women have spontaneous onsets of lactation without having any children? No! So, for cows to produce milk, they are artificially inseminated by having an arm stuck deeply into their anus and a rod inserted into their vaginas that will deposit bull semen, collected by masturbation, directly into their uterus. When their calves are born, they are taken away from them so that the milk that was supposed to be theirs can be used for human consumption. There are many testimonies to the fact that the cows call out for the calves, sometimes for weeks at a time. One breeder confirmed it to me.

Find Insemination at rebrand.ly/InsRmdly.

2) **Death chute or squeeze chute:** a narrow channel that leads from the lairage area to the stunning box (see below).

3) **Sentience.** Pronounced ‘sen-t-i-ence’ and not ‘sen-ss-i-ence’. The associated adjective is ‘**sentient**’. Sentience comes from the latin word sentiēns, and is defined as the capacity to perceive or experience the world subjectively, and feel fear, sadness, pleasure as well as pain. **It’s essential to have a nervous system to be considered sentient;** plants therefore are not. It is used to distinguish between the ability to reason and the ability to feel. Software can reason, thanks to a series of algorithms that simulate reason, but it can’t feel. It consequently can’t be considered sentient. A sentient being experiences feelings and emotions. ‘Sensitive’ is sometimes used as a synonym for ‘sentient’. Sentient beings care about what happens to them, have expectations—at least the hope of living a better life—and this is what pushes them to avoid situations that are hostile to their integrity and even to their comfort, and to search for more favorable conditions.

The notion of sentience is very important in the field of animal rights.

Notes

4) **Stunning boxes** are principally used for the forceful restraint of animals between four walls before they are slaughtered. A decree on December 12, 1997 made its use mandatory in France for all animals except for rabbits and poultry. Some of these restraining devices are simply called ‘restrainers’.

5) The penetrating captive bolt gun, also called ‘**Matador**®’, is a mechanical stunning device. Using compressed air or explosive cartridges, a bolt is driven through the victim’s skull and partially destroys their brain. Some slaughterhouses don’t like using this device because it damages the brain which can no longer be sold as easily. Alas! Sometimes the matador doesn’t stun the animal the first time around, because the frightened animal jerks their head in all directions and the slaughterer (that is what they are really called) misses his shot. The horrible wound is unimaginably painful! The increasingly violent movements of the terrorized victim make the stunning extremely difficult to carry out.

6) Even if the matador is correctly used, this does not guarantee that the animal will be stunned, per researcher Claudia Terlouw, during her May 12, 2016 audition number 11 before the Commission of Inquiry. “[...] the stunning gun, if it isn’t used correctly, can sever the spinal cord, in which case the animal is paralyzed, but remains conscious.”

Source : rebrand.ly/CR11Rmdly.

7) **Nociceptive** (adj): relating to the perception or sensation of pain. **Nociception** (noun): reacting to something that may be harmful by sending pain signals to the brain.

8) **Monster-mothers**. This research truly existed.

In his book, *Animal Liberation*, Peter Singer writes about his visit to the New York City offices of United Action for Animals. He saw filing cabinets full of reports on experiments. What he read on the file labels was hard to forget: ‘Acceleration’, ‘Decompression’, ‘Spinal Cord

Notes

Injuries', 'Multiple Injuries', 'Burning', 'Blinding', 'Centrifuge', 'Concussion', 'Compression', 'Protein Deprivation', 'Freezing', 'Crushing', 'Shock', 'Asphyxiation', 'Starvation', 'Hindleg Beating', 'Hemorrhage', 'Immobilization', 'Isolation', 'Experimental Neurosis', 'Crowding', 'Punishment', 'Thirst', 'Stress', 'Heating', 'Drug Tests', 'Electrocution'...

Each one of these labels described a research program. One of those studies conducted for '**experimental neurosis**', for example, consisted in trying to induce a depressive state in infant monkeys. How did they proceed? They would allow the infants to become attached to surrogate **cloth mothers who would occasionally turn into monsters**, either at random or upon command of the researcher. These experiments were so elaborate that they even designed and built different sorts of **monster-mothers**. Some of them would suddenly expel compressed air with such force that the skin of the infants would practically blow off of their bodies! But they wouldn't let go of their monster-mother because she was all they had to comfort them. Other monster-mothers would all of a sudden begin to shake so violently that the baby's teeth would rattle, and all the baby did was cling tighter. Another model of monster-mother would brutally eject spikes; the experimenters would studiously write down that the infants would desperately hang onto the only emotional support they had, even with the terrible wounds inflicted upon them by the sharp nails. These experiments were not hastily set up. They were conducted by Harry Harlow, who was proud to say that he was the one who had come up with the 'fascinating idea', and they lasted over a long period of time. As Peter Singer indicated, from the moment Harlow began his studies on maternal deprivation, more than 250 series of experiments were carried out. They made more than 7,000 subjects suffer from distress, despair, anguish, 'psychological death', and, of course, death itself (the least to be expected, just to say...). All this just for the study of 'maternal deprivation', a subfile of 'Experimental Neurosis'.

Source : *Animal Liberation* by Peter Singer.

Notes

9) The biomass of the human species surpasses by tenfold the biomass of wild mammals. The biomass of farmed cattle, sheep and pigs represents fifteen times the biomass of wild mammals. So, altogether human beings and livestock have a total biomass that is twenty-five times superior to that of wild mammals. The latter therefore only represent four per cent of global biomass. I found the source material to realize this calculation in an article written by Pascal Combemorel, Associate Professor of Biology and Chief Editor for the Planet-Vie website. In his article, he presents the results obtained in 2018 by Yinon M. Bar-On, Rob Phillips, and Ron Milo, a team of researchers, and published under the name The Biomass Distribution on Earth.

Find it at rebrand.ly/bmdRmdly.

10) The name of the organization is 'RWAS (Reducing Wild-Animal Suffering)'.