

# XPERTS



## The Parawarriors

Hermann Maurer

Translated from the German by  
Wolfgang Wendligner and Douglas Balog





***XPERTS:***  
***The Parawarriors***

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## **Preface to “Xperts: The Parawarriors”**

This is one of the novels in the XPERTS Collection, a collection of novels that I am coordinating. I am also author of this particular book, “The Parawarriors”. However, other writers from all over the world contribute books to the XPERTS Collection, following an outline agreed upon between the authors and me, thus making sure that the books fit into a general ‘master plan’. I am reading and editing each of the books as they progress.

Each novel is completely self-contained, yet there is some coherence due to a set of persons that appear in each of the novels at some stage, usually playing a pivotal role. The books in the collection are an unusual mixture of adventure, human emotions, supernatural powers (‘parabilities’), science fiction with glimpses into the future, and all this interwoven with often detailed descriptions of interesting places from across the world, be it USA, Canada, the Arctic, Europe with its many different environments, Brazil, Pacific Islands, Australia, New Zealand, Africa, India, Bali, La Reunion, Indonesia... you name it!

Some of the books have been written originally in English, others in German, but they are generally available in at least those two languages. I want to thank all my friends for their continuing support, the Austrian publisher Freya and the US Publisher Booklocker for excellent cooperation, and my US agent Dr. Andrew Burt for his endless patience.

An early version of this book has been read by a number of friends, providing invaluable feedback. I am sorry that I have not been able to take up all suggestions, but this book would not be what it is without (in alphabetic



order) Christoph Albert, Ulli Dieter, Lydia Gruenzweig, Peter Lechner, Christoph Marschner, Lisa Maurer, Jörg Muehlbacher, Kai Poppe, Thorsten Ries and Günter Schreier. Remaining mistakes and inconsistencies are my fault. And let me also state very explicitly that all persons are fictional and have no counterpart in real life. However, most of the geographical descriptions are true to reality, or at least were true, when I was there.

Send me some feedback, positive or negative, to [hmaurer@iicm.edu](mailto:hmaurer@iicm.edu), will you!

Enjoy the book!

Hermann Maurer, Graz/ Austria, June 2004

## 1. The Second Nuclear War?

*December 2019*

For seventy-four years, mankind has restrained itself from using nuclear weapons. The devastating effects they had on Hiroshima and Nagasaki weighed heavily on our minds. This restraint is now coming to an end.

In May 2019, the civil war in the Indian province of Jammu and Kashmir has once again reached critical mass. Of India's twenty-eight provinces, Jammu and Kashmir is the only one with a strong Muslim majority; almost two thirds of its population practice Islam, while Hindus dominate in all the other provinces. Contrary to the Indian law, Hindu fundamentalists have been trying to win a direct influence on the legislature for almost twenty years. Because of the growing number of Muslim fundamentalists, the situation in Jammu and Kashmir has been becoming increasingly tense.

There is no doubt that Pakistan supports the Muslim agitators. The border between India and Pakistan has been closed since June 2019, diplomatic relations between the two countries are frozen, and another war is in the air. Pakistan seems to be just waiting for the Islamic rebels gain control of most of Kashmir, and despite massive military efforts on the part of the Indian government, their success can no longer be ruled out.

*December 8, 2019, 8:00 Delhi Time*

Tired and dejected, Indian Prime Minister Arun Vajassa enters his office in Delhi. Several worrying phone calls interrupted his sleep. The reports he finds on his desk confirm his worst fears: his government is losing control over Jammu and Kashmir.



There is no longer much room left for reasonable solutions. Over the past few weeks, Vajassa has tried to persuade the UN and the superpowers to act as a mediator between his country and Pakistan. Unfortunately, his efforts failed because this 'civil war' is considered an internal Indian issue, unlike the earlier open wars over Kashmir. Vajassa cannot help thinking back to the last international effort to try to resolve the conflict at the Kashmir Conference two years ago. Vajassa still remembers what General Ibn Muhammed Yussin, who still governs Pakistan, said in a private conversation there: "Six wars over Kashmir have not won us the province, but, should our Islamic brothers ever come to power there, and should they ask us for help, we'll be there for them. And we will make sure that there is no resistance from your side: our nuclear weapons will be aimed at every large Indian city."

For the last two years, and despite international protest, the number of Indian and Pakistani nuclear arms has sharply increased. Would General Yussin really carry out his threat? After all, Pakistan has held the nuclear first strike doctrine since 1988.

Suddenly, Vajassa's thoughts are interrupted by a knock on his door. His secretary tells him that the General Staff has been waiting for quite a while now. Vajassa looks at his watch. It's already 9:20. He has been brooding over the situation for more than an hour, and has already kept his generals waiting for twenty minutes.

He rushes to the conference room. It is clear that the meeting will be unusually tense. The air force general in charge of the nuclear arsenal summarizes the situation:

"Unfortunately, I have mostly bad news. Let me start with the worst. Pakistan has moved an unexpectedly large number of nuclear weapons from Dalbandin, their test area in northern Baluchistan, to the missile silos close to Dalbandin and southwest of Islamabad. We have to face the fact that this would allow Pakistan to wipe out all large Indian cities. A first strike could kill two hundred million of our people. The

radioactive contamination and the breakdown of any infrastructure would probably spell the end of our country."

Vajassa remains composed. "This news does not come unexpectedly, but we seem to have reached a new level now. How about the situation in Kashmir?"

"Terrible. We've lost control of most of Jammu and Kashmir. Massive Pakistani forces have gathered at the Line of Control. They have 2000 tanks and 280,000 men there. We don't have much to counter that, but we do have thirty percent of our entire armed forces at the southern border of the province. If we were to go in, we'd be sure to face huge resistance. We know that the rebels have long been preparing to blow up bridges and other strategic targets in such a case. We have reports that almost 800,000 Hindus have been arrested over the past several days in order to guarantee that the majority of the population supports the rebellion. The rebels have taken over the radio station in Srinagar. They keep calling for more support and are now officially asking Pakistan for assistance. And Pakistan seems to be preparing to acquiesce."

Vajassa pales: the words of the Pakistani general still echo in his head. So they will march in! Indian forces will not be able to stop them. Should we just give them Jammu and Kashmir without a fight? No! That is unthinkable. They would kill all the Hindus there. And who knows what the Hindus in "the rest of India" would do to those one hundred million Muslims living in India in retaliation! That could even force Iran and other Islamic powers into the conflict.

Jammu and Kashmir must be defended: India has no option but victory, and after all, India's army is, as a whole, superior to Pakistan's. Shouldn't that guarantee success? Pakistan has desperately tried to match India's military strength, but they realized that they could never keep up with an opponent who is economically five times stronger. That is why General Yussin threatened to take India's cities as nuclear 'hostages'.



The members of the General Staff wait for Vajassa's reaction. They know that he has to make a difficult decision. Following an ancient Indian ritual, he breathes deeply seven times. Then he speaks:

"We have no choice. The very existence of our country is in danger. We must eliminate the nuclear weapons in Pakistan." The generals gasp. They know what this means.

The Prime Minister continues, "We will arm the missiles we have in Chandipur<sup>1</sup> with nuclear warheads and destroy the two bases in Pakistan. How quickly can we do that?"

Without hesitation, General R. Rao answers: "It will take about three hours before we can launch the rockets from Chandipur—2 p.m. would be realistic. Our base in the Thar desert could be ready even faster."

The Prime Minister shakes his head. "The Thar base is too dangerous. Pakistan could already be trying to neutralize it at this very moment. They would find it much harder to deal with our base on the East Coast; they have only a few inaccurate medium-range missiles there and cannot deliver the warheads to more distant targets."

They all nod. This argument has been discussed very often.

Vajassa continues, "Begin preparing for the destruction of the bases. Use impact detonators to minimize the radioactive contamination in the area. Don't forget, we don't want to destroy Pakistan; we only want to get rid of their nuclear weapons. At a little after 2 p.m. General Rao and I will activate the nuclear weapons via a high security connection. Even though we're in a hurry, we have to make sure that Pakistan has no idea that our first strike is on its way; otherwise, the first strike could be on us."

In spite of this last warning, Vajassa knows that Pakistan and other countries, will soon know about their preparations: it will be a race against time. If Yussin carries out his threat and rains nuclear bombs over India before they can stop him, it

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<sup>1</sup> Chandipur nuclear base on the coast of Orissa province

could spell the end of the subcontinent. The nuclear fallout could also mean the end of the world.

*December 8, 2019, 11:00 a.m. Islamabad time.*

In a bombproof bunker in Islamabad, General Ibn Muhammed Yussin, President of Pakistan, discusses his plans for an invasion of Kashmir with his general staff.

Suddenly, General Massuda bursts into the room. "The Indians are opening their silos on the East Coast! They're getting ready to attack!"

"Are you certain? Are those the only silos they're preparing?"

But the agents's reports all agree: whatever the Indians are planning, it is not merely a major attack, but a nuclear assault on Pakistan's nuclear arsenal.

Yussin is horrified. He had always thought that threatening Vajassa two years ago was enough to keep him from having to take any extreme actions. He had hoped that this would force Vajassa to accept the Pakistani annexation of Kashmir. He was wrong. He knows exactly what the Indians have in mind: they "only" want to eliminate his nuclear weapons and then lead a conventional war in defense of Jammu and Kashmir. India's military strength would guarantee success in this case.

Not even for a second does Yussin consider giving in. He could still prevent an Indian nuclear assault by halting the invasion of Kashmir, contacting Vajassa and agreeing to the nuclear disarmament treaty that has long been on the table. But wouldn't he lose face that way? Without hesitation, Yussin decides to set the course for the greatest catastrophe in the history of mankind:

"There is no way we can prevent the nuclear attack but our enemies will have to pay the price. I order you to aim all available nuclear missiles at targets in India, including all their large cities. Make sure to set the bombs to explode at the



optimal altitude to guarantee maximum destruction. When can we launch them?"

"We are already prepared. The first missiles can be in the air by 1330 hours, but...won't the Indians retaliate with all their might?"

"Not if we destroy them immediately and completely. Our attack will hit them so fast that they will no longer be able to launch their missiles. They are the same kind of weaklings as the USA. They made sure that they need two authorities to activate their nuclear weapons."

They interrupt the meeting of the general staff to initiate the attack. The generals cannot keep from shuddering: even if Yussin's plan is successful, they'll still murder hundreds of millions of civilians. The radioactive fallout will contaminate their own land, and rest of the whole world.

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India's preparations are noticed in other countries too. However, everyone underestimates the seriousness of the situation. What they don't know is that both sides will launch their missiles at the same time: 1330 in Islamabad is the same time as 1400 in Delhi.

The superpowers have so far considered this confrontation to be just like all the others in the region's long history of conflict. Now, they are slowly beginning to realize the weight of the situation. The lines of communication run hot. There is enormous pressure on India and Pakistan. Soon it is clear that Pakistan will not withdraw. Under these circumstances, some governments even empathize with India's decision to launch a preemptive strike.

Even New Zealand gets into the matter. The Prime Minister contacts her man in Pakistan: "We're in a state of Emergency. The Indians are activating Chandipur; the

Pakistanis are activating both their big nuclear bases. Have all precautions been taken yet?"

She gets a hasty response: "Yes, besides the usual uncertainties. We also know that the missiles will be launched at exactly 2 p.m. Delhi time. Let's hope for the best."

The PM thanks her "communications agency" on Great Barrier Island<sup>2</sup> for putting together the secure connection. It's late in the evening in New Zealand and the PM knows that a long night is yet to come. Difficult telephone calls to the USA, Russia, and China lie ahead of her. The governments of these countries will be stunned by her optimism.

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*December 8, 2019, 14:00, Delhi*

General R. Rao reports to the Indian Prime Minister Arun Vajassa: "Everything is ready in Chandipur. We can now initiate the launch sequence."

Rao is the first to enter the code. Then it is Vajassa's turn. He hesitates for a second. "This is the first time in seventy-four years that humans have used nuclear weapons against each other. We are doing it in a very limited way, but still, many people will be killed. Let's hope that our missiles destroy theirs before they can be launched."

Exhausted, Rao nods at Vajassa. Neither of them know that General Yussin is almost simultaneously initiating the launch sequence for hundreds of nuclear weapons in Pakistan. Their preemptive strike will come too late.

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<sup>2</sup> An island just off the coast of Auckland



*December 8, 2019, 14:02 (Delhi time), Chandipur,  
Orissa Province*

Standing on concrete launch pads, twenty missiles armed with nuclear warheads are protruding from the silos in Chandipur. The control center is several hundred meters away. The starting sequence for the launch has begun. The first rocket will take off in three minutes.

But what's this? Just behind the missiles, and 500 meters behind a barbed wire fence, thousands of 'holy' cattle graze in no man's land. Suddenly, they all seem to go completely insane. They rush the fence throwing themselves against it. The first cows fall to the ground, bleeding profusely, but hundreds more follow, coming in from all directions. The guards on the watchtowers, all devout Hindus, are more than puzzled and can see no way to rectify the situation: how can they shoot these holy animals? While Gopal Tilak, commander of the guards, is still baffled by the sight, hundreds of crows fly into the windows. Some of them die and fall to the ground, but others follow and break through the screens to enter the control tower.

The entire fauna seems to be out of control: the crows are followed by swarms of wasps that attack the stunned control personnel. Stung dozens of times, many of the soldiers break down in pain. Gopal tries desperately to reach the guards at the other watchtowers to order them to shoot the cows, but the lines have been disconnected. When he sees mice, rats, and hundreds of other rodents chewing through everything that even looks like a cable, he knows why.

Gopal finds it hard to get to an intact window screen. He can barely manage to lift himself up. Finally, he can see the unbelievable scene. An uncountable number of birds are flying into the silos. More and more cattle storm the base, bellowing madly and attacking the missiles with their horns. All the animals seem unafraid of death.

At first, the fifty-meter high missiles seem to be withstanding the attack, but even the huge pile of dead and



dying cattle can't stop the others from attacking. They all seem to be coming from the same direction, as though guided by some unseen power. While chaos descends over the control center, the first missile begins to tilt. The gyroscope, which stabilizes the rocket, has reacted to the situation and disarmed the warhead. Finally, with the screech of torn and battered metal, the missile collapses. With wide eyes and gaping mouths, Gopal and his soldiers watch as missile after missile falls to the onslaught of the animals.

"Holy cow! They don't like nuclear war!" one of the soldiers exclaims reverently. They all look at each other in consternation: is this the work of the gods?

In a nearby room, the red telephone rings: it is Delhi, where they have been watching the scene from a surveillance satellite.

"What the hell's going on there?" General Rao, who is standing next to the Prime Minister, shouts into the phone.

"I have no idea," answers Gopal, "I don't know why, but thousands of wild cattle have stormed the platforms and toppled our missiles. All the warheads have been deactivated. The men think that this was the work of the gods, telling us not to fight with nuclear weapons."

"So when can they be ready for launch?" General Rao sputters.

"I can't tell you now, but I'm sure it will take days."

Rao slowly hangs the phone up and looks at Vajassa. "So shall we activate the missiles in the Thar desert?"

Vajassa shakes his head. "This may or may not have been the work of the gods, but whatever it was, it was very unusual. What's most important now is to find out what the situation is in Kashmir and Pakistan."

Deep inside, Vajassa hopes that this was the work of New Zealand's PM, who visited him not long ago and mentioned she could do something to solve the conflict.

With the decreasing tumult in Chandipur, nobody notices the tiny drones that swarm around, surveying the situation. They are sending images and sounds to Klaus Baumgartner,

who, with his wife Sandra and their young companion Stephan, receives them with relieved astonishment.

"I can't believe it Stephan, you did it again. You and your paraskills— you've just saved the world!" exclaims Klaus.

"Yes you certainly have!" agrees Sandra, an emotiopath, "and the trick with the sacred cows was simply brilliant. There are two things I noticed. First, those guards were completely helpless. They didn't know what to do. A good Hindu would never shoot a cow. Second, they believe that the gods sent the cows to prevent a nuclear war. They're absolutely sure about that. It's the only explanation they can come up with."

Klaus is the first to calm down again. "Our work here is finished. You did a good job, Stephan. But now it's time to take care of the others. I'm glad that no other paras<sup>3</sup> were able to interfere with the plan. I'm afraid they have been busy elsewhere, mostly in Pakistan. We can only hope that they don't interfere with Barry and your family. It'll take us more than an hour to reach them with the Moller 800."

On their way to the Moller, Stephan asks, "Klaus, how did you manage to get the 800 into India?"

Klaus smirks. "Well, you know that the PM sort of fancies your father." He notices Stephan's disapproval. "I mean, how she appreciates the work of our group, of course. Remember, it was her who gave us permission to operate the Moller 600<sup>4</sup> in New Zealand. It enabled us to make them so popular in New Zealand that now they're even used in rescue operations in the USA.

"Anyway, the people at Moller gave us the 800 as a sort of thank you. This baby can carry two and a half tons, that's about fifteen people and their luggage, and still fly faster than the speed of sound. Most importantly, the fuselage has 'Stealth' lamination. This makes it difficult for the 800 to be

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<sup>3</sup> 'Para' is a contraction of parabilistist.

<sup>4</sup> A predecessor of the Moller 800, and the first useful model of a flying car with VTOL capabilities.



detected with radar. I hope that's enough to get us across the Pakistan border twice. It's pretty heavily patrolled, though."

"If this operation is so important, why did Aroha and Herb stay on Great Barrier Island?" asks Stephan.

"Well, first, you know that Herb is a paradedecelerator and as such, might not be of much use here. But second and more important, Aroha and Herb provide a secure and direct communications link with the PM in New Zealand through their Mindcaller<sup>5</sup>."

"But wouldn't they be more useful if they were here with us? I mean, we could get in contact with Barry and my parents that way, right?"

Klaus nods. "In principal, yes. But such a direct 'connection' takes a lot of energy and strength on the parts of Aroha and Herb. The further away they are, the more energy they need."

Stephan still doesn't understand this.

"Do you really want to know all the details?" Klaus sighs.

Stephan nods insistently and Klaus gives in: "All right, let me give you an example. When the PM wants to start the connection with Marcus via Aroha and Herb, she is 500 kilometers away from Great Barrier Island and 10,000 kilometers from Pakistan. You could say the strain is 500 times 10,000, which makes 5,000,000 kilometers worth of energy. But if we use Aroha and Herb for a direct connection, then both your father and we are 10,000 kilometers away, 10,000 times 10,000, or 100,000,000 kilometers. So the strain would be twenty times greater than it is for them now. Is it clear now?"

"No," Stephan sighs, "but I've had enough of math for now. I'm really tired," he mumbles before falling into an exhausted sleep.

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<sup>5</sup> The Mindcaller enables Herb and Aroha to communicate telepathically with anyone they like and know well. See "*Xperts: The Paracomunicator..*"

Klaus and Sandra are happy that at least Stephan can rest now. Sandra leans against Klaus. They quietly discuss what they think is about to come. They don't yet regret that they have agreed to the PM's wishes and taken up this mission.

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*December 8, 2019, 13:30, Islamabad*

While General Rao and Prime Minister Vajassa are giving orders for the preemptive strike against Pakistan, Pakistani President Yussin declares total nuclear war on India. A five-minute countdown begins in both Pakistani nuclear bases. Soon every Indian city will be annihilated.

At the same time Barry, the paradoppelganger<sup>6</sup>, is in a trance on a bed at the New Zealand Embassy in Islamabad. The personnel of the embassy have strict orders not to disturb him. In addition, Barry has locked the door and all the windows. Not even the ambassador knows what this is all about. All the PM has told him is that Barry is a 'very special person' who, for some reason, will disappear into a room for two days of complete silence. His every wish must be fulfilled.

While Barry is lying there, his almost identical paraprojection has been at the nuclear base for fifteen minutes. Barry knows that hundreds of nuclear bombs will be launched toward the Indian cities from there. His job is 'rather simple' as Marcus, his paramentor explained it: he will only have to prevent the rockets from being launched. Parabarry (Barry's projection) materializes in the huge underground control center of the nuclear base. Normally, it takes dozens of bioscans to get into this 'holy of holies'.

Supposedly, his job is 'rather simple' because the entire system is controlled by Windows-based computers of 2008

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<sup>6</sup> See "Xperts: *The Paradoppelganger*."



vintage. Actually, it should be easy to infect this antiquated system with a virus that will disable it. The computer team in Auckland has prepared such a virus: all Parabarry has to do is insert the prepared disc into the PC and type some simple answers to the prompts. Then he can disappear again. It's impossible to manipulate this system from outside because of its firewalls. From the inside though, such a system can be easily infected once you've passed all the physical security measures. For Parabarry, this is easily achieved.

Should something go wrong, Barry can always set off one of the many conventional explosive devices inside the computer complex and paralyze the communication and steering devices of the missiles.

Barry doesn't find it hard to locate the place where the explosives are kept and to attach a short fuse. The fuse and a couple of matches were all he could take with him when he materialized. For a second, he is tempted to just light the fuse and immediately disappear. He knows that this would guarantee that the rockets weren't launched, but hundreds of people at the base would be killed in the explosion. If possible, he would like to avoid that.

Carefully, Barry approaches a door. He is sure to find an unguarded room with computers there. He knows that they must be connected to the central network. As expected, the door is locked. Parabarry materializes on the other side of the door in the usual manner: he withdraws into his real body, which is lying in the embassy 200 kilometers away, then he materializes again on the other side of the locked door. The room is empty of people but several computers are working. It is almost too simple: he inserts the disk, answers a couple of prompts and receives the "please wait your commands are being processed" message. He feels safe already, but it is too soon.

Another door in the room opens. A Pakistani soldier comes in and reacts impressively fast: he pulls his weapon and shoots Barry and the computer. The screen implodes with a soft pop and white smoke rises from the back of the monitor

housing. Barry has no idea if he has successfully initiated the virus.

More soldiers enter the room. Barry has no choice. He has to withdraw Parabarry. It's now 13:31. If he hasn't managed to activate the virus, the missiles with their lethal payloads will be launched very shortly. One more time, he sends his doppelganger and a fuse into the huge underground computer room. Before he lights the fuse, he can hear the countdown begin over a loudspeaker: "Two minutes, thirty seconds to launch..." He hesitates for a second. Suddenly, he can hear a familiar female voice coming from the loudspeaker: "This is not a countdown for the missiles. This is just a countdown for a great flop. Nothing will be launched here today. I forbid it in the name of Allah! And no more explosions are necessary. Barry."

Now Barry knows for sure: the virus is working. His paraprojection reunites with his body in Islamabad.

Barry is as clear-headed as all the computer experts on the base are confused. They soon know that a destructive virus has somehow infected the system. The military staff in charge of the base do not want to believe that there won't be a launch today. When all the lights slowly begin to go out and the doors cannot be opened anymore, they realize that the Indians must be using new methods against them.

The situation is especially frustrating for General Yussin: it takes hours to find out what happened.

It is good that Barry doesn't know that some of the computer technicians will be summarily hanged the next day.

Back in the embassy, Barry surprises the personnel with his unexpected reappearance. With provisions, good maps, and in local garb, Barry gets into an old rattletrap truck and heads north to meet the rest of the group by the Moller. He is looking forward to the reunion, especially with his wife Monika, whose paralocator skills made it important that she joined Marcus's team in Pakistan.



She knows that Adler, a member of the PPU<sup>7</sup> in Brussels, is nearby. Time and again, the PPU has proven to be a danger to the paragroup, so they decided to find out as much as possible about them and neutralize them if necessary. All the members of the paragroup, and the PM of New Zealand, are worried about the PPU's presence in India and Pakistan. What could they be up to?

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December 8, 2019, 13:30 Islamabad time, Nuclear weapons base in Baluchistan, northern Pakistan

Here too, the launch procedure against India has been started, and the paragroup from New Zealand will try to disrupt it and prevent nuclear war again.

The team here is especially large. While they were sure that Stephan, Klaus, and Sandra would not find it hard to stop the Indian missiles, and that Barry's parabilities would ensure success in Islamabad, this is a more complicated case. With this base near Dalbandin, a god-forsaken little dump in Baluchistan, the situation is not very promising, even though the team consists of powerful parabilitists: Marcus is a telekinetic; with his pseudohands, he can reach through solid material over a distance of several hundred meters. Just by thinking, he can move or throw objects. He can also change his subjective time, a skill which has helped the group time and again. Marcus's wife Maria is a paraseer. She can look through solid material and can also use her eyes as a telescope and a microscope. Their daughter Lena is a parascout. She can sense when other parabilitists are near. Cynthia can erase the memory of any individual to a certain extent. Barry's wife Monika completes the group.

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<sup>7</sup> Parapsychological Unit



It is difficult to get anywhere near the base unnoticed. An even bigger problem is that Marcus cannot use his pseudohands here because the base is fenced off in a radius of one kilometer.

There only seems to be one reasonable procedure: Maria will scan the base with her paraeyes and describe it to Marcus. Then, Marcus will speed up his subjective time to break into the facility, along with a couple of satchel charges. He will set them off in the control center. He will also try to cause as much confusion as possible in order to escape.

They have spent the last couple of days planning the operation: they organized a getaway car, an old small truck with a load of goods, to disguise their intent. This truck will take them all to the meeting point. Or so they think...

Marcus looks at his watch. At 1330 sharp, he speeds up his subjective time two hundred fold. He is now able to move at about 1000 kilometers per hour. He is now so fast that he is almost invisible to 'normal' eyes. By the time the sirens at the outer perimeter go off, Marcus has already entered through a hole he made with his pseudohands. It only takes him four seconds to reach the main buildings of the base. He storms like a tank into one of the buildings. He only uses those hallways that Maria has described as 'quiet'. He tears through locked doors with his pseudohands and throws large objects against them. Even the highest level of security alert cannot stop him: he is like an invisible ghost who throws bombs, rips cables out of the walls, and breaks water pipes, thus creating a hail of shorts in the control center and stopping the countdown. The nuclear missiles stand about 300 meters away from the building. He grabs a large package of explosives, which Maria had located before, and throws it in among the missiles. There is a huge explosion that destroys the rockets but leaves the bombs intact. He knew that the altitude detonators would prevent any mass explosion of the warheads, but it doesn't take long for the base to resemble a battlefield. No one will ever be able to explain what happened here, and no one will ever guess that it was caused by a single individual.

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With great relief, Marcus and his team leave Dalbandin unnoticed. What follows is a strenuous drive: 130 kilometers over rocky dirt tracks to the meeting point. A short conversation with the PM over the Mindcaller confirms that all three operations were successful and that Pakistan's nuclear bases incurred heavy damage. The PM congratulates Marcus. She expects to see him immediately upon the group's return to New Zealand. But first they have to dissolve their own base of operations in Sarnath, northern India.

When Monika also reports that Adler is now far away, probably back in Europe, everyone is even more relieved. The PPU wasn't so dangerous after all.

But half an hour later, this relief will vanish.



## 2. The Black Afternoon

*December 8, 2019*

Klaus, Sandra and Stephan are approaching the India-Pakistan border in the Moller 800. Klaus knows that this will be the most difficult point. He cannot allow the authorities to detect their crossing.

Barry, in his truck, has almost reached the meeting point north of Islamabad. He stops, hides the truck behind some bushes, and takes a rest in the shade of a rock overhang. He will stay there until he is in radio contact with the others.

Marcus steers the car over the pitted track. They are all very tired. Maria is sitting next to him, and Monika and Cynthia are behind them; Cynthia is feeling a little redundant because of her inaction. Behind them, Lena is lying on a blanket in the seatless back of the truck. Next to her are tools, vegetables, a spare tire, and a jack. Her little book that she uses as a journal is in front of her. The ride is so bumpy that she can barely write a word.

There are still eighty kilometers to the meeting point. They are all in traditional clothing; the women are thickly veiled in chadors. Marcus has artificially darkened his skin. This way they hope that the heat will remain their biggest problem. They reach a curve in the road with an almost vertical drop on the right. There is no guardrail.

Marcus is surprised: 'why didn't I notice that on the way up? No one would survive a fall like that.' He drives deliberately and carefully. Once he has successfully rounded the curve, he decides to contact Aroha and Herb via the Mindcaller to tell them that everything is going as planned. He also tells them about the treacherous stretch of road they just passed and asks them to inform Klaus, Barry, and the PM.

After another narrow and dangerous curve, Lena rushes up. "Daddy, there're paras here! One of them is dangerous and evil. He's even worse than the Brodlyns<sup>8</sup>!"

They all look up immediately. Three men are standing in front of them in the middle of the street. One of them is very tall. With his dark complexion, he looks Pakistani. The second one is scrawny and looks like someone from southern India. The third one, of medium build, is a grinning European. Marcus and Maria recognize him immediately: this is Justo, a telekinetic not nearly as strong as Marcus, who took over Klaus Baumgartner's job at the PPU more than ten years ago. For some reason, Justo feels only deadly hate for Marcus and his group.

Marcus is tired after the operation at the base in Dalbandin and reacts too slowly. Maria is a bit faster, but it is too late to warn Marcus in time. The tall Pakistani, Tata Musharaf, is a parahypnotist. Just by letting his eyes glide over Marcus and the group, he turns them into motionless objects, divested of freewill. Against his will, Marcus stops the car.

Tata Musharaf fails to notice Lena in the back of the vehicle. Nevertheless, Lena can feel a wave of negative paraenergy. She can barely move her body. She is terrified with the feeling that they will not be able to escape. With a last great effort, she scrawls into her book, "Throw my ashes into the Ganges near Varanasi..."

She doesn't get any further. The scrawny Indian has noticed her and informs Tata. The Indian is Justo's trump card, a parascout, and he quickly noticed that there are five, not four, parabilitists in the car. Soon Lena can no longer move even her pen.

Justo steps closer to the car. In a wave of triumph he shouts, "Finally I've got your ass, Marcus, and on top of that, you serve me your friends and even your wife on a silver platter. Hey Maria, remember me? Can it be that you have underestimated me? You may be a stronger telekinetic,

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<sup>8</sup> See "*Xperts: The Paradoppelganger*".



Marcus, but there are things that I can do that you cannot. For example, I first seduced Baumgartner's wife and then I seduced his girlfriend Greta. I can have then all! Who knows? Maybe I'll give Maria a chance in the end. But first, Marcus, I'll have to end your insignificant life once and for all. You! Over there!" He points to Monika. "You will now kill Marcus... Come on Tata, it's your turn."

Tata looks at Monika: "Tell the girl behind you to give you the jack."

Lena doesn't want to do it, but she has no control over her body. She has to give the jack to Monika. Her psychological resistance is not strong enough to fight the order.

"Good. Now, Monika, show us how strong you are. Kill Marcus."

Monika grimaces in disgust. She doesn't want to follow the order, but Tata is stronger than she. Against her will, the parahypnotic makes her beat him about the head and shoulders again and again. Finally, drenched in blood, Marcus collapses. With the last vestiges of her psychological energy, Monika tries to soften her blows before they strike Marcus...or does she only imagine that? Tata and the Indian throw his lifeless body into the space next to Lena, then brutally tie the girl up and tape her mouth. They bind her to the wall of the truck. Then, after they have also tied up Cynthia and Monika, they sit Maria at the steering wheel.

Now Tata concentrates his orders completely on Maria. "You just keep driving quietly. At the next curve, take a left. Then you will cross a bridge where you will have a wonderful view of the abyss below. You will speed up to fifty kilometers per hour and the left side of your car will hit the right pillar of the bridge. Unfortunately this will kill you, and the car will fall into the canyon below. Make it look like an accident, is that clear?"

Maria repeats everything. She understands the atrociousness of the situation but is still incapable of disobeying the order. Somewhere in the back of her head, she

can feel an enormous well of tears, self-blame and guilt for not having listened to Klaus, who has always tried to convince them to be better prepared against evil parabilitists and always to use the device he created for the Brodlyn affair<sup>9</sup>. But now it is all too late.

Justo savors his victory. "Ah, Maria, if Marcus wasn't already dead, I'd make you beg me to love you. You would undress in front of me and beg me to pardon you and your friends. But that would only be half the fun. Also, I have to catch my flight back to Brussels and you seem to hate yourself already, don't you?"

Justo gives Tata new orders. He makes sure that Maria will not be able to free herself from the hypnotic suggestion. Justo and his companions walk over to their Jeep. They drive slowly back toward Dalbandin. One last time, Justo sticks his head out the window and calls back, "Have fun, kids!"

That phrase was the hypnotic 'key'. Maria can't help but to start the car and drive away. Her condition is indescribable: she knows what she is doing and knows that she should not be doing it, but she has no control over her body or her senses. When she sees the curve leading to the bridge, she accelerates. Against her will, she drives further and further to the right, closer and closer to the gorge. The front of the car hits the right pillar: with the very last flickering of her own will, she tries to fight the hypnotic order. This may be the reason why the car doesn't hit the pillar exactly with the left side, but a bit more toward the middle. This slows the truck down considerably and Marcus's lifeless body is ejected. Then the truck tilts to the right but doesn't fall into the canyon. Because of a lack of momentum, it gets stuck between two large pine trees. Maria is not wearing a seatbelt. She hits the steering wheel with her head and loses consciousness. Monika and Lena, who are sitting on the left side of the truck, are dead. Cynthia rolls on top of Monika, whose body softens the impact, but like Lena and Monika, Cynthia is tied up. Now the truck starts to burn.

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<sup>9</sup> See "*Xperts: The Paradoppelgänger*".



Marcus is severely injured. He is unconscious, but he isn't dead. Because he was thrown from the car, he now lies just above the abyss, but still on the street. Suddenly, pieces of his environment become clear again. He does not understand why he is lying here on the street. He cannot move. Both his legs are badly broken, a rib seems to have perforated a lung, and his upper arm is grotesquely bent. He can now see the car with its lifeless bodies below him. But something seems to move inside. Is that Cynthia? He recognizes Maria, collapsed over the steering wheel. And there is Lena, tied up like a package. Marcus tries to speed up his subjective time to the maximum. It's nearly impossible. Without thinking, driven by love and instinct, he grabs Maria with his pseudoarms, pulls her from the driver's seat, and throws her roughly next to him on the street. He is overcome by waves of pain and close to losing consciousness again. But there is still Lena! With supernatural effort, he manages to rip the ropes off of her, lift her up, and lay her next to Maria.

Quiet and sleep is all he wants, but he can't give up. He breaks the ropes binding Monika and Cynthia. Cynthia manages to climb out of the car, through the flames and up to the road. Marcus notices that Monika doesn't do the same. With a scream of pain that only Cynthia can hear, Marcus grabs Monika and lifts her from the burning car. Cynthia will never be able to get this scream, or this brave man, out of her head...

Marcus sinks into deep unconsciousness before Monika is safe. Monika falls down only one meter above Cynthia. She starts to roll down the steep slope toward Cynthia, and threatens to drag them both into the abyss. But Cynthia has the tenacity of a mountain goat. She holds on tightly to slow Monika's fall and somehow manages to lift them both back up onto the road. What she now sees is a true catastrophe: both Lena and Monika seem to be dead, Marcus appears to have terrible head and shoulder wounds, and Maria isn't moving at all. Cynthia is desperate but she does not lose her head. She telepathically contacts Aroha and Herb. Her description of the



situation is short, but she makes one thing clear: "Get the Moller here right now!"

Aroha and Herb immediately contact Klaus, who was surprised to find it so easy to cross the Pakistani border unnoticed. At least that is what he thinks. After hearing about the catastrophe, he advises Barry that he will be two hours late because of an incident in Baluchistan.

Barry is infuriated. His position is almost on Klaus's way. It would make much more sense to pick him up first and, after all, his parabilities could probably be of great help. However, Barry is unable to contact Klaus again. Hours and hours pass before the others pick him up.

In the meantime, Klaus flies to the scene, which Cynthia has described to him. He has no problems landing the Moller, but when he gets out, he faces a disaster far beyond what he could have imagined: only Cynthia seems to be relatively unhurt; Marcus is alive, but severely injured and almost unresponsive. Maria must have a bad concussion, maybe even a fractured skull, and appears to be in a coma. Lena and Monika are dead.

Stephan, who arrives at the scene with Klaus, now stands in front of his dead sister. He is paralyzed at first, but when he also sees the terrible condition of his parents, he cannot help but to break down in tears. After a little while, he recovers and starts questioning Cynthia on every little detail. The situation is very intense and Cynthia can barely handle it. But even Klaus and Sandra can't stop Stephan. He goes on until he is sure he knows everything, and then becomes silent and unresponsive.

Klaus and Sandra help Marcus and Maria as much as they can. They have to be very careful with Stephan though; he seems to have fallen into a sort of catatonia. Suddenly, he sighs deeply and tears begin streaming from his eyes. "Lena, Lena, my baby sister, why did they take you away?"

Klaus and Sandra support Stephan as he walks unsteadily to the Moller. He wants to be close to his sister, whose body

lies next to Monika's. Stephan sits down beside her. He carefully places her head on his thigh. Her face is pale but not wounded. The rest of her body is covered by a sleeping bag, which fortunately keeps Stephan from seeing how terribly mutilated she really is. Cynthia sits down next to Stephan. She puts her arm around the boy, who is shaking in grief and pain.

Now it's time for Klaus to pick up Barry. He will have to confront him with the truth. Barry does not know yet that his wife, Monika, is dead. Finally, he is shown her corpse. His first reaction is stiffness, then a flood of accusations breaks out of him: "I always told you that I didn't want to be separated from her! Why didn't you pick me up first? I might've been able to save her! Why did Marcus save his Maria but not my Monika?"

They all know that Barry is not really himself at this moment; nevertheless, every single accusation hurts: when Klaus decided not to pick up Barry on his way to the site of the crash, Monika was already dead. There was nothing Barry could have done about it. Making Monika part of the team was agreed on a long time ago, and Barry hadn't objected. If Marcus had lifted Monika from the wreck before Maria, would Monika have survived? It is difficult, maybe impossible, to say. After all, Monika died from internal trauma and not because of the fire, so an earlier rescue wouldn't have helped. And who could blame Marcus for saving his wife first? But this very woman, his own wife, will later reproach him for having saved her first, and Klaus will never understand why...

When the paragroup is finally ready to leave the scene, their mood is the blackest it has ever been. But still, they have prevented a nuclear war. They saved the lives of hundreds of millions of people; maybe they even saved the entire human race.

After all of Pakistan's nuclear weapons have been destroyed, General Yussin agrees to sign an arms control treaty with India. He also agrees to recognize the Line of Control as the legitimate border between India and Pakistan. Suddenly, an



even greater relaxation of relations between the two countries seems possible, which for political reasons have had no commercial exchanges for more than sixty years.

But the relaxation has come too late for the paragroup. Two of them are dead and they still have to cross the dangerous border one more time. Klaus had hoped that his first crossing would go unnoticed. Unfortunately, this was not the case. The Pakistani Air Force was not able to react quickly enough to this fast and unusual flying object, which was barely detectable on their radar systems. But this time they are ready. Forty kilometers from the border, two jet fighters suddenly appear behind the Moller. Klaus is taken by surprise. He had hoped to be safe in the falling darkness. He does not respond to their orders to land. The Pakistanis open fire with automatic cannons. The Moller is hit several times, but does not suffer heavy damage. But the situation is more than critical. Marcus is still unconscious, he can't interfere, and Klaus's evasive maneuvers are not enough.

Suddenly, Barry comes out of his catatonic state: he materializes a paraprotection in the cockpit of the fighter immediately behind them. He manages to interfere with the steering of the pilot, who is so shocked that he can only barely make an emergency landing. Barry orders his paraprotection back and repeats the procedure with the second fighter, but before he can do that, several more bullets enter the Moller from underneath. One bullet rips Stephan's seat out of its housing and Stephan's head hits a metal strip near Cynthia, who is horrified when she realizes that Stephan doesn't seem to be moving anymore.

Before Barry can land the second fighter, another slug enters the Moller from the front. It shatters Sandra's skull. Klaus is so shaken by the sudden horrible death of his wife that he loses control over his actions. In desperation, he takes Sandra's hand, still warm with life. He cannot help looking at his wife's mutilated head, and forgets to steer the Moller, which now careens aimlessly through the air.



For the first time in her life, Cynthia finds it necessary to use her parability on a friend. She bends forward, turns Klaus's head with one hand, and disconnects his hand from Sandra's with the other. She then erases the last ten minutes of Klaus's memory with her paraenergy. She also takes a blanket, covers Sandra, and lays her to the side, making it look as though she is asleep.

It is an eerie moment when Klaus realizes that the Moller is about to crash. Somehow, he regains control of the craft and says calmly, "We must've been hit, but everything is OK. We'll fly straight to Delhi to bring the wounded to the hospital. Is everyone all right?"

Cynthia answers haltingly, "Barry and I are OK; Stephan and Sandra are exhausted, sleeping; Marcus and Maria are both still unconscious, but their pulses are stable." Barry realizes what Cynthia has done and knows that they will have to keep lying to Klaus to guarantee that he flies as safely as possible.

Klaus contacts several institutions in New Zealand, Sarnath, and Delhi. He is surprised at how much has already been prepared: the PM of New Zealand has been with them through the whole operation and has taken several precautions for emergency scenarios. Even though the paragroup's main base of operations is in Sarnath, the PM has informed her ambassador in New Delhi to make sure that several emergency rooms in a private hospital nearby have been prepared. This hospital also has a helipad big enough for the Moller to land on. The PM is still in shock after hearing about the deaths of Lena and Monika and the condition of Marcus and Maria. She does not yet know about Sandra's death and Stephan's injuries. As far as Cynthia can tell, Stephan seems to have gotten away with 'just' a concussion. In the meantime, he is lying on the floor, and his eyes have opened again. Cynthia tries to keep him calm and convince him not to try to sit up.

Without noticing it herself, Cynthia has become the key player of the group: Barry is still blocked by Monika's death, Klaus works very professionally, but only because she let him



forget that Sandra is dead too. As soon as he realizes it, his behavior will be unpredictable again.

They are near enough to Delhi now to be able to communicate with the e-Helper. In India, broadband wireless networks can still only be found around larger cities. Cynthia contacts the Ambassador of New Zealand, who is with Dr. Sharma, Head of Medical Personnel at the private clinic. Finally, Cynthia's efforts to learn Hindi pay off: now she can communicate with the doctor without Klaus understanding a word:

"Our pilot doesn't know that his wife, sitting next to him, is dead. He thinks she's asleep. I'll try to maintain this illusion until we land. If he finds out too soon, anything could happen. So, once we've landed, get the pilot out first and put him under for twelve hours. We also have a severely injured couple here: he has severe head and shoulder wounds, both arms and legs have multiple fractures, and it's also likely that he has broken ribs; his wife has been hit by hard objects multiple times. They're both unconscious, but she doesn't have any flesh wounds. I hope she only has a concussion, but she could also have trauma to the brain from internal bleeding. Finally, we have a young man, their son, who hit his head on a piece of metal a half an hour ago. There's some swelling and he might have a concussion as well. He's conscious though, and responsive. Another man is physically unhurt, but he's in deep shock from the death of his wife. I think it would be best to give him a strong sedative. There's a dead woman and a dead girl who we've put into sleeping bags. Please make sure you transport their bodies discretely. The girl is the wounded couple's daughter. It would be better not to let them know that she's dead. The woman in the seat next to the pilot was killed by a bullet to the head. Pakistani fighters were firing at us. Please get her out discretely as well. We have to be very careful of when and how we tell her husband. Definitely not before he wakes up tomorrow. I'm the only one who's not hurt. My name is Cynthia and I'll tell you everything you want to know once we've landed. Eventually, I'll also need a bed and a



strong sedative. Two days ago we were a group of good friends and in a good mood, we were nine healthy people. Now three of us are dead and two are in critical condition. It's awful."

She finds it hard to suppress her tears. Dr. Sharma recognizes this and tries to calm her down. "We will prepare everything that's necessary. We'll do the best we can. You should know that we're some of the only people in India who know that your group saved our lives today."

Cynthia is baffled. So the PM has let some people in on this. They never agreed to that, but it was probably necessary in order to move things along. That's probably also the reason why the Moller can land with a minimum of flight surveillance and attention on the roof of the hospital. Everything goes as Cynthia requested.

After all the patients have been admitted, she meets Dr. Sharma for the first time. She is immediately impressed by him: he is a tall, light-skinned Hindu. After making the Namaste gesture of greeting, he shakes Cynthia's hand. It is warm and pleasant. His big brown eyes look sad and knowing.

Before she can ask him a question, he lifts his hand: "Klaus is asleep. When he wakes up tomorrow morning, you should tell him about his wife. He will be strong enough then to face the truth. Stephan only has a contusion and a light concussion. He'll have to keep quiet for a couple of days but the concussion doesn't seem to have interfered with his brain functions. Marcus is still in surgery but he'll survive. He'll be covered in bandages and casts for weeks, though. I'm afraid Maria has a small hematoma in her brain. If it doesn't expand, she won't have any lasting problems but she'll remain unresponsive for several days. Finally, you yourself need some peace and quiet now. Take this sedative. It'll help you to sleep peacefully for at least nine hours. Unfortunately, the first thing you'll have to do in the morning is give Klaus the bad news. You can also talk to Stephan tomorrow, maybe even Marcus, but I'm afraid you'll have to keep quiet about his daughter's death...Maybe it'd be best to tell him that she's in Sarnath



with Sandra, OK?" He hesitates. "It could also be that we'll have to keep Marcus in a coma for a couple of days. If that's so, we'll have to tell him the truth right after he wakes up."

Cynthia nods. She feels good in Dr. Sharma's presence. She thanks him and wishes him good night.

Once she has left, Sharma thinks to himself, 'She must be at the end of her tether too, I'm sure; otherwise she would know that tonight certainly won't be a good night for me.'

### 3. The Days After

*December 9-22, 2019, Delhi, Sarnath, and Varanasi*

When she wakes up the next morning, Cynthia goes straight to Dr. Sharma. He looks very tired and it is obvious that he didn't sleep the previous night. Nevertheless, he is as friendly as he was the evening before, and he has good news: all the patients are well. As a precaution, they will keep Stephan under observation for three more days. The operations on Marcus went without a hitch and, except for a couple of scars, he'll be as good as new in six weeks. The hematoma in Maria's head is healing and she is out of danger.

When Cynthia enters the cafeteria, she finds a depressed and beaten Barry. His eyes are red and he looks terrible. He keeps talking about Monika, and the good news about their friends doesn't affect him at all.

She tries another tack. "Barry, you know, Klaus doesn't know yet that Sandra's dead. I'm going to have to tell him right now. Would you come with me and help me? If you could try to get his mind on something else, maybe he'll be able to start thinking about the future again and how we can protect ourselves from Justo's group. I'm afraid we're still in great danger, and that the whole world is in great danger. We have to stop this monster!"

Barry listens to her and thinks, 'Cynthia is right; we have to do something.'

"Barry, there's still another problem. Stephan is torn up over Lena's death and his parents don't even know about it. We can't tell them yet. So it'll be on our shoulders to take care of Stephan."

Barry nods. "Yeah, you're right. They need us."

They wait by Klaus's bed for him to wake up. Suddenly, he is wide-awake. He sits up straight and looks around. "How did I get here? What happened...what about the others?"



Klaus notices the grief in Barry's face, and he takes his hand to comfort him. Now all the dams burst within Barry. He embraces Klaus and, still weeping, tells him once again about Monika. Then he tells him about Sandra.

Klaus can't believe it at first; he doesn't want to believe it. Cynthia confesses to erasing ten minutes from his memory so he would keep flying the Moller. Barry blames himself for having waited too long: "I was in such shock. Maybe I could've stopped the bullets otherwise."

For a long time, Klaus stares blindly into space. He doesn't fight his tears. Finally, he finds his voice again. "We did all we could. Only Justo and his group are to blame. If they hadn't caused the accident, Marcus could've stopped the Pakistani jets. We need to stop blaming ourselves. We'll have to make it our sworn mission to neutralize Justo's group. But where do we start?"

Cynthia quietly leaves the room. She knows that the grief of the two men will last much longer, but at least they have a goal now, a goal that will keep them from wallowing in their sorrows. But what about Stephan? And how will Maria and Marcus react when they learn about Lena's death?

Stephan is much better. He is happy to hear that both his parents will be fit again soon. But Lena's death still hangs over him like an invisible thunderhead.

Dr. Sharma and Barry enter the room. The doctor quickly examines Stephan and is confident. "We'll soon have you up and about again. You were talking about some crazy things during the night though. I'd like to do one more test to see that your brain functions are 100% again. Maybe a strategy game would be the right thing. Barry told me that you like to play *Go*; would that be all right with you?"

Barry has a *Go* board under his arm. It is Stephan's favorite game. Barry taught him how to play, but in the meantime, Stephan has become much better than Barry. He's on Dan level 4 (the fourth level of a teacher) right now, while Barry will never be able to go beyond Kyu 3 (three below

teacher level). *Go* is a strange game: either you have a talent for it or you don't, just like with music.

At first, Stephan doesn't want to play, but Dr. Sharma insists: "Would you really rather take the usual tests? That would take almost three hours but this way Barry will know in one hour if you're mentally up to par."

Finally, Stephan and Barry start the game. Dr. Sharma and Cynthia withdraw. Once they are out of the room, they smile at each other: they both know that they have managed to get a little spirit back into the three men.

There are only two things that Cynthia cannot forgive herself; first, that she is somehow happy that Maria and Marcus have not yet woken up, and second, that she has accepted Dr. Sharma's invitation to go to the India Gate.

While he sees a private patient there, she visits 'India's Arc de Triomphe'. She watches snake charmers and the tricks of trained monkeys. She also hands out Indian rupees to begging children. When it gets too busy for her, she enters the nearby National Museum, where she is meeting Dr. Sharma for tea later.

Later, they drive north from the museum and back toward the India Gate. Dr. Sharma is a good driver; he knows how to navigate through the dense traffic. A couple of times, he also proves himself to be a good Hindu by skillfully driving around cows in the road. He points out all the sights to her and has a story about every single one of them. They pass the All India Institute for Medical Sciences, where he also lectures from time to time. They also pass the Darya Khan memorials, the Safdarjang and the Coda. For the first time Cynthia is able to forget yesterday's horror, at least for a couple of minutes.

After Stephan and Barry have played several games of *Go*, Stephan takes a short nap. A young Indian woman wakes him up for lunch. She explains what he is about to eat. He pretends not to know about Indian cuisine, but in fact he knows about it from their time in Sarnath, where they spent weeks planning yesterday's operation.



The nurse's name is Raianda. She is very attractive and probably not much older than him. Her petit figure, fresh smile, and coffee-brown skin, which contrasts temptingly with the white of her nurse's uniform, enchant Stephan. When she bends over the bed to put the tray down, Stephan doesn't find it hard to notice her white panties. She leaves the room but returns shortly to wash him one more time.

Without hesitation, Stephan pulls his shirt off over his head. Now all he is wearing is a pair of tight underpants.

"Turn over on your stomach. First I'll wash your neck and your back," Raianda explains. With a lukewarm cloth, she soaps Stephan from the neck down. Then she uses a fresh cloth to wash the soap away. She dries him and massages him with a few drops of oil. It feels heavenly for Stephan, especially when Raianda's hair brushes against his skin and Stephan can smell her light perfume.

He does exactly as she says. When she moves her hand further down, then pulls his underwear down with one quick yank, Stephan gets a little shy. However wonderful all this may be, it is still a little embarrassing to lie there with his snow-white butt in full view.

"Do you treat all the patients like that?" he asks. "I mean, what if somebody comes in?"

Raianda laughs. "Well, I hung the 'patient resting' sign on the door. But you're right; we only give this special treatment to very special patients. I'm sure you deserve it. I know what a tough day you had yesterday. That's why I'm giving you such a thorough cleaning...or, does it bother you?"

"No! I mean no, no, this is wonderful. But no pretty girl has ever treated me like that."

"How can you call me pretty? You've hardly seen anything," Raianda answers saucily. "But a compliment like that deserves a little kiss." Carefully, she turns his head a little to the side and softly and quickly touches her lips to his.

So far, Stephan's experiences with girls have been quite limited. He feels his erection growing. He can only compare the present situation with some of the dreams he has had,

dreams that sometimes brought about unwanted moist, and embarrassing, results. How should he interpret Raianda's behavior? Would it be all right to touch her too? He hesitates.

Raianda systematically continues her treatment. When she reaches his buttocks, she tries to gently spread his legs a bit. "You don't need to be so tense," she remarks. Then she moves the cloth between his legs and casually touches those parts of his body that only Stephan, and his parents of course, have touched before. When Raianda moves on further down to the backs of his knees and his feet, Stephan is almost disappointed. But Raianda is not finished yet.

"Time to turn over," she says, and shifts him with her hands so that Stephan turns almost effortlessly. His toy soldier stands at attention but Raianda pretends not to notice this.

"And now on to the second half," she adds. She starts washing his face without soap. No one has ever washed him like this: his eyes, his cheeks, his ears, his nose, always the same method: first wet, then dry, then a few drops of oil. When she reaches his mouth, she gently cleans his lips, opens them a little, and even touches his teeth with the cloth. She then pats his lips dry. It tickles and Stephan can only barely hold still. She dips one finger into the oil and dabs it onto his lips. She then wipes her finger dry and strokes over his closed lips.

"Like it?"

"Yes," Stephan mumbles, and opens his mouth a little.

Raianda, who seems to have waited for this moment, now inserts her finger into his mouth. She laughs when she sees his surprise. "Don't bite, just see how a clean finger smells and tastes."

Carefully, Stephan sucks a little. As her finger slips in a little deeper, it touches his tongue. "Yes, play with it," she says.

Stephan is spellbound. "Leave it," he demands when Raianda begins drawing her finger out.

"That's enough for today. I have other work to do too. But you'll remember what a clean finger tastes like, OK? Close your eyes. I'll show you one more thing."



Stephan gets the feeling that she is excited too now. He closes his eyes. Her finger enters his mouth one more time. Again, he sucks on it.

"Keep your eyes shut," Raianda orders before she takes her finger out. A moment passes before she puts it back on his lips. Now the finger suddenly smells like a strange perfume, and a little salty.

"Open your eyes now and tell me which finger you liked better." Raianda gives Stephan an intensive look. Her cheeks redden a little.

"The second one," Stephan answers.

Raianda laughs. "Well, I think you'll become a good lover eventually."

Stephan doesn't understand that. He is also too busy concentrating on what is coming next: Raianda washes his neck, following the usual procedure. Her forehead often comes close to his mouth. Once, Stephan touches it tenderly with his lips. Raianda again pretends not to notice. Her hair, which smells delightful, brushes against his face more and more often.

Slowly, Raianda's cloth approaches Stephan's erect penis. While she soaps him between the legs, she casually touches it several times. Stephan can barely hold back.

"Are you always that excited during a wash?" Raianda mocks. "You must keep still or I'll have to stop."

Stephan tries to keep as calm as possible. She is now dedicating her attention on his thighs. Again and again she touches his intimate parts as though by accident. She now stands parallel to the bed, her head bent over his thighs. Her blue nurses's skirt has slipped up a little. Stephan can see far up her thighs. Carefully, he touches her skirt and moves it a little, so he can see even more. Then he touches one leg right above the back of her knee. She does not react. Slowly, Stephan's hand moves further up until he can carefully begin to stroke Raianda's cheeks. She is so busy washing his legs that again she does not seem to notice this. Finally, as she is washing his feet, his finger reaches the place he is most

attracted to: the point where the space between her buttocks is only barely covered by a pair of small, white panties.

"Finished," Raianda calls out as she stands up straight again. Stephan tries to remove his hand inconspicuously. "Oops! My skirt is all messed up," she observes.

Stephan cannot think of an appropriate reaction to that. Raianda puts his underwear and hospital gown back on.

"Did you like it? Will you need me again tomorrow or do you think you'll be fit enough to take a shower?"

Stephan had not planned to stay in bed one more day, but suddenly he feels that he has not yet recovered fully. "I think it would be better if you could help me again tomorrow."

"You're lucky, I'm working again tomorrow. But it'll depend on Dr. Sharma's decision. Enjoy the rest of the afternoon." One more time, Raianda examines the bump on Stephan's head. It seems to be going down. The examination turns into a final caress of his face before she leaves.

This leaves Stephan with a lot to think about after Raianda has left the room. What a wonderful sensation that was, and it will be continued tomorrow! He strokes his face with his hand the same way Raianda did. Suddenly he smells the exciting scent again; it is the same strange smell as before.

From Stephan's room, Raianda goes straight to Dr. Sharma. "Did you clean him all right? And did you make sure to get his mind on other subjects?" he asks.

"Yes, father. He said that he wants my help again tomorrow."

Dr Sharma cannot help laughing, but he quickly turns serious again. "Raianda, you understand the situation, right? It's important that Stephan not think constantly about his dead sister or the status of his parents. If he's a little bit in love with you—" he stops for a second when he notices the strange look on her face "—or, if you fall a little bit in love with him, that's OK. But the emphasis lies on 'a little bit.' He'll be out of here in one or two weeks. He'll be a nice memory for you, and vice versa. You will have helped him to break out of the complicated world of his group, at least a little bit. This is a



group of adults and it's important for him to realize that girls can be even more interesting than a game of *Go* at his age. This is important for him now. But if the two of you should really fall in love, you'll both get hurt. That's probably the last thing he needs now. He already feels more sadness than he can handle, so make sure that nothing happens that you might later regret. You know, a little melancholy is OK but a broken heart is not. So tell me now, do you want me to declare him healthy tomorrow or will it be necessary to wash him again?"

"I think he'll need some help with the washing tomorrow," she answers, reddening a little.

"All right. This may be irresponsible, but all right."

Raianda also thinks that it might be irresponsible. But is it really necessary to be responsible all the time? She loves and admires her father. She loves that they can talk so openly, especially since the death of her mother, but why do fathers have to be so rational all the time?

In fact, Dr. Sharma is much less rational than his daughter thinks: he loves people, and he wants to help them whenever he can. And whether he employs conventional or unconventional methods, or treats the body or the psyche, he's a doctor to the bone. However, his unconditional attention to others has very often caused undue affection in some patients. 'Humans are like mirrors. They only give what they have already been given,' he thinks. Many times it has been necessary to draw a rational line where he didn't want to, and now there's this young woman, Cynthia. He has only known her for a day and he is sure that they share a mutual affection. But how far can you let yourself go when there is a clear end in sight?

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The paragroup's situation has become relatively stable over the last two days in Delhi. Maria and Marcus remain

artificially comatose. It is planned for today to wake Marcus first, around noon, and then Maria, later in the day. They are all happy to be able to witness the progress Maria and Marcus have been making in terms of their physical health, but at the same time, they are all anxious about the shock they will surely have to endure when they are told about the deaths of Lena, Monika, and Sandra.

Stephan has been declared healthy. He still has a bump on his head that glimmers in just about every color of the rainbow, but apart from that, he is in good physical shape. Raianda kept her promise and gave him another thorough wash. In the interest of time, certain parts of the cleaning were longer, and others parts shorter. Their goodbye turned out to be very intense. They kissed as Stephan has never kissed before. Even when he carefully reached into her blouse, the kisses never lost this intensity. Afterwards, Raianda spent two days with her relatives in the country. Stephan spent most of those two days thinking about her and her promise to pay him another quick visit in his room.

Klaus and Barry are working on detailed plans on better paraprojection methods. Those plans will have to evolve much further before they dare face Justo's group again. Both men try to keep as disciplined as possible, but whenever memories of their wives surface, they have to try very hard not to let themselves go.

They found a little note in Lena's bag saying that she would like her ashes to be scattered into the Ganges at Varanasi. They know that Monika and Sandra felt at home at their base in Sarnath, only ten kilometers away from Varanasi. They also remember that they were not opposed to cremation. If Maria and Marcus give their OK, they will plan a group ceremony for their three lost friends.

Around noon, Dr. Sharma has another word with Cynthia, Stephan, Klaus, and Barry. He will be there when Marcus wakes up. He will first tell him about Maria's progress. When Marcus asks about his children, the doctor will call Stephan in. It will be Stephan's duty to tell his father about



Lena's death. Barry and Klaus will not come in before Marcus asks about Monika and Sandra. In the case of an emergency, Cynthia will erase several minutes of Marcus's memory, a plan that Dr. Sharma doesn't know about. He doesn't even know about the group's paraskills yet.

There is no agreement on what part of his memory Cynthia should erase. After what happened with Klaus, she'll have to be very careful. Even though she had to erase details of Sandra's death in order to save the Moller and the group, they are not sure if she really did Klaus any good. On the one hand, he can't remember the terrible sight of Sandra's crushed head, which will surely spare him many nightmares, but on the other hand, it troubles Klaus that he cannot remember ten of the most important minutes of his life, however terrible they may have been.

So what should they do with Marcus? Should they erase the whole encounter with Justo, or just from when he lifted Lena's mutilated body from the wrecked car, or should they go further and even try to erase some positive memories of his daughter? Maybe he would become less depressed, but it doesn't seem right to take such memories from a human being. The same goes for Maria. They all hope that Cynthia won't have to come in at all but they know how fond Maria and Marcus are of their children.

Marcus wakes up so fast that they have no time to think about it more. First, he sees the friendly but unknown face of Dr. Sharma. He quickly realizes that he is in a hospital, that he has had many operations, and that he is covered in casts and bandages. Memories from the encounter with Justo start to come back: 'Didn't this other parabilitist force Monika to kill me?'

He quizzes the doctor: "Where am I? How did I get here? What about the others?" Dr. Sharma gives Marcus a short version of the 'accident' and tells him about how Marcus mysteriously managed to get his friends out of the wreck. He also tells him that all of their missions were completely

successful: "You and your group saved India, and maybe the entire world from a nuclear holocaust."

Marcus is impatient. "Where's my wife? Where are my children? Where are my friends?"

Dr. Sharma describes Maria's condition then calls Stephan in. Fortunately, Stephen has seen his father since the operations; otherwise this sight would have scared him. Marcus insists that Cynthia, Barry and Klaus come in too. Soon, Marcus realizes what they're still hiding from him: his daughter, Monika and Sandra are dead. His friends try to calm him down but surprisingly Dr. Sharma is the only one who can ease his pain a little:

"You have lost people you love more than anything else. I know how terrible this must be and I know that nothing can ever bring them back. But you saved India and maybe even the whole world. And your friends who survived are also part of this 'rest of the world.' I know nothing can ease your pain in this moment, but deep, deep inside, you know that you would have to do it again if you believe in humanity."

"I would have to do it again? Risk the lives of my friends and my family?" Marcus cannot get it out of his head. Maybe the doctor is right. It is about all of humanity, but, subjectively speaking, he has been helping others with his parabilities long enough, and how has he been repaid? Three of the people he loved the most are dead. He doesn't want to go on like that.

Absentmindedly, Marcus exchanges a couple of words with the rest of the group. He makes a composed impression but they all know that he is only acting. Marcus looks out the window. "You'll have to leave me alone now. I need to digest all this in peace."

They all leave the room. Only Stephan stays. He takes his father's hand, and Marcus can't suppress his tears any longer.

"Stephan, what you did in Chandipur was great. We all tried so hard, but still, with our skills, we are somehow like monsters. Even if we help others, we somehow fail to protect ourselves from loss."



Stephan waits for a long time before he speaks. "But dad, it would've been all right if it hadn't been for Justo and the other evil paras. We have to find a way to recognize monsters like them and to neutralize them. I think this should be our highest priority and I think we owe this to Lena, Monika, and Sandra."

Marcus looks at Stephan affectionately. "Yes, you're right of course. If only I had listened to Klaus more closely, if only I had concentrated on this matter much earlier, we would all still be together." Marcus breaks into tears again before he can continue. "But it's too late now. We have to start again. We have to get those criminals."

Stephan hesitates before he talks. Then, without looking his father in the eye, he says quietly, "Dad, that won't be necessary. Those three are dead."

Marcus looks at Stephan with astonishment. It takes him a while to understand. "You mean you..."

"Do you remember the cliff right before you ran into Justo?" Stephan asks, looking at the floor. "Remember how you mentioned that no one could survive a fall down there? Well, when the three of them reached that point on their way back, cows ran out of the bushes and pushed the car over the cliff. No one survived, I know that for sure; I received a message."

In his excitement, Marcus doesn't register the part about the message. All he knows is that those three scum are dead and that Stephan, his son, knowingly killed them. He looks at Stephan seriously. "You know, it makes me a little happier to know that Justo and his group can't harm anyone anymore. But you just killed them! You decided on your own that it was all right to kill them. This is terrible. Even we can't overstep all laws. I..."

Stephan angrily interrupts Marcus. "If that's so, then let's just say the animals pushed the car down accidentally. I had to do what I did. And by the way, Dad, don't start giving me that legal shit about how we shouldn't actively use our parabilities to break the law and kill. Just think about how

often you've broken the law; didn't Barry have all those explosives with him to blow up the whole base in Islamabad 'just in case?' That would've killed hundreds of people. Please, Dad, I want you to get better soon; Mummy will need your help. But stop criticizing me, especially for things I deserve praise for!" Then Stephan storms out of the room.

Marcus is left alone to reflect in his despair. 'Nothing fits anymore. This is getting out of hand. Stephan is right, but I'm right too. And so is Dr. Sharma and...'

After he left, Dr. Sharma switched on the video surveillance in Marcus's room. He asked Cynthia to follow everything that happens, so Cynthia saw the scene between Marcus and his son, sharing all their compassion, despair, and irritation. She wonders, 'What *are* the right answers?'

When Maria hears about her daughter's death, she weeps uncontrollably, until her convulsions turn to cramps. Even the sedative Dr. Sharma gives her can't calm her down.

She insists on seeing Marcus but Dr. Sharma warns her, "Your husband is all right but both his legs, his right arm, his ribs, and his head are covered in bandages. He looks terrible but he's healing well. Believe me, the sight of him would be too distressing."

But Maria insists and Dr. Sharma gives in. He allows the visit only on the condition that she under no circumstances tries to walk. He knows that, on top of the psychological stress she is already experiencing, any physical strain could cause the healing blood vessels in her head to burst again. He has her moved into a wheelchair and takes her to her husband's room.

Cynthia is already in the room when Maria arrives. When Maria sees Marcus, she is shocked. He reminds her more of a mummy than her husband, but at least he is conscious. He takes Maria's hand in an effort to calm her while she continues to insist that Cynthia give her the details about the crash again. Cynthia emphasizes that it was her, Maria, who prevented the worst from happening by using all her strength to fight the hypnotic order.



For a long time Maria remains in a dark silence. "Marcus, what has become of us? We sacrifice our children to save others."

Marcus cannot help but wince at that. Suddenly, Maria stands up from her wheelchair. There is anger in her voice. "Marcus, you will get better, and so will I. But why didn't you save Lena instead of me? Why did you lift me from the car first and not her?"

This hits Marcus like a sledgehammer. Cynthia is shocked: "Maria, Lena was already dead. Marcus could not have..."

But Maria isn't listening. "I've had enough, enough, enough!" she wails, "Enough of all this. Just leave me alone, all of you!" She stumbles out of the room. Cynthia and Dr. Sharma follow her with the wheelchair and gently force her to sit. While Cynthia returns to the monitor, the doctor takes Maria to her room and makes sure she swallows another sedative. He waits until he is sure that Maria will be asleep for several hours.

Dr Sharma is worried: he has seen many varieties of despair and pain, but this case seems to have another dimension to it, something he doesn't understand. What he does not know is that this catastrophe has caused his patients to revolt against their parabilities.

Cynthia and Stephan watch Marcus on the monitor. Cynthia is not a telepath, but her parability makes it possible for her to sense certain emotions. She can feel how desperate Marcus is. She can't believe her eyes when Marcus starts to move the big wardrobe opposite his bed with his telekinetic powers.

"Cynthia, do something!" Stephan screams. Cynthia winces. "He wants to kill himself! All these accusations have been too much for him." As if Marcus could hear him, Stephan shouts, "You couldn't have saved her! Lena was dead, right? Mom couldn't know that; she was knocked out. You did all you could!"

The wardrobe starts to lift off the floor. Even though Cynthia knows about Marcus's skills, she has never seen him use them with such strength. During the accident, everything went so fast.

"Cynthia, erase what my mom just said! You know she didn't mean it. He'll kill himself if you don't!"

Like the others, Cynthia is by now deeply averse to using her parability, but she has to act. She enters Marcus's psyche and feels his emotions well up with volcanic force.

She senses that Marcus is especially overwhelmed by Maria's words, but there is also something else, something from further back in the past. Cynthia finds it difficult to decipher this emotion:

*Five months ago, Marcus desperately tries to talk some sense into Lena. "Be reasonable, Lena, you're too young for this. We already have a parascout with us, Klaus. It's not necessary to endanger you too. Please, stay here with Aroha and Herb."*

*But Lena is desperate. "But I want to go with you and mom, especially if you're going to be in danger. I don't want to live if you die. I'll die here from worry while you're in India. I might as well die now!" Wailing, Lena storms out to the balcony.*

*Marcus knows that she is serious and rushes out behind her. She throws herself over the rail but Marcus grabs her with his pseudohands before she hits the rocks below. He forces her back into the room and lays her on her bed.*

*"Lena, don't be stupid. OK, if you really want to go that bad, you can come to India with us. But there are two conditions: you have to promise never, ever, to do anything like that again and you will never, ever, talk to Mom about it."*

*Lena nods and embraces her dad.*

Cynthia is overwhelmed by the strength of feeling in this memory. She acts without thinking and erases both the



memory of Maria's words and of the scene between Marcus and Lena, which indirectly led to Lena's death.

Marcus has lifted the wardrobe and is ready to position it over himself and drop it, ending his miserable life. But he suddenly loses his concentration. The wardrobe slips out of his pseudohands and falls a few harmless centimeters to the ground. Marcus's head is spinning and he gasps for breath. His pulse runs wild and causes the alarm at the intensive care station to go off.

Dr. Sharma is quickly informed and runs to Marcus. When he enters the room, he sees how his patient is grasping at the edge of the bed with his healthy arm. He is looking around himself in confusion. Dr. Sharma asks himself if this behavior could be an after-effect of the concussion.

Marcus's pulse races. Dr. Sharma begins to prepare an injection but suddenly Marcus's facial expressions clear up and he waves the doctor off: "Thanks for coming, doctor, but I'm all right now."

"What happened?" Dr. Sharma wants to know.

The eyes of the men meet for a long time before Marcus quietly speaks. "Believe it or not, I had a sudden urge to kill myself, and I somehow knew how to do it, even in my present condition. But it's OK to change my mind, isn't it?" Marcus tries to smile. "I'm back to normal now and I know that I'll have to fight and that everything will eventually be all right again."

Dr. Sharma is still looking at Marcus. "I believe you, but please promise you'll never let your emotions overcome you like that again."

In the other room, Stephan embraces Cynthia and she breaks into tears. "I only hope I erased the right things."

"Whatever it was, it saved my father's life."

"Stephan, this has to stay between us. Let's get out of here, quick, before Dr. Sharma notices that we watched all this.

It has been a long and stressful day for everyone. No one is surprised when Stephan withdraws to his room right after dinner. He takes a shower and slips naked into bed, covered only by the bedspread. He hopes that Raianda will keep her promise.

Soon it is dark. Twice, Stephan makes sure that his door is unlocked and that the key is still in the inside keyhole. He wants to make sure that Raianda can lock the door after she comes in. She said something about 7 p.m., but it is already eight. The entire hospital is quiet.

Stephan unintentionally falls asleep and turns on his side, facing the wall. Suddenly, he feels something soft and warm pressing against his back. He wants to turn around but is stopped.

"Psst! Stay like that." Raianda cuddles Stephan from behind, her pelvis against his rump, her head against his shoulders. He feels her nudity, the triangle between her legs and her hard nipples. When he tries to touch her, she giggles.

"Later," she says, kissing his shoulders, running her fingers over his neck, and sometimes scratching him with her fingernails, causing goose bumps to cover his entire body.

She slips to the side a little to allow her fingers to run across other areas. Waves of pleasant shivers wash over him. When he finally turns around, Raianda offers no resistance. Stephan kisses her forehead and her cheeks, playfully avoiding her mouth at first. Then their mouths meet naturally. Stephan caresses her soft lips and tongue with his mouth. His hands grope for her breasts. He strokes them, kisses them and then lets his hand go further down to her triangle. They explore one another's bodies piece by piece, accompanying the search with kisses and a tight embrace. They roll around feeling, sniffing, kissing each other.

Finally, Stephan insists on the top position and presses his stiff member against her pubis. But Raianda frees herself and slips out of the bed.

"Turn over on your back," she whispers. She strokes and massages his erection, then stops and with one deft movement



of her hand slips something over it. Stephan knows what is about to happen:

‘God, it’s my first time!’

Legs spread, Raianda mounts him. He dives into her. At first she is still. Stephan feels excitement and warmth all over. Then he begins to move. Raianda’s body flows into a sympathetic rhythm, sometimes stopping them both, playfully withdrawing and observing him. Finally, she can hold back no longer. Her hair brushes against his face as Stephan buries his hands in the soft flesh of her bosom. They both lose control and lead themselves to orgasm.

They remain in a silent embrace for a long time afterward before Raianda speaks. “It’s getting late. The movie I supposedly went out to see has been over for a long time. But if you come to the cafeteria tomorrow morning, we can ‘officially’ meet again and maybe...well, let’s see.”

Before he falls asleep, Stephan is hit by a feeling of guilt. ‘Lena. Lena just died and here I am, starting to become a man. And I’m *enjoying* it.’ But the pleasures of youth win out in the end. He sleeps peacefully and dreamlessly until long after the Sun rises.

Maria sleeps as well, but is plagued with strange dreams. An illogical mix of scenes from the days in Sarnath and Varanasi comes over her:

*We arrive at Varanasi airport, the kids, Marcus and I. We come straight from Auckland. We change in Delhi. We are tired. Two bald men pick us up. They carry us in a palanquin. The men are Tibetan Buddhists from Sarnath University. We live there. Streets without sidewalks. No traffic rules. Marcus insists on going to the street barber with Stephan. But there is only one chair, one pair of scissors, one hand mirror. Why does he want to have their hair cut there? I hand out rupees like Marcus said. “Never ignore the kids or the beggars. Look them deeply in the eyes. When you feel that they are at their lowest, give them ten rupees, ten rupees...” I see their eyes. I see their needs. I give them banknotes, again and again, until*



*the money is gone. Marcus and Stephan come back to the car with bald heads. The beggars feel compassion. They buy two black wigs for them. Men clean my shoes; they clean Lena's shoes. They are friendly; they don't want money.*

*A street in front of Sarnath University; a girl calls to Lena for help. Lena gets out of the car. She takes soft cow pies with her. They are clean, holy cow pies. She mixes them with straw. She sticks them to the white wall of the little house. They dry there, fast. They can use them as fuel for their fire. Lena comes back. Her hands are brown and sticky. A tall man stops her. He smiles. He cuts open a green coconut with a machete. Lena washes her hands with the milk inside...*

*The kids are in bed. They are under mosquito nets in the guest room. Marcus takes me outside. He has a secret. We sit in a bicycle rickshaw. His arm is around my shoulder. We ride through the royal zoo, toward the big stupa made of stone and brick. Where Buddha held his speech, sitting in the lotus position...*

*We're on the back of an elephant. The children are there. In a basket, everything is shaking. The children laugh. The stupa and the ruins shrink. They turn into Japanese, Chinese, Tibetan shrines...*

*We are in old Varanasi, by the Ganges, the holiest place for Hindus. We approach huge steps. They lead down to the river. Old people, men, sit and wait quietly. They are waiting for death. They want to die there. They want their ashes thrown into the holy river. There is no sadness. There is a feeling of lightness. A fakir shows his long hair. Two meters long, even longer, longer, longer. It tumbles down the stairs, like Rapunzel. One of them has fingernails half a meter long. They practice yoga, their legs crossed, their hands folded in front of their chests. They don't move. The steps are slippery and dirty. It is strange dirt, important for the world. People, pigs, and cows rush by. They all get on a boat by the Dasawamedh-Ghat, the roots of the city. Twenty ghats. Thousands of people bathing in the muddy, opaque water by the left bank, which we glide by in the boat.*



Slowly along the Ganges. Men rowing. The people on the shore fill bottles and pitchers with water. They will carry it with them. Hundreds of kilometers to the people who can't come here. Dead people lie on pyres, only from rich families. They are covered in white shrouds. The bodies are burning and the families watch. Saying goodbye. The smoke is getting thicker and thicker. Mist everywhere. Strange smell. The villas on the shore are old, crumbling, impregnated with moisture. But they are colorful, not gloomy. No one cares about their condition. The pilgrims stay there. Dying people live there. Devout, they wait. They wait to transmigrate into another existence.

The light of the red sun breaks through the morning dusk on the other shore. Peace and quiet. No sadness. The coming and the going. Lena has lotus flowers in her hand. She puts them in the water. They float down the river. To the pleasure of the ashes of the dead next to them. Stephan lights a candle. Another candle, and another, and another. He gives them all to Lena. She puts them into a small wooden boat. Then she lets it float down the river too. She's happy:

"I want you to scatter my ashes here too. I want to float away with the flowers and the candles."

"You'll have to wait for a long time," Marcus says. "You still have a long and happy life in front of you."

"Yes!" laughs my daughter, "I'm so happy I could come here with you and mom. Everything is so beautiful, so peaceful, here." The boat keeps floating in the current, slowly floating. The flowers and the candles float next to the boat. Flowers and candles all around them. Their lights reflect in Lena's eyes. She looks at me, happy.

*Maria wakes up. For a moment, the dream lingers, then a dark cloud of memory replaces the happy feeling: 'Lena is dead and I drove the car into the pillar. I couldn't help it though. I had to follow the hypnotic command.' Maria knows that Justo and his helpers will pay for that. She is overcome by another fear: she has to see how Marcus is doing. He is also*

severely injured. He got them all out of the car and she only had blame for him yesterday. And she has to comfort Stephan, who loved Lena more than anything.

Maria finds Marcus awake. Dr. Sharma is with him.

The doctor smiles. "Your husband is much better now. We'll get him out of most of the casts today and his turban will be smaller too. All the bones are healing quickly. And we'll get your son out of here soon too; he's playing tricks on everybody. I think he's trying to seduce my daughter. They're in the cafeteria together right now. But seriously now, I'm happy to see that you can handle life without a wheelchair again."

Maria feels that Dr. Sharma's feelings are genuine. She can't hold back her tears.

The doctor has seen this many times: under such conditions, every emotion can drive a patient to tears.

Marcus takes Maria's hand. "There's something for you by the window. I can't carry it into your room yet."

On the windowsill is a pot of purple orchids, a kind that only grows in northern India and that she does not have in her orchid collection on Great Barrier Island. "Do you think we can smuggle them back to New Zealand through all the agricultural customs checks they have there?"

"I promise," Marcus says.

Maria finds it hard to talk about yesterday. "Marcus...what I said, that was mean and unreasonable...please forgive me. I...I was so confused, not myself really."

Marcus frowns. "I can't remember what you said."

Maria elaborates a little, but Marcus still can't remember anything. Maria is confused. 'Can he really not remember? Is it his concussion or is he just saying that to make it easier for me or, did I dream it all?'

When Maria goes to the cafeteria afterwards, she understands what Dr. Sharma was talking about: Stephan is



*sitting really close to a very pretty girl. They seem to be really close and Stephan does not even notice his mother at first.*

*Stephan is all excited about Raianda's plan to show him the Red Fort. They both consider how they will get permission for the trip from their parents. What they agree on seems to work well: Marcus allows it because he doesn't want Stephan to become mired in his thoughts. He also likes Stephan's idea to buy some nice silver jewelry for Maria. Maria agrees too. She also suggests that Marcus might like a present.*

*Dr. Sharma is surprised by Raianda's plans. "You want to buy a silver necklace for Cynthia and you want me to give you the money for it?"*

*"Yes. I think Cynthia has helped a lot over the past few days and I won't give her the necklace, you will. You do seem to get along with her all right..."*

*The normally composed Dr. Sharma is suddenly a bit flustered: he does not want to pursue the topic any further and agrees. 'Did she notice that I didn't go to the cinema alone yesterday?'*

*Raianda and Stephan take a taxi to the Fatehpuri Mosque. What a remarkable structure it is. However, it is more important for them to take the Chandni Chowk, the street of the silversmiths, to the Red Fort. They plan to buy the jewelry right at the beginning of the street where Raianda believes the best bargains are. Stephan is happy to have a guide like Raianda. Chaos rules in this narrow street. Merchants, "saints," shoe shiners and beggars assail them continuously and are very persistent. But Raianda has no problem navigating them to a small silversmith's belonging to a relative. They buy a nice necklace for Cynthia, an engraved chalice for Marcus, and a matching necklace, earrings, and brooch, all set with garnets, for Maria. The last was Stephan's idea. He knows that garnets can also be found in the mountains of Styria, his parents's home, and that Styrian jewelry is often a combination of silver and garnets.*

*Raiana doesn't notice that he also buys a nice silver bracelet for her. It has a beautiful blue lazulite in it. He hopes*



*it is not fake but he knows the blue stone, together with the silver will suit Raianda well.*

*They soon reach the Red Fort. With its high, two-kilometer long, red walls, it is already impressive from the outside. The inside is splendid, even though many of the highlights were destroyed during India's turbulent history. It contains a great number of palaces, pavilions, mosques, and gardens. Raianda's knowledge of local history is seemingly endless: the Red Fort, or Lal Quila, was built by Shah Jahan between 1639 and 1648. No expense was spared. Later, the Persians and the British plundered this magnificent work of craftsmanship.*

*Raianda and Stephan enter through the Lahore Gate, which at first leads into a covered bazaar. At the end of the bazaar lies the music pavilion. In the past, visitors had to step off their elephants or horses before they could attend a public audience with the mogul at the Diwan-i-Am. Raianda leads Stephan in to the private audience room:*

*"This, Stephan, is where the Peacock Throne used to stand. It was made in the early seventeenth century and decorated with gold and silver peacocks. The tail feathers were made of sapphires and diamonds. A hundred years later, Shah Nadir took the throne with him to Persia after his victory over Mohammed Shah. Later, the British removed all the silver and diamonds from the ceilings and walls of the palace. See all the holes? They were once all filled with gems. But at least they didn't destroy the marble floor of the Royal Bath. Do you see how all the semi precious stones and the inlay work is still there." Stephan marvels at the blaze of color and the fact that tourists in such numbers are still allowed to come in here.*

*Raianda continues, "My favorite building is the Pearl Mosque, over there, see? Even though the onion domes aren't gold anymore."*

*"I like that mosque," Stephan smiles, "it's as pretty and delicate as you."*



Raianda likes to be considered pretty and delicate and she has always considered the mosque to be 'delicate' too.

"Come on Stephan, there's one more thing you should see. Look at the building over there. This used to be the Color Palace, the women's Rang Mahal. From there, they could look through the bars on the windows unnoticed. That way, they could at least get a little idea of what went on in the courtyards and gardens. Those women, even the princesses, lived really strange lives back then. They had all the luxury, but they were far away from reality. Just imagine, the ceilings of their rooms were made of silk. They were surrounded with gold, silver, and gemstones. There was an eighty kilometers long aqueduct that brought clean water from the headwaters of the Yamuna to bathe and cool their beauty. They hated sweat but I don't. I don't envy the princesses for all their jewelry and wealth. I'm happy that I will now be able to show you a little hidden corner of the park and hope you'll kiss me there and that you won't mind that we're both a little sweaty."

But Raianda can also think practically. "You should really take one of these light Indian blankets with you to New Zealand as a souvenir of Delhi and of me."

Stephan hesitates but she makes him buy one. She herself buys spiced cookies and canned fruit juice before she leads him through a hedge under a large tree. Its branches reach almost to the ground, but they are able to stand upright inside the canopy. It's shady and cool in there. She takes the blanket out of Stephan's hand, unfolds it on the ground and lies down on it. Now Stephan understands why she was so insistent on the blanket and now this piece of cloth will really turn into a souvenir!

Despite their late return, nobody gives them a hard time. Maria is moved by the jewelry set and Marcus makes a joke of asking Stephan why the chalice is empty. Raianda's father is a bit embarrassed, but grateful for the chain he will give to Cynthia. He doesn't tell Raianda when he will give it to Cynthia, but two days later, she is already wearing it. Stephan



*finds it difficult to explain the purchase of the blanket. He is still hiding the bracelet for Raianda; it will be a farewell gift.*

*Cynthia has had to deal with less pleasant matters during the day. However, they turned out to be not so bad because Dr. Sharma was able to help her here and there. She had to contact the authorities and make preparations for the crematorium. It took her a lot of willpower to accept the wishes of the families and take responsibility for the whole affair. As soon as Marcus's condition stabilizes, they will all meet in Varanasi to scatter the remains into the Ganges.*

*After another examination, Dr. Sharma is baffled at the rate of Marcus's recovery. He decides to take the casts off his upper arm and left foot and replace them with braces on December 20<sup>th</sup>. In addition, he will be able to reduce the head bandage so much that Marcus will be able to hide it under a hat.*

*"With a hat, long thin trousers, a loose shirt, and only the cast on your right leg, you'll look quite presentable, despite the crutches. Then we'll be finished with you here. You can already plan the ceremony for December 21<sup>st</sup>. If you hold it very early in the morning, the masses won't disturb you. Then you can fly back to New Zealand and spend Christmas at home on your island.*

*December 21<sup>st</sup> is still one week away. For Cynthia, Barry, Klaus, Stephan, and Maria, there is no need to stay in Delhi any longer. Only Marcus still needs Dr. Sharma's care. Barry and Klaus decide to make use of the week and prepare to return to SR's offices back in Auckland. They want to try out some ideas that should improve the parashields they have already invented. They will be back at their former headquarters in Sarnath on December 20<sup>th</sup>.*

*Under no circumstances will Maria leave Marcus alone. She encourages Stephan and Cynthia to go back to New Zealand with Barry and Klaus. Neither likes the idea. Cynthia argues that it doesn't make sense to fly back only for a couple of days. Stephan concurs with her, but for another reason...*



For Stephan, the next week is more frustrating than he had thought it would be: even though he has two more wonderful secret meetings with Raianda, she always seems to be busy for one reason or another. Raianda knows that her father is behind it: she regrets not having more time for Stephan, but she also remembers the words she had with her father. And it is true, Stephan and she have fallen in love a little, maybe even more than a little, and she knows that in a couple of days he will be far away in New Zealand. The end of their 'friendship' is inevitable anyway, so maybe she should really try not to lose her head over him.

Marcus's injuries heal in a way that Dr. Sharma cannot understand. He has never experienced anything like it. Time and again he asks Marcus if he has ever noticed the speed of his healing before and if he has any kind of explanation for it. Marcus gets closer than ever before to telling an 'outsider' the truth. Dr. Sharma can't know of course, that Marcus speeds up his individual time, and the healing process with it, whenever he's alone.

So it happens that on December 19<sup>th</sup> Dr. Sharma no longer has a reason to wait: he removes the casts from Marcus's arm and left leg and can't even find a reason to prescribe him braces. He also removes the head bandage completely. Only new, hairless skin commemorates the wound. Even the right leg, which was fractured several times, doesn't seem to need a cast. However, the doctor decides to have him wear a brace.

"If you have no problems walking over the next couple of days, I'll have a Christmas present for you. Then you have my permission to throw the braces and the crutches away on Christmas day. I have to admit, so far, I've only experienced this type of healing with a couple of top athletes. You're in great shape! Congratulations."

Marcus says, "I should congratulate you. The operations and the whole treatment...there's not much I could add to that. I thank you, not just for myself, but for the whole group. One more thing: you'll always be a welcome guest on Great



*Barrier Island. Whenever you feel like it, feel free to visit. Don't forget, summer is about to start there now. That's when it's the most beautiful. The sooner you come, the better. And by the way, Raianda's invited too, of course. I think she gets along well with all of us, not just Stephan."*

*Dr. Sharma is grateful for the invitation but he knows from experience that recovered patients are usually like travel acquaintances: the invitations are honest at the time, but as time passes, the sincerity fades.*

*The next day, they exchange warm goodbyes. The others notice that Cynthia and Dr. Sharma embrace more than once.*

*Stephan manages to get away from the group for a moment to be alone with Raianda. He gives her a package with the silver bracelet. There is also a small piece of the blanket inside along with a short letter saying that this piece of blanket should be a reminder to return it to him one day. Before they say goodbye, he adds, "My dad has invited you and your dad to come stay with us. Please convince your father to come. We've all become good friends, but I hope that you have more reason than just that." There is not enough time for a real kiss. In front of all the others, he only dares give her a quick peck on the cheek. At least for one more moment he is able to enjoy the scent of her skin and her perfume.*

*"What about the other cheek?" she surprises him. Reddening, he gives her a quick kiss on the other cheek and retreats, smiling. He is still paralyzed and his parents almost have to force him into the airport taxi.*

*They arrive in Varanasi and transfer to their rooms at the Tibetan University in Sarnath. This brings back many memories, both good and bad. Klaus and Barry are already there. They all have a quiet dinner together. No one dares discuss the next day, when they will have to open the urns at 4 a.m. on the banks of the Ganges.*

*Marcus convinces Maria to go for a walk. They take a rickshaw to King Ashoka's 2000-year-old stupa one more time; they go alone and without their children. "Maria, you and I aren't very religious, but as far as I understand*



*Buddhism, there is no individual really. There is no individual soul, as in Christianity. There is only a global something that we are all part of, no matter if you're alive or dead. We are a part of it and so is Lena. I tend to believe Buddhism in this respect."*

*Maria makes no comment.*

*They travel back under the setting sun.*

*At 4 a.m., it is still almost pitch black in Varanasi, but life has already started. As if sedated, the paragroup takes a taxi to the Dasasvamedh-Ghat. A big boat is waiting for them. Slowly, they float up the river. Cynthia makes sure that they the boat goes a little further in to the middle of the river. From there, the boat floats downstream. The first signs of the rising sun appear.*

*Cynthia hands Barry the urn with Monika's ashes inside. Barry is not a man of many words. He stands up quietly and faces east. "Monika, before I knew you, I had no aim in life. You changed me, and you were the only one I ever loved. I hope I was able to make you as happy as you made me. May your spirit stay alive inside me as long as I live. I hope I will see you again." He opens the urn and carefully scatters her ashes, followed by lotus and rose petals, into the Ganges. When he sits down again, he buries his face in his hands and starts wailing.*

*Klaus takes Sandra's urn. Calmly and quietly, he talks about her, himself, and their life together. Then he bids her farewell so intensely that the oarsmen stop rowing. Marcus has to support Maria when she and Stephan stand up together.*

*Stephan has the last word: "Lena, we will miss you more than I can put into words. Without you, I cannot imagine a happy childhood. I thank you for that. Your life was short, too short, but I hope that what you once said was true. You said that when you die one day, you would be grateful to the world and to your family and for the good time we had together. You said that you had had so much fun during our time together, probably more fun than most people have in their entire life. I*

*know you don't want us to, but we'll cry for you because we'll always miss you. Sleep well, baby sister."*

*They all put lotus flowers into the water, and candles in little boats, which float downstream together with the ashes. Maria takes a package from her handbag. She opens it to reveal another little wooden boat. She whittled it herself. Silently, she lights the candle before letting it float away. She sits down next to Marcus, takes his hand, and looks at him sadly.*

*For one moment, Marcus senses a strong accusation in Maria's eyes. He returns a loving but quizzical look. But Maria turns away and looks into the red, rising sun.*



## 4. Back on Great Barrier Island

*Christmas Eve, 2019*

On December 23<sup>rd</sup>, the paragroup returns to Maria and Marcus's estate on Great Barrier Island, situated just off the coast of Auckland in the Hauraki Gulf. Most of the group and many of their friends live there. For the most part the island is undeveloped and covered by primordial New Zealand bush, which is only interrupted by the occasional house or the odd small village. Even though most of the workers at SR Inc. live and work in Auckland, this is the true heart of the paragroup. It's an isolated spot, but with all the new transport and communication technologies partially developed by SR Inc., the location has nothing but positive effects on the community.

The group receives a hearty welcome from Aroha and Herb. The couple found each other through the Mindcaller, a mysterious apparatus from the ancient days of the Earth. Its origins and technical principals are unclear, but it allows Aroha and Herb to communicate telepathically with each other and with people they know well. The fact that the Mindcaller sometimes allows them a view into the past, or perhaps realistically simulates the past, makes it even more mysterious<sup>10</sup>. Their latest research has solved many of its riddles. For example, they now know that strange obsidian spheres, which must have been created by the same people who made the Mindcaller, are somehow connected to its capabilities<sup>11</sup>. Still, many questions remain unanswered.

The Mindcaller was the only means of communication between Herb and Aroha in New Zealand, and the rest of the paragroup in India. Their e-Helpers were mostly useless there because of the lack of wireless communication networks in rural India. Aroha and Herb were able to follow most of the

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<sup>10</sup> See "*Xperts: The Paracommunicator*".

<sup>11</sup> See "*Xperts: The Paracommunicator*".

incidents, so there is no need to talk about it just now, and the travelers are still tired from their flight. Also, there seems to be some tension between them, something that Aroha and Herb cannot put their finger on. Most of the travelers soon withdraw to their beds and Stephan has some affairs of the heart to communicate with his e-Helper. This gives Aroha and Herb time to help the cook the Christmas meal.

When they wake up the next morning, they are greeted by a glorious blue sky. The Pohutukawa trees are already displaying their blood-red blossoms, and they eat a long, relaxed breakfast in a world that now seems OK again. They also enjoy taking long walks through the bush and down to the sea, but somehow it seems too quiet without Lena, Sandra, and Monika. Klaus and Barry move to different apartments, and Lena's room remains locked; no one wants to be reminded of the catastrophe.

Nevertheless, they all try to cheer one another up. They bathe in the whirlpool, which is fed by both cold and hot natural springs, they swim in the clear water of the sandy bay, and they play croquet and tennis and go scuba diving. In the meantime, Stephan stands on the beach, giving orders to his fish, hypnotizing them soundlessly. This same method prevented a catastrophe at the nuclear base in Chandipur.

His father calls Stephan an 'animalactivator', but Stephan sees himself more as a sort of Dr. Doolittle. With some of the animals, like the one-eyed grouper, the dolphins, and the lobsters, he feels a sort of friendship. He does not allow his parents to fish for them anymore, so when they really get in a fishing mood, they have to go to a different part of the island.

The horses whinny happily when they see Stephan. More and more, Stephan has the feeling that he can not only give them orders, but also read their emotions. He senses jealousy amongst the horses. Each one wants to be stroked by him first. Stephan notices another thing: his paraseeing skill, which allows him to look round objects, seems to have faded. This could be a result of his concussion, but Klaus is sure that it's



just a matter of growing up, that the individual para-aura changes during puberty.

They decorate the big Christmas tree in the traditional Austrian style. It's a crazy mix of balls, angels, and stars. Only the electric candles remain as a 'tribute' to New Zealand<sup>12</sup>. They have to wait until darkness falls before they turn on the lights, so there is still time to marvel at the tempting buffet. They can't help but steal a taste of a little something here and there. There are not too many presents under the Christmas tree, but it is not necessary to provide explanations for this. They all know that the last months haven't left much time for Christmas shopping.

Only Maria found some time for shopping during their last week in Delhi, mostly to get things off her mind. Marcus asked Dr. Sharma, Raianda, and Cynthia to buy some presents he could give. When Stephan opens his present from Marcus and finds a petit silver hand, he knows immediately that Cynthia must be behind this. Stephan also managed to bring some presents back from Delhi.

Aroha, Herb, Barry, and Klaus also found some time for Christmas shopping, and Cynthia's presents are most unique. She must have ordered all of them a month ago from Austria. It was a very sad moment when she decided to hide Lena, Monika, and Sandra's presents deep inside her closet.

Only the handful of gifts for Ryan, the pleasant young man from Perth, remain untouched. With his ability to project a parashield, he would have been a huge help in India, but after having searched for his girlfriend in Australia for months, he has disappeared without a trace.

There are many embraces and tears are shed over many things. It is not a cheerful Christmas, but it is a Christmas that will stay in their memories forever.

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<sup>12</sup> It's considered an absolute no-no to put electric lights on a Christmas tree in Austria. This tradition may have caused many a fire, but wax candles remain a cultural imperative.

They celebrate Christmas Day in a more Anglo-New Zealand tradition and several turkeys are 'sacrificed'.

Right after lunch, the PM calls Marcus on his e-Helper. "I've decided to descend on your group, so don't be scared if you hear something landing at your place."

Marcus watches the PM's face on the e-Helper screen for a second before she disconnects the call. Jenny, the PM, has become a good friend of Maria and Marcus over the years. It was just as well she called in advance because otherwise the e-Hummingbirds would have suspected some kind of an attack and given the alarm. Marcus disarms the alarm system by entering the landing code he gave to the PM before. Now her Moller 700, which has become her favorite means of transport, can land on the island.

Marcus rushes to landing pad just in time to greet the PM as she steps out of the Moller.

She embraces him. "I'm not going to act as sad as I feel and I know how you must feel. We have to look forward. We have to look for the positive. But please allow me to say a couple of words when we get inside. Is there's anything I can do for you and Maria..."

Marcus shakes his head. "Thanks, Jenny. I'm glad you could make it. I know it wasn't easy on a day like this."

She waves him off, but in truth she had to cancel several appointments for 'health reasons'. The pilot and the co-pilot are just getting comfortable in the Moller when Marcus turns around one more time. "Why don't you guys go grab a bite of turkey in the kitchen?"

While the pilots join the little party in the kitchen, the paragroup and the PM sit down in the winter garden. After a couple of hellos and how-are-yous, the PM turns serious:

"I can only try to imagine what you've been through. There's no reasonable way to express my feelings; no words could adequately describe them. But trust me, I've been with you as much as is possible for an outsider. I also know that such words are not only superfluous here, but that they could also stir up your grief again. But one thing I have to say is



thank you. Thank you, thank you, thank you. Thank you for saving India. If all of Pakistan's nuclear weapons had been launched, the attack would have endangered the whole world. According to the experts, New Zealand would've faced severe radioactive contamination. People would've died, there would've been miscarriages, birth defects...I really don't want to tell you all the other details of the report, but I can tell you, it was not particularly pleasant holiday reading."

"As you know, only very few people know the details of the conflict. The greater public has no idea what really happened. All they got in the news was that there were almost simultaneous accidents at nuclear bases in India and Pakistan. It's not out in the open yet, but those accidents will have far reaching consequences. India and Pakistan have signed an anti-nuclear pact that will actually make those countries free of nuclear weapons."

"The propaganda machines have been busy for two days: Now they claim that both countries helped each other during the 'accidents.' Stop laughing! This is amazing! The rivalries between the majorities and the minorities in both countries are turning into mutual respect. The border with Kashmir has been reopened. Warheads are being dismantled, people are even burning their weapons in bonfires. Both Bollywood, the media industry in Bombay, and its Pakistani counterpart are already putting this new attitude to good use. While we sit here, ministers of both countries are discussing a free-trade agreement. Can you imagine that? They've barely spoken to one another since 1947 and now they're discussing free trade. Any trade at all has been absolutely *verboten*, as some of you might say, for decades. This is the greatest historical moment since the end of World War II. It even tops the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. You'll see; there'll be even more surprises. You can be proud of yourselves. You, and only you, made this possible."

For a moment, the PM is silent. All of the paragroup sit there in amazement. Then the PM continues less emotionally,



"You will stay in the background. That's how you want it, right?"

They all nod.

"But there are a couple more details I have to tell you: the parliaments of India and Pakistan both want to decorate you with the highest medal they have for foreigners. They've sent me a letter asking for the names of the people who helped them in this critical situation. We have to find a way to handle this matter. The Indian government has even sent Christmas presents for the unknown heroes."

Now it is clear why the PM has brought a box with her. She opens it and hands each of them a longish package. She does this in alphabetical order: First Aroha, then Barry, Cynthia, Herb, Klaus, Marcus, Maria, and finally Stephan.

Stephan is the first one to rip his package open. He finds a golden case. "Is that solid gold?"

The PM nods. "But sit down before you open it."

But Stephan cannot wait. He looks inside and finds a checkbook. "Is this for real?" he asks Klaus next to him.

Klaus flips through it twice. "Yup, you just got yourself five hundred 1000 dollar checks, young man."

The PM nods knowingly. "You can't really call India stingy in these matters. I'm afraid I can't match their generosity, though. Plus, I'm a little more down-to-earth."

"Five hundred thousand bucks sounds pretty down-to-earth to me," grins Barry.

The PM calls one of the pilots on her e-Helper. "Time to get the stuff out of the Moller." She then turns back to the group. "Well, let's make this a bit less dramatic. What I have for you are two hundred bottles of wine from each growing district here in New Zealand. You'll have some stacking to do, Marcus."

Stephan can't contain himself. "How many wine districts are there in New Zealand?"

The PM laughs. "Officially, we now have thirty-eight."

Marcus has the feeling that it is time to say something too. "Merci pour le vin, madame!" He kisses her hand, making



the PM blush a little. "But two things are troubling me a little: first, I'm not sure if my cellar can accommodate all this, and second, we all have the feeling that you want to neutralize us paras with alcohol."

Then he turns more serious. "About what you said before, we're all happy that we could do some good for India and Pakistan. We want to thank you for your praise and your gifts. But as you know, our actions there did not render purely positive results. Don't get me wrong, this doesn't mean that you're no longer our friend; it was our decision to accept the mission. Let's all drink to a better future."

The PM is sure that Marcus still considers her a friend, but she's no longer sure if that goes for the rest of the group. She was watching Maria during Marcus's speech and noticed the wrinkles on her forehead and the telling look she gave Barry. Barry's facial expressions were not that friendly either. The PM also knows that Marcus was not completely honest when he said that it was only their decision to take the mission. She knows that Marcus knew she would not have been able to accept a "No" in the matter. The fact that this mission could have killed some members of the group would not have made a difference back then, even though she likes Marcus more than she would like to admit. She sighs to herself. 'Sometimes it's hard to be the PM,' she thinks, 'sometimes it's hard to make decisions that an individual really shouldn't have to make.' She raises her glass to Marcus again.

The group slowly breaks up. Curious, Stephan runs down to the wine cellar. The others follow in twos and threes. It is an impressive sight seeing how the thousands of wine bottles are slid into the cellarets after the special labels have been attached.

Later on, the PM has a private word with Marcus; some questions remain unanswered. "How did it happen that all of a sudden your group established a base in India, and why Sarnath?"

"Well Jenny, that's a long story, but I'll make it as short as I can. Remember I told you that we'd already had some



trouble with the PPU in Europe? We knew that they were on the point of developing effective espionage and shielding devices. I'm sure you also remember the French frigate you forced into port. We found all kinds of suspicious material on it, even though they destroyed most of it before we got on board."

The PM smiles: "Of course I remember that. It was a pleasure to repay the French for the Rainbow Warrior affair. After all, they had illegally entered New Zealand waters."

Marcus continues, "I think this really put the brakes on their plans. Either that or they had some other problems I don't know about. Anyway, they laid low for a while, until they found out that we had begun operating outside New Zealand. We knew that their man Justo and some other PPU people were looking for us again, but they didn't give us too much trouble at first. Last year, we suddenly detected strong para-activities in India and Pakistan, and we knew that it had to be the PPU again. We had to find out what they were after because we were sure that the PPU could become a real danger to us. That's why we decided to install a strong group in Sarnath."

"And why Sarnath?"

"That happened almost by accident. I made friends with a couple of Tibetan immigrants on South Island. They told me that Sarnath is host to the only real Tibetan university. It's located inside an old university building near a Buddhist monastery. This monastery was built there because, supposedly, Buddha gave his first speech there after becoming enlightened. But I'm getting off the subject. At this university, they use the most modern computer technologies to preserve traditional Tibetan culture. They digitalize pictures, films, prayers, scrolls, etc. I was curious about the technology they were using and I realized that they had an ideal infrastructure to support our e-Helpers, drones, and communication glasses. It turns out that the university desperately needed funds because Ford and its Orient Foundation have severely cut their



support. The rest was simple, we helped them, and they helped us.”

“But let me ask you something too, Jenny,” Marcus continues. “We had already moved to Sarnath in June and, back then, there was absolutely no sign of another escalation of the conflict between India and Pakistan, and no sign that nuclear weapons could be somehow involved. How did you know that Chandipur, so far from the Pakistani border, would play such a decisive role there?”

The PM smiles: “That was almost an accident as well. In 2017, I was New Zealand’s delegate to the Kashmir Conference. After it produced no results, they decided to prolong it for another fruitless day. Prime Minister Vajassa insisted that I didn’t spend another night in the hotel and invited me to stay with him at his residence. We talked long into the evening; we got along well. He told me certain details that only he knows. He mentioned that Pakistan’s president and General Yussin had personally threatened him. They said they would destroy every large Indian city in the event that India refused to give up Kashmir without a fight. From that moment on, Vajassa knew that he would have to plan a first-strike scenario against both of Pakistan’s nuclear bases. In August, Vajassa paid a quick visit to Wellington, which the media considered a waste of time. He told me that the situation was hopeless and wanted my opinion. I couldn’t come up with a solution either, but then I thought about you guys. I let Vajassa in on the secret of my special operations unit that could probably prevent Pakistan from bombing India. That’s how it went and that’s why you got some extra support. Didn’t you notice that?”

Marcus nods his head.

“I know you must have asked yourself why the wireless broadband network worked in Chadipur, of all places. That was installed for you and your drones. And didn’t you notice that you were only attacked by the Pakistani Air Force and that the Indian Air Force, which is much better equipped, never

tried to keep you from flying across the border? And how do you think you managed to smuggle the Moller 800 into India?"

"Call me stupid, but I always thought that the stealth lamination was the reason for that. So, actually, it was a political, not a chemical reason, right? Just one more question, if we had refused to go on that mission, would you have forced us to?"

The PM reacts a bit angrily. "Marcus, we shouldn't play those mind games. They lead us nowhere. I knew that this was big, very big. I probably would have tried to pressure you a little, but then I would have explained the situation to you. Would you really have refused to try to save the Indian subcontinent? If you really had, then I don't know what I would have done. I still don't see any alternatives. So, actually, it's very good that you agreed. It's a tragedy that the PPU got involved, but who could have foretold that? Who can undo this now?"

Marcus remains silent. The PM takes his hand and looks at him. Marcus nods understandingly.

A call from the PM's Moller interrupts them: "Request permission to land!"

"All clear to land," answers Marcus, a bit confused. "I didn't know they even left."

"When you're talking about important things, you sometimes miss what's happening around you," explains the PM, "The Moller went back to Auckland to pick up two people who really want to see you. Maybe you should welcome them at the landing pad."

Marcus rushes outside. The PM follows him slowly. Stephan is already there.

"Stephan, do you have any idea who could it be?"

"I think I do," he answers his baffled father.

The Moller lands. The doors open and Raianda jumps out and runs straight into Stephan's embrace. Stephan is glowing with joy. 'She made it,' he thinks.

A somewhat more dignified Dr. Sharma steps out. He gives a still confused Marcus a firm handshake. "You invited



us and you said the sooner the better. You even insisted, so we didn't want to disappoint you." He notices the surprise on Marcus's face. "I think you don't even know that you invited us again, but I think we both know who is behind this" He looks over to Stephan. "Have a look at the e-mail we received through the New Zealand Embassy in Delhi two days ago, then you'll understand. He hands Marcus the hard copy.

*Dear Dr. Sharma:*

*We are very grateful for the splendid treatment you gave our citizens. In addition to a check that should cover the costs of the treatment, we are also sending you two electronic tickets for a round-trip flight to New Zealand. We know that your new friends on Great Barrier Island have explicitly invited you to visit them soon. We were able to find out that your working hours would allow a short visit over Christmas. We have booked a 24th December Delhi-Sydney-Auckland flight for you and your daughter. The personal pilots of the Prime Minister of New Zealand will pick you up in Auckland at 3:00 p.m. They will fly you to Great Barrier Island and the Prime Minister herself will be there to welcome you.*

*After three days with your friends, we would like to invite you to a short tour of New Zealand. Please contact Mr. Stephan Simmer for further details and have a look at the attachment to this mail. In case you decide to take the trip, you will be back on great Barrier Island for New Year's Eve and will be picked up at 3:00 p.m. to take the return flight Auckland-Sydney-Delhi.*

*With highest regards and best wishes for a safe trip,  
The Government of New Zealand.*

In the meantime, the PM has also reached the Moller. "Don't you want to introduce us, Marcus?" she asks.

The others share Marcus's joy and surprise. Dr. Sharma has some small souvenirs and a bouquet of flowers for Cynthia. He makes sure to give it to her in the presence of the whole group. Cynthia is the only one who also has presents for Dr. Sharma and Raianda. It is good that nobody asks why she had them in the first place; in fact, they had been intended for their dead comrades.

The afternoon turns out to be more joyful than anticipated. Unfortunately, the PM is the first to depart. Marcus insists on accompanying her to the Moller. "Thank you, Jenny. You're class."

"I hope that this at least took your thoughts off your loss a little. Dr. Sharma and his daughter are very nice. I'm sure they will keep you cheered up. I have one more surprise, but you'll discover it later. By the way, your son is a real scamp. He called me in parliament on the 23<sup>rd</sup>. Of course, they didn't put the call through, but then he called again, using your name. My co-workers know that a call from you is always important. So they put him through and he introduced himself to me. Then he more or less dictated what I had to do. When I asked him why he thought I would do all this and why I would want to foot the bill, he literally answered, 'You get so much positive publicity because of us, so it's the least you could do.' We joked around a little, but then he turned serious again: 'This isn't just a fun invitation; three of us have died and this could endanger the group. I think that this could help us to get over this crisis.' And then he just hung up! Trust me, *no one* hangs up on a Prime Minister."

"I have to admit that I've underestimated Stephan. He's grown up so fast, too fast for me to keep up."

"Marcus, do you think that your group could really fall apart?"

"Not really fall apart, but there could be a serious crisis coming. I don't understand it, but sometimes I notice certain looks...and moods."



"I'll keep my fingers crossed. Call me if you need anything."

The three days are too short for the doctor and Raianda. Stephan and Raianda spend as much time together as possible. No one can ignore the crackling fire between them. Raianda makes sure that they also spend some time together with the group without acting as a couple. Everything is even more obvious with Dr. Sharma and Cynthia. They are true lovebirds in front of everyone. They keep asking Maria about New Zealand and make her give them a tour of Auckland and the island. They also spend a lot of time talking with Raianda and Stephan. Dr. Sharma is like a magician: he holds the group together and inconspicuously tends to people who need his help.

'If only I had his leadership qualities,' Marcus keeps thinking, with a bit of admiration and envy.

Through Stephan, Raianda learns to truly know and love the sea for the first time. They take endless swims along the coast. Here, by the sea, he takes the lead. After they pass the first cliffs, they come to a bay that can no longer be easily reached by land. Stephan insists that they both get naked. He finds Raianda even more beautiful in the daylight. They play and carry each other easily through the water. They become playthings, completely at one another's mercy. Then Stephan hides all their swimwear in a small cave and takes out a waterproof bag and thin neoprene wetsuits. He puts one on and tells Raianda to do the same. Stephan knows that the water will get too cold after a while, even though there will be more beautiful bays like this for them to dry and warm themselves on. When they find another small, sandy bay, the sun burns down on them through a large space in the clouds. Now it is time for Stephan to open the waterproof bag, take out 'their' blanket and unfold it there. It is warm and they are alone, so they decide to take off their wetsuits. They both enjoy each other's salty skin.

When they swim back around a rocky promontory, Raianda begins to get a little worried: "The waves are getting bigger and bigger!"

"Raianda, you don't have to be scared, the fish are my friends. They'll help us if we need it."

Raianda thinks this a little childish; in addition, she swallows some water when the largest waves hit her. Almost panicking, she gasps, "Stephan! I need help."

Stephan, swimming right beside Raianda, supports her body with one hand. At the same time, he silently calls for his best friends, the dolphins. Suddenly, six dolphins swim underneath them and lift the two swimmers out of the water. Raianda is sure she is dreaming.

"Stop swimming," says Stephan. "They'll get us back safely." He holds Raianda tightly as the dolphins carry them back swiftly and comfortably.

'This is too weird to be real. I must be dreaming!' Raianda thinks.

When they reach the last bay before the house, the dolphins carefully let them glide into the shallow water and disappear as fast as they came.

"What the hell was that all about?" Raianda asks.

"Those were my friends. Most of the animals around *here* are my friends. Please don't tell anyone about this—not anyone. We'll wait here for about an hour, until the tide goes back out. Then it'll be easier to swim the last bit."

"I'm cold, even in this wetsuit," Raianda says.

"We'll take care of that now," Stephan responds. He goes back to the little cave where he hid their swimwear and takes out a dry towel and a warm blanket. He unfolds 'their' blanket on the sand. "Get out of that suit," he tells her before he sensuously towels her dry and sits her down on the silk blanket. Then he covers her with the thicker one. He then returns to his hiding place, and, very much to Raianda's surprise, returns with a small camping stove and starts some water boiling for tea. Then he dries himself off and slides in



with Raianda. They quickly get warm beneath the blanket. They rub each other's feet and are soon enjoying the hot tea.

More than an hour goes by quickly. Now they can easily make the short swim home without help.

On the third day, the changeable weather becomes a real storm. They all sit in the winter garden and watch the trees strain against the heavy wind. Dr. Sharma thinks this could be the right moment for the surprise that the PM and Stephan have planned. He considers the surprise a bit dangerous, but after all, they are leaving for the tour of New Zealand tomorrow morning:

"The PM has invited us all to a gathering on New Year's Eve. The gathering will be for you, your families, and your close friends exclusively. Everything including transportation has already been organized. Of course, this will not be a New Year's party with music and dancing; it will only be a harmonious gathering of family and friends to welcome the New Year."

Dr. Sharma gives Marcus a list of the people invited. There's Alice and Gilles from Posonby—it seems like forever since they went rafting together in Waitomo; Peter Cobb, Marcus's best friend from Chicago, and his wife; Aroha's mother, who normally cherishes her solitude, and several of Herb's relatives as well. Of course, many of SR, Inc.'s employees such as Robert, the manager, will also be in attendance. The meeting will take place on a hill in Devonport on the north side of the Harbor Bridge. This should provide a quiet environment, but will still allow them to watch the midnight fireworks in Auckland.

Most of them consider this an unusual idea. Dr. Sharma can feel that many of them are reluctant to have a 'celebration' or 'party' so soon after the deaths of their loved ones, even though he consciously avoided using these terms. He senses that this 'tightrope walk' was not wholly effective, so he makes his voice calm and peaceful and tells them about the big families in India who meet, not to celebrate, but to just spend



time together. These gatherings can sometimes extend into several days. Maria's parents, for example, only agreed to come after making sure that, even though it is the New Zealand government who invited them, they will not have to take part in any official ceremonies or celebrations. They agreed to come only after making sure that it is just about spending time together, and meant as a thank you to the group. When Maria hears that, her inner resistance falls apart: she has tried many times to convince her parents to visit them again but without success. She had even given up due to the physical fragility of her father. Now she understands what her mother meant when they last talked over the e-Helper: "I hope we'll be able to really see each other soon, not just virtually." Sharma hands out lists of the people who have agreed to come. There are many more pleasant surprises.

Then Dr. Sharma withdraws to his room. He feels very tight with the group and knows how much they are weighed down by the deaths of their three friends. He is not sure if any tricks or attempts to ease the situation will be enough to keep them together. He needs fresh air and walks to the forest and the source of the spring. The Pohutukawa trees are waving wildly in the dimness of the storm, and the branches knock against each other. He is reminded of the sounds of a bamboo forest in the wind. He can barely walk in the gale but reaches one of the biggest trees and sits down underneath, his legs crossed and his hands folded.

The storm is getting stronger and stronger. Clouds of red Pohutukawa blossoms whirl and branches fall here and there. Dr. Sharma knows that he should go back to the safety of the house...

Marcus eventually notices that the doctor has gone. He finds his slippers by the door facing the forest. 'So he went outside. That's not too safe in a storm like this.' Marcus puts on his heavy weather gear, speeds up his individual time and walks outside. He is almost knocked over immediately: the wind must be blowing at over 100 kilometers per hour. Dr



Sharma is nowhere to be seen. He must have walked into the forest for a little protection from the wind. Marcus knows that the falling branches, or even whole trees, could easily injure Dr. Sharma.

With two pseudohands, he creates a protective shield over his head. This is tricky, because the wind affects his pseudohands as it would an umbrella. Marcus walks carefully toward the forest. He soon sees Dr Sharma meditating under a great, old tree. Marcus stops some meters away from him. Small branches are thrown continually against his pseudoroof, but without injuring him.

When Dr. Sharma notices Marcus, he stiffens. 'All these branches falling on him and he just stands there?'

The storm intensifies even more. An unexpectedly strong gust throws Marcus to the ground. Lifting himself up again, he sees how the tree behind the doctor is bending further and further. It will crush him like a grape. Speeding up his individual time as much as he can, Marcus pulls Dr. Sharma away from the tree, grabs him, and draws him back to the house, all the time protecting him with his pseudoroof. Sharma looks back at the place where he was sitting: it's now completely covered by the giant tree trunk. He would be dead if this unknown power had not intervened.

The two men enter the house and look at each other. "The man who can move thing with his thoughts," Dr. Sharma mumbles, "and who can heal his own wounds?"

Marcus nods, still looking him in the eye when Dr. Sharma asks, "Why are you looking at me like that? Thank you for saving me, but what are you thinking about at the moment?"

"You shouldn't know about my skills. You could say something to someone. I'm seriously considering erasing the memories of the past few minutes."

"You can do that?"

"Yes."

"So that's how India was saved," Dr. Sharma concludes.

"Can I be sure that you won't say anything about what just happened?"

"I can promise that I will never say anything consciously, but what about when I'm asleep? What if someone tortures me? What if somebody gives me drugs? If this has to remain a secret, I don't think you can trust even me. Erase the last ten minutes, now."

Marcus admires Dr. Sharma. He calls Cynthia and explains what has happened. Marcus allows Dr. Sharma to listen. He knows this will not make a difference because Cynthia will soon erase the last ten minutes of her beloved's memory. She is not happy that she has to do this and sighs.

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Despite their reservations, New Year's Eve 2019 turns out to be wonderful for the paragon and their friends. There are so many friends and friends of friends who enjoy being together, sharing their problems, their sorrows and their joys. Positive energy is flowing everywhere. There is a feeling of communion between the living and the dead. Not even Dr. Sharma experiences this very often.

With love and a bit of pride, Dr. Sharma observes Cynthia: she has changed a lot over a short period of time. She has somehow become the good soul of the group. Just like him, she enjoys helping others. Maria is happy to be together with her parents and Dr. Sharma is happy to see that their love for their daughter outweighs their grief over the death of their granddaughter. Barry and Klaus mix in well with Aroha's and Herb's friends and families. There never seem to form tight groups. It is an unusually homogenous mass of incredibly diverse individuals.

Marcus is so happy to see his sister and parents again. He had long given up trying to convince them to come to Auckland. Dr. Sharma is especially impressed by Peter Cobb:



a successful man who does not seem to be true to the word of law but always follows the laws of humanity and friendship. It's also remarkable how a PM can move around here so freely, with nothing in her to give away her title of office. Yes, this visit to New Zealand has been well worth it.

It is typical of the evening that almost no one is especially interested in the fireworks. There is also no need for the popping of champagne corks or for the compulsory 'oohs' and 'aahs'.

But Stephan and Raianda are an exception to this rule. After spending what they consider a long time with the others, they have left the party and are now sitting in a field, cuddling like lovebirds. There is so much they want to share with each other: the romantic silhouette of Auckland, first dominated by the Skytower and later by the rockets coming from Mission Bay, Devonport, and from the Auckland Domain. But all this is merely a romantic background for more important matters of the heart.

"Raianda, did you bring that piece of my silk blanket with you?"

"No, Stephan."

"You forgot?" Stephan asks, disappointed.

"No, I left it at home on purpose."

Slowly, Stephan begins to understand what she's telling him. "So we'll meet again," Stephan beams.

"Yes!" Raianda answers with a quaver in her voice, "but not too often." Then she breaks down in tears that Stephan can only stop with long kisses. They know it will soon be the time to say goodbye. Suddenly, someone behind them clears his throat. They turn to find Dr. Sharma.

"Raianda, I told you not to fall in love with Stephan."

"I know but sometimes your orders are hard to follow, papa."

Without accusations, Sharma pulls them both up by the hand and puts his left arm around Raianda and his right around Stephan. "Come on, let's get back to the others. Don't forget, there is more to the world than just two people."

Both Maria and Marcus's parents stay for two weeks, and will take the same return flight via Singapore to Vienna. During this period, the grandparents take control of Great Barrier Island. Everyone else is treated like a child in one big family. Even Herb, Barry, and Aroha, who barely understand German, become *mein Sohn*, and *meine liebe Tochter*. Klaus and Marcus have to face a lot criticism when they work too late.

But actually, they are extremely busy making advances on antipara rays. Now they understand that it was a mistake not to further develop the special e-Helpers they invented to use against the Brodlyn twins. Back then, the fact that silatraviate had to be activated by x-rays in order to produce the necessary frequency-variable rays seemed unacceptable because those x-rays were too dangerous for humans over longer periods of time. Additionally, the antipara rays were undependable.

That is the reason why they decided not to bring antipara devices with them to India. However, the effects of Justo's paprahypnotic proved that the PPU has made great advances in the field: Lena could only sense his parability from a very short distance, which was not normal for such a case. Apparently, the PPU had, in the meantime, made it possible to turn parabilities on and off without endangering the health of their paras. This is where SR, Inc. has to hook in.

The more they work together, the more the differences in approach between Klaus and Marcus become apparent: while Klaus insists on more research, Marcus wants to go to Europe to get rid of Adler and the PPU once and for all.

"Marcus, you can't go to Europe before we've come up with some kind of protection against the parahypnotic."

Marcus looks at Klaus in disbelief. "That guy is long dead!"

This is how Klaus, and later, Barry and Maria, learn what Marcus has known for a long time: that Stephan had those three killed. Marcus claims that he never mentioned this



to Klaus because he thought that Stephan had told them all long ago. After all, it was Marcus who was in a coma for three days.

Klaus does not seem to believe half of what Marcus is saying and the fronts harden. It is soon clear that they will not continue to work together on this matter. Klaus will keep doing research in Auckland while Marcus will have to face the PPU in Europe without him. Marcus tries to calm Klaus down. "I'll take one of the old antipara e-Helpers with me for protection."

Klaus only shrugs.

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After the grandparents have left, the house on Great Barrier Island is mostly empty during the day. Barry, Klaus, Herb, and Marcus usually work long into the evenings in Auckland. Stephan is back in school, also in Auckland, leaving only Maria and Cynthia, and sometimes Aroha.

With little sensitivity, Marcus tells Maria that he has to fly to Europe for two weeks to take care of the PPU business. He also tells her that he will ask Cynthia to come with him because she is the only one who can guarantee that he can use his parabilities unnoticed. Maria is shocked, and glaring at him, she reels off a list of angry accusations like she's been preparing them for weeks.

"First of all, you plan to leave me for two weeks right when I'm especially alone, and on top of that, you're going with another woman: a young woman, and this very woman is my only support at the moment. And what I really want to know is, why for God's sake did you let Lena come to India with us? We already had a parascout *and* a paralocator and..."

Marcus tries to interrupt her but Maria is not finished.

"No, now you let me talk for once. Tell me! Tell me why we didn't bring any antipara e-Helpers. Was it because you didn't develop them yourself? And all those gifts from India

and the PM visiting here and that whole New Year's gathering—you were really able to enjoy all that! I watched you closely. You didn't even miss Lena for one moment. And your lies! I'm sick of them! In your speech to the PM, you said that we couldn't have refused to take the operation. That's laughable. That's ridiculous! You know she could have, she would have forced us to do it and, speaking of the PM—how she *adores* you and how you *adore* her. It's so obvious! It makes me sick how you show everyone again and again that you don't need me anymore! And what you do to our son! You don't give him any appreciation. You're so strict all the time. You're losing Stephan! You'll lose him. Worst of all, you didn't even tell me that Justo and that other monster are dead! Marcus, you're crazy, you're completely obsessed. Here we are, after this...catastrophe, and what's on your mind? You're ready to lead us into the next catastrophe! You know, I've had enough, just enough. And I'm not the only one. I just want to live a normal life, like other people just for once! Just be normal like other people. I want to forget about this whole para-shit and if I have to, I'll ask Cynthia to erase it all. You didn't even notice how hard it was for me to stay calm and self-controlled when my parents were here. Don't you see that I can't take it any longer? You don't, do you? You know what? Just take Cynthia and go to Europe with her. You might as well stay there."

Marcus is paralyzed. He tries to calm himself down by breathing in and out seven times, as Dr. Sharma has shown him, but before he can answer, Maria begins shouting at him again: "And now you don't even know what to say. You don't even have a word to say to this."

Marcus finds it hard to control himself. Fortunately, his anger is outweighed by the sadness that he is obviously losing Maria. That way he manages to remain at least relatively calm. "Maria, please listen to me. I think a lot of what you just said isn't true. You're still so desperate because of Lena's death, but I'm desperate too. Don't you think that I've been having the same problems controlling myself? Do you know how hard



I tried to get my thoughts off the whole thing in order to just get through this? Don't you see how I blame myself? Maybe I should never have led you into this. Maybe I should have known that my parability is dangerous for everyone, then at least you would be able to live a happy life now."

"So now you're saying that you regret having married me..."

Marcus slams his hand hard on the table. "That's enough now! Please listen until I'm finished before you insult me again or do anything. Let me try again, as calmly as possible. But you have to understand that it's kind of hard to stay calm right now."

"I loved you before we got married. I loved you when we got married. I've always loved you since, even up till this moment. So don't twist my words. And about your other accusations, give me the chance to explain a couple of things to you. I know that I have to take the blame for a lot of things; I've made many mistakes. You're right there. But please, let's go through the whole thing together and don't throw all the hate you feel at me."

Maria wants to interrupt him, but Marcus stops her. "First, I know this isn't the best time to go to Europe, maybe we should reconsider this. Maybe I should've gone when your parents were still here, or maybe I should've asked them to stay longer. We can talk about this, can't we? And I'm only taking another woman with me because I need her paraskill. I could only do this without Cynthia if Barry was willing to come, but I asked him and he refused, flatly. But I'll ask him again; I'll even beg him, but please understand—I have to force Adler to tell me all he knows without him realizing it. But please, please, come with me—it would help me so much. Forgive me for not asking you before, but I thought that we shouldn't leave Stephan here by himself. I'm sure we could find a solution to that. If it comes down to it, he could even come with us. I know that Cynthia is important for you now, but I didn't know how important, and there's also Aroha. But



still, the best thing would be if you came along. Please come with me.

And I really didn't want to take Lena with us to India. I knew how dangerous the mission might be. I even wanted to forbid it, even though she insisted on coming. I've been blaming myself for weeks for changing my mind. I know it was a mistake and I can't even explain it to myself. I blame myself again and again. And the reason we didn't bring any antipara e-Helpers is because they were still too dangerous for us to use. Nobody thought to bring them but that's exactly what Klaus is working on now. He wants to find a solution here, and I—I want to find out what the PPU already knows. They seem to have found a parashield that's not dangerous to humans."

"And about the PM and Dr. Sharma visiting. Yes, I was happy about that, but not like you think. I just thought this would be a great chance to take our minds off it. Of course there were moments when I tried to suppress what happened, but there was not a single time when I woke up in the morning without despair, deep despair, and there was hardly a night without nightmares, hardly a minute without those terrible scenes coming back: how I was lying there in the road, and how I saw you wounded and dead in the burning car. Do you really think that I can forget this in four weeks? And you're right about my speech. I'm still not sure why I said that. And when I asked her about it directly afterwards, she was evasive...I shouldn't have said something like that, but please forgive me—it was a spontaneous answer. Please don't weigh every single word I say. I have to admit, I do like the PM, but you do too, don't you? And yes, I'm happy that she appreciates our work. I consider her a very good and reliable ally, but there's no more to it."

"And about Stephan. I really hope he will stay with us. But if he doesn't, I know that it could be partly my fault. Maybe he's sowing his wild oats, and he'll come back to us after. And please believe me in this, I never meant to conceal the death of Justo's group. Why would I want to do that? I



thought Stephan told you, and you never asked about what happened to them. Wouldn't it have been logical to ask if they had been kept track of if you thought they were still alive? And trust me, it has crossed my mind hundreds of times to simply ignore my parabilities, but I just can't. We were born with them and some people even envy us because they can't see the other side of the coin. We can't just erase them; that would be like erasing our ability to breathe, and Cynthia knows this too. I just can't bring myself to not use them. I would always save Dr. Sharma's life if I could."

For the first time, Maria shows some reaction.

Marcus continues, "And I would always save someone from a burning car, no matter who. I'm sure there'll always be situations where you won't be able to keep from using your paraseeing, and actually, this is how the PM would've forced us to go to India: she wouldn't have threatened to expose us, but she'd have explained to us in detail what would happen if we didn't go. No one, not even you, would've been able to refuse."

Maria stands up without a flicker of emotion. Marcus calls after her, and when she runs away, he holds her back with one pseudohand. "Maria, have you been listening? Why don't you believe me?"

"Marcus, you're a liar through and through: all that you said about loving me before and during our wedding, you know that we never really got married. You just gave me fake marriage documents one day...you never even asked me if I wanted to marry to you. You know that I can't come to Europe with you because of Stephan, and he can't come because of school. And Aroha? That mute fish? You want her to support me? And I don't even know if you have something going with Cynthia. Maybe you haven't yet, but I'll bet it's on its way. Don't you think that I saw how you envied her and Dr. Sharma? I know you're hot for young chicks: the way you sometimes looked at Raianda even...and what about those two English girls in the mountains? Keep lying whenever you can.

I don't care. But never, never ever touch me with your pseudotentacles again. If you do, I swear you'll regret it."

Marcus lets go of Maria. She runs off and starts taking her things into a different apartment. He thinks back to the night with the two English girls: 'How much did I hold myself back there? And why did Sandra break her promise and tell Maria about them?' Their 'marriage' troubles Marcus the most. He is sure he remembers that they both wanted to get married and that they both wanted to have kids, but it is true, of course: they never married officially. He only organized fake documents to be able to escape from Europe<sup>13</sup>. Maybe they should have had some kind of a church ceremony or something, to make up for that. But Maria has never said a word about it and they have always considered themselves a married couple, and so have all the others. What's the matter with her? What did he do wrong?

For the next few days, Maria avoids Marcus. When he addresses her, she doesn't say a word. He explains his plans to Aroha, Herb, and Stephan, and Klaus already knows all about them. They all listen quietly and have no objections. He doesn't understand why, but they don't seem to sympathize with him any longer.

Marcus has another word with Barry. "Barry, your help would be so valuable to me in Europe. The whole thing is not just about neutralizing the PPU; it's more about finding out how they hide their paraskills and how they protect themselves from other paras. They seem to be much further along than us in this respect."

Marcus is not surprised by Barry's answer, but he is shocked by his indifference. Barry seems to be bored and only shrugs his shoulders. Marcus continues, "Barry, it's about security for all of us. Don't you think that Monika would've wanted you to help here?"

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<sup>13</sup> See "*Xperts: The Telekinetic.*"



Barry then explodes with anger. "Ah ha! I knew you'd bring this up, but you can't bait me with that. I know how hard you tried to hide it from us, to make sure that we would keep cooperating, but even stupid Barry knows now that Justo and his group are dead. Do you really think you can win me with cheap tricks like that? You just do whatever you want. So will I. Thanks for the conversation. This makes it much easier for me now. I'll get my shit together and move back to Auckland. Now."

Marcus is desperate. "Trust me, Barry, I never wanted to bait you with Monika's memory. I had no idea that Stephan hadn't told you about Justo's car crash. Remember, I was still comatose. Stephan told me after I woke up. How could I have known that he only told me?"

"Marcus, trying to talk yourself out of it like this is unworthy of you. I didn't think you could sink so low."

It takes Marcus a long time to digest Barry's anger and hate, but now that he rethinks everything, he doesn't feel free from guilt anymore: Stephan was so embarrassed when he told Marcus about what he did to Justo's group. And then his reaction to Marcus's light criticism was so strong. If only he'd had more empathy, he would have known that however fair it might have been to kill those monsters, the act would weigh so heavily on Stephan that he wouldn't tell anyone else. Why did he have to react in this way? Instead of comforting his son, he stirred up the guilt inside him. Marcus is not sure if he will be able to talk this out with his son and whenever he tries, Stephan cuts the conversation short.

Never in his whole life has Marcus experienced this kind of loneliness. But still, he has to proceed with his plans: he will have to get his hands on all the PPU knowledge and, if possible, destroy the PPU once and for all.

Marcus asks Cynthia to come to Europe with him: "No one wants to go with me. I need help to find out what I need to know, and how we can protect ourselves from para-attacks in the future. You're the only one who can guarantee success."

"How do you want us to carry it out?"

Marcus roughly explains his plans to her—plans that no longer include Barry. Cynthia asks him to give her time to consider it for a while. She wants to talk to Maria about it.

In their conversation, Maria makes untenable accusations. It makes no difference when Cynthia invalidates all of them. Now Cynthia is the only one who is starting to understand Marcus. There is just one point she doesn't get: why can't Marcus see that Maria is psychologically unhealthy at the moment? Why can't he see that she badly needs medical care? She discusses this with Aroha, who promises to find a good psychotherapist for Maria. Now the decision is clear to Cynthia. She agrees to go with Marcus and they book a flight to Brussels with an adjustable return ticket for the 18<sup>th</sup> of March.

On March 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2020, a beautiful late summer day, Cynthia and Marcus fly to Brussels via Sydney. This day is special in more than one way: when she cleans up the winter garden, Aroha finds her Mindcaller, which has been missing for two weeks. It has recorded every single word of the quarrels between Marcus and Maria, and Marcus and Barry. Aroha doesn't realize what consequences this will have later.



## 5. The Battle with the PPU

*March 2020*

Cynthia and Marcus arrive in Brussels tired from the long flight. Even though there were no complications, the direct nonstop flight from Auckland to Brussels took eighteen hours. The side effects of the trip are still a nuisance. In order to do Cynthia a favor, Marcus has not slowed his subjective time, a trick he usually uses against jet lag.

The new generation of jumbo jets, which have been in use for long distance flights since 2012, approach the speed of sound but can still not go beyond it. The problem is that sonic booms can only be avoided by flying at greater altitudes. There have been positive developments with the seating and personal space but the new 'mass experience' causes new problems: it remains difficult to get 2000 passengers on and off the plane, provide them with food, check in and store all the luggage, etc. In addition, the huge, new planes can only land at certain airports, most of which have become so big that new means of transport had to be invented for airport areas.

Small autonomous vehicles are slowly replacing train connections. The passenger's individual e-Helpers store ticket and boarding information. This way, the next free vehicle automatically stops for the passenger and takes him to the gate or, if there is time, to a waiting area. From there, the e-Helper reminds the passenger in time to get to the departure gate.

The growing size of airports has made it necessary to move them further away from cities. Usually, you have to take a high-speed train from the airport to terminals in the city center. This has the positive side effect of allowing a passenger to go directly from one city terminal to another on the other side of the globe without ever having to carry baggage.

Cynthia and Marcus choose an even more comfortable mode: they fly the Moller from Great Barrier Island to Auckland Airport and, once in Brussels, change to an air



shuttle, which is a large Moller as it turns out, and land directly on the roof of the Le Meridien hotel in the center of Brussels.

For twenty-five years, Le Meridien has been one of the best hotels in Brussels. The big suites offer every possible creature comfort. Cynthia and Marcus decide to take naps in their individual rooms. At 4 p.m., they will take a walk around the city center and find someplace to have dinner.

After a couple of hours sleep and a quick dive into the swimming pool, they feel fit again. Cynthia knows Brussels better than Marcus, so she takes the lead. From the hotel, a street leads them directly to a little square with the odd name of Grasmart. Then they take a narrow street off to the left, which leads them to Brussels's 'jewel', the Grand Place. The square is dominated by the Hotel de Ville, a fifteenth century gothic city hall. Its façade is made of filigree designs, forming lines which all lead skywards. A slim tower hosts the copper statue of St. Michael, the patron saint of Brussels. All this fits in perfectly with the guild and civil houses that surround the square. Every single house, most of them as old as the city hall, has a different, baroque façade. These buildings and the cathedral, which was renovated in the gothic style, and always reminds the visitor of a museum, speaks volumes about the area's changing history: not only is the place covered with flowers every other year, but this is also where the Weaver's Rebellion was brutally suppressed, where Lutherans and Baptists were burned at the stake, and where the Dukes of Egmont and Horn, who opposed Phillip II, were executed. It is hardly noticeable that Ludwig XIV almost entirely destroyed the square in 1695. The citizens rebuilt it only a few years later in its original style and with its original beauty.

Cynthia and Marcus sit down at a café in the square. Cynthia goes into greater detail about some of the houses, like the Roi d'Espagne, a building which at one time belonged to the Bakers Guild and sports an octagonal dome; about the fat merchant's house, the wolf house, which has a relief of Romulus and Remus; the brewers house, which now contains the Beer Museum, and the impressive House of the Dukes of



Brabant. Like a good travel guide, Cynthia knows a lot details and stories. Marcus is surprised at this; he never noticed that she was preparing herself especially for this history lesson.

"Where did you find the time to read all this?"

"I haven't read anything," Cynthia laughs. "I just went on a very good tour here three years ago."

Without having any suspicions, Marcus comments, "You have one great memory." He notices how Cynthia shrugs at this. Now he has a suspicion. "Cynthia, does that mean that you have some kind of a special memory? A parability that you haven't mentioned to anyone yet?"

Cynthia nods and then it floods out of her. "Yes. It's really strange. Not only can I erase parts of people's memories, but I also seem to be able to remember almost every detail of everything I experience. Since I noticed this, I'm really afraid that my brain will just be completely full one day, and I won't be able to store anything new."

Marcus is completely surprised to hear this but he tries to calm her down. It doesn't take long for Cynthia to agree to let SR Inc.'s research department have a closer look.

For a short time, this news causes the late afternoon to lose its easygoing, touristy atmosphere. But when they walk back to the Grasmart and into the Galeries Royales St. Hubert<sup>14</sup>, they both become more relaxed again.

They cross the Ilot Sacre, a little side street that the inhabitants of Brussels contemptuously tend to call 'Grazing Street' because of how one restaurant literally leads to the next.

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<sup>14</sup> The Galeries Royales St. Hubert is probably Europe's longest, and definitely its most elegant, shopping street. This 'Mother of All Shopping Malls' is more than 150 years old and covered by a curved glass roof. Its unique architecture houses expensive jewelry shops and simple appliance stores as well as the 'pharmacy' where pralines were invented 120 years ago. You can also find first-class restaurants that often don't appear first-class from outside, regular apartments, and the Tropismes, an amazing bookstore that seems to have survived the electronic revolution in the publishing industry.

Cynthia picks one. In spite of the cool temperature, they can sit outside: big space heaters allow this despite the enormous waste of energy. Cynthia and Marcus enjoy delicious food cooked in traditional Belgian and French styles, and a type of wine that is quite different from the wine in New Zealand. They find a lot to talk about. They are surprised how little they know about each other even though Cynthia has been with the group for eight years now.

A little tipsy, they walk back to their hotel. For the first time in a long time, the world almost feels right to Marcus.

Work starts the next day. Their goal is clear: they have to find the PPU and find out about their new protection methods. To do this, they will have to find Georg Adler, the head of the European Security Police (the ESP). Neutralizing the PPU and Adler permanently will be another goal altogether. If possible, they also want to neutralize Dirkmann, who has been the Head of the European Commission for over twenty years now.

At first, Marcus wants to break into Adler's apartment and office in the hope they'll find a lead. The ESP is unknown to the public as an institution; that is why they need professional help. Marcus has a list of small detective agencies. It will be important to find one that has good connections to the EU Commission, possibly even to Adler. Maybe they will be able to find an agency that is generally hostile to the Commission.

As Marcus expected, this is only possible with Cynthia's help. Money opens the doors to every agency on the list. It never takes long and they sit down with the boss of the agency in an environment that is certainly not bugged.

They always start by claiming that they want to get married and that Marcus is having troubles getting a divorce. It comes in handy that Cynthia is attractive and looks even younger than her twenty-eight years, while Marcus, who is ten years older than her, looks like he is in his early forties. Once they are talking to the head of the agency, they talk bluntly



about the ESP and their wish to find Adler's address in order to resolve a certain debt. The first eleven detectives are highly skeptical that an organization like the ESP even exists, and they want nothing to do with the matter. Some of them even want to turn Cynthia and Marcus over to the police. Of course, it never comes to this: Cynthia always erases their memories, and what remains is just a sticky divorce case that they are unable to help with.

The next day, their twelfth try turns out to be a complete success: not only does the boss know Adler personally, but she has also lost her husband, who worked for the ESP, in one of their operations. She was never able to discover more about the operation or about the ESP. They paid her off with some 'hush money' and threatened to kill her if she ever spoke about the case. It would make her happy if someone stood up to Adler and brought the ESP into the public view. She gives them Adler's home and office address and wishes them good luck. In the interest of security, Cynthia erases her memory as well.

"So now we have what we wanted. Where and when shall we start?"

Marcus gives Cynthia the answer she expected: "I'm a bit more worried about the office. Maybe they have parascouts or paratraps there. Let's check out the house first. We can do it tomorrow morning after Adler's left for his office."

Without noticing that he is being watched, Adler leaves the house at 8:30 a.m. He is barely out of sight when Marcus and Cynthia nod at each other in agreement. They ring the doorbell and soon a woman opens the door, but only a crack.

"Mrs. Adler?" Marcus asks politely.

"Yes, what can I do for you?"

"We have to bother you because we have to go through your husband's papers."

"My husband is not at home. He just left for work."

"We know that and we want to see his papers without him knowing it."

Mrs. Adler's expression changes to disbelief and fear. She slams the door, locks it, and shouts, "If you don't leave immediately I'm calling the police."

Marcus shrugs. Through the door, he grabs the woman with two pseudohands, and with a third, he unlocks the door from the inside. Cynthia and Marcus enter and lock the door again. The woman can't understand what is happening.

Before they can say a word, they hear a voice. "Stay where you are or I'll shoot!" They look up and see a man standing at the upper landing of the staircase. He holds a very dangerous-looking shotgun. Marcus disarms him with a pseudohand and holds him tightly with two more.

Cynthia walks cautiously through the house. Mrs. Adler and her brother as it turns out, are the only ones there. Her brother is there for a short visit. Marcus leads them into the living room and explains:

"Unfortunately, we'll have to keep you tied up while we go through Mr. Adler's papers. I assure you we'll let you go when we're done. We'll take nothing from the house besides perhaps a couple of data disks. In the event you get hungry or thirsty or have to visit the bathroom, please let us know. We'll get you anything you want. I'll also turn the TV on so you don't get bored. I really don't want to have to tape your mouth, I know how unpleasant that is, but if you make just one loud noise, I'll have no other choice."

After they have tied up the siblings, Marcus and Cynthia start their search. Adler's office room is tidy and orderly and they soon find what they are looking for, and more: extensive information about the PPU, its pararesearch, especially the search for variations of silatraviate, and also large files of data entitled 'Dirkmann' and 'Entertainment'. A quick look into 'Entertainment' shows that Adler is a pedophile. His collection of films and pictures is both horrible and illegal. Marcus takes these files as well. He erases all the data about the PPU, leaving only the 'Entertainment' file untouched. Cynthia and Marcus expected to have to search for several hours, but they are already done after only forty minutes.



The rest is simple. They untie their hostages but Marcus still holds them tight with his pseudohands. Cynthia puts the shotgun back in the gun rack. She also installs a bug that will automatically destroy itself after two days. Cynthia and Marcus leave the house. As soon as they are out of sight, Cynthia erases the last forty-five minutes from Mrs. Adler and her brother's memories and Marcus simultaneously frees them from the grip of his pseudohands.

Soon afterwards, Cynthia and Marcus are back in the hotel. First, they listen to the recordings that have been made of Mrs. Adler and her brother since they left. What they hear is both spooky and amusing: neither can explain the last forty-five minutes. They pretend to have spent the missing time reading, taking a nap, and other mundane things.

"Cynthia, this skill is really something, but what really gets me is that nobody ever admits to having a memory lapse. They all somehow lie to themselves and try to fill in the blanks."

While Marcus dives into the PPU information, Cynthia goes through the 'Dirkmann' files. Even though all the data is coded, they find it easy to read. The encryption is the same as the one SR Inc. had to decipher when Klaus gave them early PPU research information years ago<sup>15</sup>.

The information about the PPU turns out to be surprising: this group no longer exists. In the end, the group only consisted of Justo and two other parabilitists, as well as some secretaries. After the group failed to return from an operation in Pakistan a few months ago (they only found burned human remains in a wrecked car), the group was simply dissolved. Adler's function as the head of the ESP will end on May 1, 2020. It looks like the danger from the PPU is all but finished.

The technical documents are even more interesting: their attempt to find a technical device more effective than parascouts failed; apparently, the information that something

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<sup>15</sup> See "*Xperts: The Paradoppelganger*".

had been developed was just a rumor. Conversely, the PPU managed to find effective protection against all known parabilities. They probably even invented pararays against parabilities still unknown to SR Inc. For this they used a variation of silatraviate that develops strong variable-frequency rays when it is exposed to normal light. This radiation can be implemented as a force field or a focused beam for protection, or to turn off parabilities temporarily.

Actually, when parabilitists protect themselves in this way, their own parabilities are neutralized while the device is in use. Marcus cannot believe how lucky they are: this data offers detailed descriptions of the production of most of the necessary chemical and technical components. This will make Klaus's work much easier. Soon, they will be able to protect themselves from all sorts of parabilities and even turn them off. Suddenly, Marcus's good mood gives way to self-accusation: 'Lena and Monika would still be alive if I'd traveled to Brussels earlier.' But he quickly realizes that that is in fact not true: he would have encountered the parahypnotist here and that could have become a hopelessly unwinnable battle.

He tells Cynthia about his findings. She is excited and has some news herself: Adler has maintained a detailed dossier on Dirkmann. If this dossier were published, Dirkmann would definitely have to resign and probably even be indicted for criminal activities. Apparently, Dirkmann knew about Adler's dark side, his pedophilic tendencies. By maintaining this file, Adler was obviously protecting himself against blackmail.

"As much as I hate blackmail, I think I'll make an exception this time. This'll force Adler to communicate with us and he'll tell us everything we want to know. Are you OK with that?"

Cynthia nods.

Soon afterwards, the telephone in Adler's office rings. He answers the call immediately; only very few people know this secret number. The voice on the other end sounds



somehow familiar, but he can't place it. The message is brief and to the point.

"Mr. Adler, you will be in Suite 319 of Le Meridien in thirty minutes. You will come alone and without any parastuff. We have to talk. You will not be harmed. If you are not here within thirty minutes, the 'Entertainment' file from the server in your house will go straight to the police. You know what the consequences of that would be, right? The files we have clearly show you in compromising positions, you know that."

Marcus hangs up leaving Adler no time to respond. Marcus purposely left the 'Entertainment' file saved on Adler's server to guarantee that Adler couldn't talk himself out of this. But in fact, this precaution was unnecessary because the material they managed to decipher incriminates him so clearly.

Adler is totally shocked. Who the hell was that? How does he know about 'parastuff', and how did he decipher the code to get access to his 'Entertainment' file? This guy knows *too much*, but for now, Adler will have to do as he has been ordered.

Before Adler leaves his office, he activates an antipara field around him big enough to cover a complete hotel suite to neutralize any parabilities in it. He also puts on his special belt. If he says 'Pardon' three times in a row, ten explosive projectiles will shoot out from the belt in a fan. Adler can't help thinking of one of Q's inventions from the James Bond films.

"Do you think he'll come? Do you think he'll try anything?"

Marcus hesitates. "I'm sure he'll come, and I'm afraid he will try some tricks. He'll probably be wearing the antipara device we saw in the documents. We also know from the ESP files that they have all kinds of miniature weapons. That's why I didn't want to go to his office. I even felt a bit uneasy just being in his house. But now we should protect ourselves. I'll hide in the wardrobe in the hall. When he knocks, you shout, "Come in." So when he enters and walks toward the living

room, he'll have his back to me. Then I'll shoot him with a fast-acting sedative dart. Once he can't move anymore, we'll search him for weapons and deactivate his antipara field."

Adler knows Le Meridien well and can get into Suite 319 without being seen. As soon as he knows where the blackmailers have the 'Entertainment' file, he will get it back. He is prepared to kill if necessary.

Adler knocks on the door of the suite. To his surprise, it is a female voice that asks him to come in. He enters and approaches the living room. Suddenly, he feels something sting his back and crashes to the floor, paralyzed but still conscious. He can see a man step out of the wardrobe, a man he knows. It is Marcus, the telekinetic! A woman appears and together they carry him into the living room and lay him on the sofa. Then Marcus pats him down, finds the antipara device, and switches it off. 'How does he know about this device?' Carefully, Adler starts to whisper something to find out if his vocal cords are paralyzed as well. When he hears himself whisper, "Marcus..." he knows that he is able to articulate the message for his weapon. "Pardon, pardon..." He is not able to say it one more time. Marcus has covered his mouth with his hand.

Marcus is alert. "Cynthia, he has some kind of speech sensitive weapon. He was just trying to activate it. He might have more tricks up his sleeve. We'll make short work of this criminal." Scaring the hell out of Adler, Marcus plugs his nose with two pseudofingers. Adler desperately struggles for air. Marcus lets go a little, takes Cynthia by the hand, and pulls her away from Adler. "Let me search him."

Marcus rips off Adler's jacket and shirt to reveal a strange belt. Marcus carefully removes it with his pseudohands and deposits it in the bathtub, which he then begins filling with water. Then he continues to undress Adler down to his underpants. He doesn't hesitate to search his more intimate areas. "I don't think he's dangerous any longer, but stay alert." Still only using his pseudohands, Marcus pushes Adler into a



chair and attaches cables to his head. Then he quickly leads Cynthia behind the chair so that Adler cannot face them.

"Georg, I've known for seventeen years that you're ruthless. Now I also know that you're a sick pedophile. If you cooperate, I won't hand your 'Entertainment' file over to the police and we'll let you go. But I will leave it with a lawyer for the rest of your life and in case something should happen to me, he will hand it over to the police. So from now on, you'd better pray for my safety."

"The cables on your head are a technical version of an emotiopath. This is to ensure that you're telling the truth. Actually, the cables can do what Sandra does. Do you remember her? I warn you, if you lie just once, the file will go straight to the police and you will be able to enjoy a nice scandal and spend your retirement in prison. You got that?"

"I understand. I will cooperate."

Marcus has exaggerated: the cables work like a lie detector. They are reliable but they don't even come close to what Sandra's parabilities could do. Marcus purposely didn't tell Adler about Sandra's death: he doesn't need to know that the paragroup has been weakened.

During the whole interrogation, the lie detector indicates that he is telling the truth. What they find out mostly confirms what they already know: the PPU no longer exists, but the ESP, of which the PPU was only a small part, is also falling apart; the EU has developed new monitoring bodies because the parliament in Strasburg has gained power. Therefore, the head of the commission has lost much of his influence and much of his ability to misappropriate funds for his own purposes. Great advances have been made in the research of silatraviate, and Dirkmann and Adler are the only people with documents on it. Eight antipara devices have been produced; three were destroyed with Justo's group, four are in Dirkmann's office, and the last one is here in the suite. Adler ordered the operation in Pakistan hoping to find new parabilitists. However, he never knew about Justo's

confrontation with the paragroup and neither ordered nor approved anything like that.

Marcus questions Adler intensively about the security measures in Dirkman's office. It turns out that, besides a security guard at the entrance and patrolled hallways, there are no motion detectors or additional surveillance.

"Georg, we might need you one more time over the next couple of days so stay in Brussels and be sure we can reach you. I promise that your 'Entertainment' file won't go public unless you start playing games. I'll also try to destroy Dirkman's copy of the file."

"You'd do that for me? Don't you know that I was ready to kill you? If I could've said 'pardon' one more time, you'd be dead now...you know, the belt."

Marcus nods and shrugs his shoulders. They let Adler go. His ripped shirt and jacket make it hard for him to leave the hotel discretely.

"Marcus, don't you think you were a bit easy on Adler? He wanted to kill us, and he abused children; that's a crime we should report. We don't even know what blood is on his hands from the ESP operations. And you just let him run off like that?"

Marcus nods. "I see your point, but I have reasons not to proceed against him any further. Klaus told me that he was a pretty good guy when he was younger and that it was Dirkman who corrupted him. Second, the pictures of Adler and the kids must be at least twenty-five years old...so apparently, he's stopped doing it, maybe just because he was scared of Dirkman. I'm not sure if sick crimes like these have a statute of limitations, but twenty-five years is a pretty long time. Also, there's something else that only I know so far: Adler won't live through the summer: he has terminal cancer in his intestines, liver, lymph nodes, and brain. He doesn't even know it yet, but there is no hope."

"How do you know that?"

"My pseudohands, darling."



"I see. And what about Dirkmann? Do you want to make *his* file public at least?"

"He really deserves it, but don't forget, he's been the head of the commission for more than fifteen years now. If the public finds out how evil, corrupt, and criminal that guy is, then it could seriously affect Europe. And somehow, I'm really glad that Europe has been growing together over the past few years. This process could be brought to a halt. If it's all right with you, I suggest we break into Dirkmann's office tonight, like we did at Adler's house. We remove all paradevices and leave a copy of the 'Dirkmann' file and a note saying he should resign within three days unless he wants it to go public. And if we find the 'Adler' file, we'll destroy that too. I don't think we should punish a dying man for something he did thirty years ago."

Cynthia is hesitant, but agrees. Once again, the combination of Marcus and Cynthia's parabilities prove very effective. They manage to accomplish everything they planned and also destroy Dirkmann's copy of the 'Entertainment' file. There is only one thing that puzzles them a little: they only find three antipara devices. Cynthia and Marcus assume that Dirkmann is wearing the missing device.

This is the reason why they remain alert until they see Dirkmann the following evening at a reception. Marcus is surprised to find out that Dirkmann isn't wearing the device and therefore has no protection against parabilities.

When Dirkmann resigns before the deadline they gave him, Cynthia and Marcus feel that their mission has been accomplished.

They have to wait two days before they can take a convenient flight. This gives them the chance to visit Ghent and Bruges, two more wonderful Belgian cities. They learn more and more to enjoy each other's company without ever getting intimate.

Marcus worries about his return to Auckland. Will Maria's feelings toward him have improved?

When Marcus boards his flight, his feelings are very mixed. On the one hand, he feels satisfied at having freed the world from a great danger. On the other hand, the sadness over his dead friends is coming back again. Most of all, he is scared of his reunion with Maria. Cynthia feels that she could soon lose something that has been growing over the past couple of weeks.

It is probably a good thing that they both do not know that Dirkmann somehow managed to save a copy of the research documents and an antipara device. Now that he is a well-paid early retiree, he will be able to dedicate himself fully to pararesearch.

On the day Cynthia and Marcus leave for Brussels, Aroha starts trying to find a psychotherapist for Maria, as she promised Cynthia. It is clear that Maria would not be willing to find one herself.

After Aroha has talked to a therapist named Becky, she decides to invite her over as a 'friend' to Great Barrier Island. Becky lives with them for three days and slowly wins Maria's trust. Finally, Becky convinces Maria to visit her regularly in Auckland, 'just to talk'.

Aroha is happy that Maria seems to accept this type of therapy and soon she gets the impression that Maria's moods are stabilizing.

Aroha doesn't know that Maria only sees Becky once and meets Barry right afterwards. From that day on, she goes to Auckland only to see Barry. The two of them get along very well, especially when it comes to blaming Marcus. Maria is still convinced that Lena's death was Marcus's fault. Barry agrees with this and similarly blames Marcus for Monika's death.

Before he married Monika, Barry had always been a lady's man. During their marriage, Monika and Barry were sexually very active. Now, after three celibate months, he is already starting to look at women again. Maria and Barry spend hours sitting together and talking. Barry finds her



attractive and she repeatedly turns him on by telling him what the young women around them are wearing underneath their skirts or what is going on in nearby apartments. Maria has never used her paraseeing skills in such a voyeuristic way before.

Soon, the mere tenderness between them is not enough for Barry. When Maria hesitates at his approaches, he decides to make a tricky move: "All right, Maria. Let's say you're in a hotel room and it's not me who visits you there but my paraprotection...this would be much more exciting for you than any dildo and it would be really exciting for me too. Don't forget, you wouldn't be cheating on Marcus. But I'm not sure that's important to you anymore. You wouldn't be making love to me, but to my projection."

Maria likes the idea. She rents a small, furnished apartment with maid service in the Cintra Apartments, overlooking Rangitoto Island and the Hauraki Gulf. She has barely moved in when she calls Barry. "Would you like to send your projection?"

It doesn't take much to convince him. He materializes next to Maria on the little balcony and soon they remove their trousers and underwear. From the outside, they look fully dressed and seem to be just standing there, looking indifferently out onto the bay. They even occasionally wave to the neighbors. Barry, who seems to be harmlessly leaning against her from behind, soon makes her so hot that they cannot help but to run into the bedroom, take off the rest of their clothes, and make passionate love to each other.

With his projection, Barry plays games that have so far been unknown to Maria. Once, he even materializes a riding crop with him and asks Maria to whip him as hard as she wants. She knows that she cannot harm him this way. He can feel the lashes and Maria can even see the marks that it leaves on Parabar's skin, but when Barry has had enough, he withdraws his projection and sends a fresh new one. Maria never imagined that she would be able to enjoy something like this, but she does. Maybe those lashes help her overcome the

frustration she has built up during her marriage and because of Lena's death.

The bond between Barry and Maria grows tighter and tighter. Aroha's happiness deflates when Maria suddenly starts to pack, telling her that she is moving in with Barry in Auckland. All she leaves for Marcus is a short, snippy note on the living room table:

*I have moved in with Barry. What a man! I hope you enjoyed Cynthia in Europe.*

*Your ex-girlfriend, Maria*



## 6. The Parasettlement Disbands

*March 15, 2020*

Cynthia and Marcus return to Auckland several days sooner than they expected to. Their work in Brussels was easier than they thought.

Stephan picks them up from the airport with the Moller. He is happy to see his father again, but he is also apprehensive about what Marcus's reaction to Maria's new living arrangements might be. Stephan keeps asking his father questions about Brussels and dodges Marcus's questions about Maria.

"I think she's all right. She decided to take a little time off from the island." Then he adds, "She left a message for you, one you won't be too happy about, I think."

Cynthia listens quietly. She tenderly squeezes Marcus's hand and whispers, "Whatever happens, time heals all wounds. You can be sure that I'll help you however I can."

When they arrive on Great Barrier Island, it is late in the morning and very quiet, too quiet. Herb and Klaus are working in Auckland. Aroha is waiting for them with a strange expression of trepidation on her face. After a short welcome, she quickly takes Cynthia aside. Marcus starts for the living room table and finds the note there:

*I have moved in with Barry. What a man! I hope you enjoyed Cynthia in Europe.*

*Your ex-girlfriend, Maria*

Marcus almost loses control completely. "And you call this 'time off,' boy? You were just too much of a coward to tell me the truth!"

Stephan is hurt. "I only wanted to help you, dad. Nobody wants to bring bad news. Don't let your disappointment, or sadness, or anger, or whatever it is— don't take it out on me!"

Stephan rushes out of the room and Marcus throws his hands over his face. 'Of course he's right. I'm such an asshole.' He runs after Stephan and shouts, "Stephan, please stay!" But Stephan does not stop. Marcus has to force Stephan back with his pseudohands.

Enraged and full of contempt, Stephan looks at his father. "Is that all you can do to stop me? That's so pathetic! Would you want me to send a thousand wasps after you or something?"

Marcus lets go of Stephan and wails, "Please forgive me, please forgive me for stopping you, but I had to do it. I have to ask you to forgive me for my stupid behavior. I'm really sorry, please forgive me. I was shocked and I said something that I never should have said. I didn't mean it that way. That was so brave of you to pick me up from the airport. I thank you. Please forgive me. I love you and I really don't understand why I keep...I keep hurting the people that I love the most...you and your mother. I really don't understand it. I'm so desperate."

Stephan's heart opens up again. "Just stop it, dad. It's all right. You just lost control for a minute. I understand your pain. I miss her too and I think that Barry is the only one who can understand why mom's doing what she's doing and why she's so against you instead of trying to overcome Lena's death together with you."

Marcus looks at Stephan for a long time. 'What a great son I have.' He would really like to embrace him, but Marcus is too scared. But then Stephan makes a step toward him and embraces his father. "I talked to Raianda yesterday and she told her dad. He called me to tell you that he knows what you're going through. He also said that he thinks that this phase could go on for a long time, but that you should never give up. He's sure that everything will be all right again. He said it twice. He said that he knows for sure. Then I asked him how he could be so sure and he said that he knows us well and that he has seen many other misfortunes. That's how he can be



so sure. 'No empty words; it will happen just as I say,' he told me. Dad, I believe him and you can believe him too."

"Thank you, Stephan. You're fantastic. I wish I could believe this. I really want to. But now I have something to take care of. I'll be back in a couple of hours."

Deeply worried, Stephan watches his father walk toward the Moller.

Marcus lands at SR Inc.'s office building. From there, he drives to Barry's apartment and knocks on the door. Barry opens it a crack. When he sees Marcus, he notices right away how enraged he is. He immediately slams the door shut again. "Marcus, I don't think you're in any kind of condition for a reasonable conversation. Please go away and come back when you're calm."

Marcus won't accept that. With one pseudohand, he opens the door from the inside, with two others, he holds Barry tight. "I don't even want to talk to you, Barry. I'll never forgive you. I'll never forgive the friend that seduced my wife. I don't ever want to have anything to do with you anymore; I want to talk to Maria."

Barry answers as calmly as he can. "Marcus, let go of me immediately, or I'll use *my* parability. Maria and I both know how much this must hurt, but we've discussed the situation thoroughly and we decided that we have no choice. We also decided that we wouldn't allow you to talk with her alone. She wants me to be there."

Marcus squeezes Barry even tighter, but suddenly, his hands are empty: it wasn't Barry, it was just his projection.

'Damn, I should've known that,' Marcus curses himself. For a while, he just stands helplessly there in the hallway. Then he decides to systematically rake the apartment for Maria and the real Barry with his pseudohands.

Just then, Barry and Maria come out of one room together and stop by the door. Barry lifts his hand. "Marcus, don't do anything that you will regret later. Don't force me into a fight; I'm prepared for it, and you would lose. Just listen

for a second. First of all, what you see is only a projection of me. The real Barry is somewhere else. You can't come close to Maria; she's wearing an antipara e-Helper. We all know how bad this is for her health. It's you who is responsible for this, so why don't you stop messing around with your skills; they would be useless with the precautions we've taken anyway. Say what you have to say, but make it short. Then just shove off and leave us alone, which means, both of us. We want no further contact with you, no contact of any kind."

Maria remains silent through this. When Barry is finished, she just nods. This hits Marcus hard. He has only one flicker of clear sense left. He uses it to speed up his individual time a thousand fold. At least this will give him some time to think. For Maria and Barry, only a couple seconds pass while Marcus has a whole hour to consider the situation. Despite his grief and his lack of understanding of Maria's actions, Marcus realizes that he is behaving like most 'betrayed' partners. He is bathing in a sea of useless anger and insult. When he finally speaks, he's a different person again. Quietly he says:

"Apparently, there's nothing I can do to change the situation between us, so I promise not to do anything stupid. Maria, please turn the parashield off. I really don't want the x-rays to harm you. But I do have a couple of questions: Haven't we spent seventeen happy years together? What have I done? What made everything change? Do you really suddenly love Barry so much, or did you already love him before Monika died? And what about what Barry said? That from now on you don't want to have any contact with me? Does that mean that you wouldn't even allow me to help if you were sick? Does it mean I can't give you a birthday present or that we can't celebrate Stephan's birthday together anymore? Is that really what you want, or is that what Barry wants? Do you really want to erase the last seventeen years of your life, and pretend that nothing happened? Is there really no part of it you want to remember anymore?"

Maria answers without hesitation. "I don't know why this would make a difference to you, but just to calm you



down, Barry and I only fell in love a couple of weeks ago. And about what you have done, well, first of all, Lena's death is mostly your fault, and so is Monika's. *You* don't seem to want to remember this. Second, you left me all by myself after. You never comforted me; you only found arguments. And then, as if nothing had happened, you just left for Europe, and with another woman. I think that should be enough. There's no need to say more, is there? Barry comforted me. He understood me. And he was there for me during a time when I almost went crazy. And it's true. We love each other a lot. So please don't force yourself into my life again. I want to forget about you. I want nothing, absolutely nothing, to do with you anymore. Please go now and let me give you one more piece of advice: take better care of Stephan if you don't want to lose him too."

This hits Marcus hard. He is silent for some time. He never considered himself responsible for Lena and Monika's deaths. He only feels guilty for having allowed her to go to India with them...but why didn't Maria try to stop her? All in all, Maria's arguments remind him of the useless discussion they had before his departure.

So finally, a Marcus who seems to have aged says, "Maria, I've loved you for seventeen years. I won't be able to just switch this feeling off all of a sudden, and I don't even want to, even though for the first time I really don't understand your behavior. But I respect your wishes: you won't hear from me again. But should you want to get in contact with me in any way, then please do. I can't believe that I won't be happy to hear from you. All the best, Maria."

Marcus almost sobbed through his last words. He turns around and is ready to walk away when Maria stops him with a different tone in her voice. "Marcus, I'm sorry to see you suffer, but you'll get through this. You're strong. Thanks for your promise to stay away from me. If you hadn't said that, Barry and I would've moved to another country, never to be seen again."

Marcus turns in surprise. "You would have disappeared like that, without thinking about Stephan?"



Maria stares at him without saying a word. Finally, Marcus leaves the apartment without looking back.

At the office, Marcus speeds up his individual time and broods over the situation. His thoughts and feelings circle endlessly before he wins back some control over himself. Then he calls Klaus and asks him to come up.

He tells Klaus about Brussels and about the end of the PPU. He hands him the documents that will make it possible to improve their antipara devices. After having a quick look, Klaus reacts in excitement. "Marcus, you were right after all to fly to Europe. Now we'll soon be able to protect ourselves from unwanted para-influences. This is great because, unfortunately, I haven't got very far with my research. Think about how much the PM will like this. It'll also make it much easier for us to integrate into society. Looks like we soon won't have to hide anymore. We will be able to 'out' ourselves!"

Marcus is pleased that Klaus appreciates the documents. He was a bit worried that Klaus would see this as some kind of competition with his own work. Nevertheless, Marcus started twice when Klaus used the words 'we' and 'us' and can't help expressing his worries. "Klaus, thanks for your seeing things so positively, but I'm really desperate because 'we' have become so few: in addition to the two of us, there's just Cynthia, Stephan, Herb, and Aroha left. Ryan is still lost in Australia, and I'm sure you know that Maria and Barry don't want to be with SR Inc. anymore."

Marcus can't hold back and tells Klaus in detail how much he is suffering from his loss of Maria. After a while, Klaus gets annoyed:

"Marcus, would you please quit the self-pity...you're talking to the wrong guy. I lost my Sandra for good. She's dead. That's much worse. Your Maria is all right. She's in love and alive. What I wouldn't give for Sandra to be happily alive, even if I couldn't be a part of her world anymore. If you still



love Maria, then you should be happy that she's doing all right. Don't be so egotistical. And in case you don't love her anymore, then it's only your pride that's wounded, and you shouldn't have a problem getting over that."

Marcus looks at Klaus thoughtfully. "I understand what you mean. Sorry for bothering you with my problems."

Klaus waves him off. "Trust me, I know that you don't feel well, and I know that I was a bit harsh just now, but you have to get over this. There's so much we can still do for mankind with pararesearch. The sooner you start working again, the sooner you will be able to handle your feelings."

Marcus nods but he knows that it will take him a while before he can throw himself into work again.

On Great Barrier Island, a worried Stephan waits for his father. He's happy to see that Marcus has calmed down a little. Stephan tries to lift his spirits further by telling him about certain things that Maria said to him: that she is not completely sure that it is true love between her and Barry and that they became so close because they were able to comfort each other over the loss of their loved ones. He also tells Marcus that he thinks that his mother was very distraught about Lena's death and that he thinks that this could wear off eventually.

Stephan is disappointed to notice that his father does not seem to be listening.

Stephan throws himself into preparing for his final high school exams. He is not altogether happy: he misses Raianda. Marcus is absentminded. When Stephan meets with his mother, he can't help feeling that she needs psychological treatment much more than she needs Barry. Stephan can talk with Cynthia about this and she agrees with him. But overall, Cynthia tries to take more care of Marcus than of Stephan, so Stephan only has Aroha to talk to. He is grateful for that, but sometimes she just goes on about insignificant things, like how she lost the Mindcaller for three weeks until she found it while cleaning the winter garden on the day Marcus left for Brussels.



‘What is it with these people?’ Stephan can’t help thinking sometimes.

Marcus cannot find any peace. He decides to prepare for a five-day hike across the island. They are all happy that Marcus at least is planning something. Cynthia asks him if she can accompany him. She is used to hiking in the Austrian mountains but has not yet really experienced New Zealand bushwhacking. Most of all, she wants to go on the trip because she thinks that she could help Marcus and cheer him up a little.

They leave with twenty-five kilograms of gear in their backpacks. They plan to start at Motairehe, the northernmost village on the island, and take a trail along the east coast in order to reach the northernmost point on the island via Miner’s Head. This point is within sight of Aiguilles Island. Then they plan to take a more western route almost to the northern end of Rangiwhakaraea Beach. From there, they will go back east to the starting point. This means that they will have to cross virgin thicket for the first twenty kilometers. Only the first few kilometers should be a bit easier because they will be able to follow a creek upstream. The rest of the hike will lead them up and down through thick undergrowth and brush. It will also be necessary to cross dozens of creeks and wide stretches of marshland.

Despite their heavy backpacks, the beginning of the hike turns out to be a pleasure. Only wearing hiking boots, shorts, and t-shirts, they hike upstream in the late summer warmth. Of course their shoes get wet, but without shoes, it would be difficult to find good traction in the creek and they could easily injure their feet. They take a refreshing dip in a pond beneath a small waterfall and afterwards a fine gravel bank allows for a comfortable rest. Marcus has the chance to admire Cynthia’s naked body several times. The sun is so strong that they have to use sunscreen with a very high SPF; it is inevitable that they help put it on one another’s backs.

They take their first long break when they reach the source of the creek but from then on, the hike is difficult.



Sometimes, the brush is low and thick enough to allow them to walk on top of it, with the vines and branches only occasionally caving in. Long trousers and long-sleeved shirts are much too warm, but at least the clothes protect them from scrapes.

When they reach real forest, they have to face thick undergrowth. The light that sometimes breaks through the branches makes up for much of their effort: it makes the ferns glow a brilliant green. Another comfort is the many moss beds that are as soft as down, the little birds that sometimes accompany them for a stretch, and the mighty Kauri trees. The trees just seem to appear suddenly in front of them; the space underneath is almost entirely devoid of undergrowth, and the ground is as soft as a carpet.

During the day, the clouds get thicker and thicker. When Cynthia and Marcus reach another creek at around 4 p.m., they decide to make camp in a beautiful spot beneath some high trees. They know that they did pretty well for the first day and that this would be the perfect spot to get through the inevitable rain shower. While Marcus stretches a plastic sheet between the branches, Cynthia goes out and collects dry wood. She piles it up next to the shelter so that they can easily find it in the darkness. With a small pump, Marcus filters some creek water. This is a necessary precaution against the worm larvae that sometimes live in creeks and can infest intestines.

After taking all necessary measures, Marcus 'cooks' a three-course astronaut dinner that he learned from his friend Mike<sup>16</sup> on earlier hikes. Suddenly, the clouds open up with buckets of rain. At the same time, the wind begins to blow. Cynthia and Marcus sit close together under the shelter. For a little while, it gets cool and they are happy to have some sweet, hot tea as a digestive.

The fire is big enough to withstand the rain. As usual on great Barrier Island, it becomes humid as soon as the clouds have disappeared. A deep spot in the creek is perfect for the

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<sup>16</sup> See "*Xperts: The Paradoppelganger*".



evening wash. Marcus doesn't miss out on the opportunity to rub some soap onto Cynthia's skin very thoroughly. Suddenly, they both have a strange sensation. Without a word spoken, it is clear that they will make love tonight. There is no pretense and no hurry. Marcus enjoys caressing Cynthia's beautiful back. When his hands glide over her butt, she opens her legs a little. When he turns her around to wash her front side, they kiss each other deeply, but not with true passion. There will be plenty of time for that later. When Marcus is finished washing her, he makes sure with his mouth that she is really clean. Cynthia accepts this with no resistance. Even at her most intimate parts, this doesn't become erotic kissing, sucking or licking; rather, it is a test, a preparation, and a message: this is only a beginning. When Cynthia soaps and rinses Marcus, it's the same way. She does her 'work' well and tenderly. She tests all his body parts with her tongue and mouth, some a little more thoroughly than others.

When they are finished, they both realize that it has become a bit cold in the creek. They step out and look at each other in surprise. After toweling off, Cynthia unzips Marcus's sleeping bag and unfolds it like a soft blanket. She lies down on her back and Marcus soon follows her. He lays on top of her, first only for the warmth, but then they start to explore each other's lips and mouths. They move on to other things without a rush. It is an experience they will never forget. Everything goes without speaking; it's all so natural. They don't need to hurry and have no overactive desires. Several times, Marcus gets up to feed the fire, which by now also serves them as a source of light. But neither sees this as an interruption. Cynthia enjoys watching Marcus, now standing at full strength. Cynthia also feeds the fire once while he supports, and strokes her from behind.

They enjoy this evening carefully, softly, and slowly. When their eyes meet, Marcus notices an encouraging look. "Is it time?" he whispers.

Cynthia nods slightly.



The next morning, Cynthia is the first to wake up. When she steps out of her sleeping bag, Marcus wakes up too and watches her with interest.

"Do you want breakfast first or after?" Cynthia asks knowingly. A bulge in the middle of Marcus's sleeping bag gives her the answer. This time is different from last night: everything is intense, focused, and quick.

While Cynthia learns more and more every day about the northern New Zealand forest, Marcus learns more about sex. On the second evening, for example, Cynthia suggests they don't touch for twenty minutes, but instead just lie there, naked and side-by-side. Cynthia tells an erotic story, with details so spicy that they both get extremely excited. When they touch for the first time afterwards, they shiver with delight and scream, "YES!" in ecstasy.

By day four, the northernmost point of the island lies behind them. They are still on schedule and about two kilometers away from the point on the west coast that faces Miner's Head Island. Meter by meter, they struggle through the brush further south. Suddenly, on their right hand side, they see an open space behind several rows of trees. This must be either a little lake, or a flat, exposed rock that is not on the map.

Curious, they make their way east through the thicket and cannot believe what they see: a perfectly circular clearing covered evenly by twenty centimeters high grass. It is nine kilometers to the nearest house, so what could this be?

Marcus hesitates before he steps into the clearing. Suddenly, a loud voice booms from nowhere. "Don't take one more step! This is a military zone. Move back into the woods immediately and continue your walk south. Don't tell anyone about this clearing. If you do so, we will frame you with a story that will put you in prison for a very long time. This is a safety measure. We've been watching you for two days. We will continue to observe you permanently to make sure you 'forget' this spot quickly."



Cynthia and Marcus cannot believe their ears. A military zone with no warning signs here in the bush? Marcus tries to rake the clearing with his pseudohands and immediately there is the voice again:

"Stop that immediately. Do you want us to carry out our threats? We know everything about your group; we just haven't found it necessary yet to interfere. It would be better if you didn't force us to start now."

It hits Marcus like thunder: whoever is behind this knows about them. Has the PM broken her promise? Has she told the military? Is this some kind of a measure for checking up on them?

"Cynthia, we'd better leave."

She nods.

Marcus checks the coordinates on his e-Helper. He will write them down later on. Neither one discusses the incident. They are both afraid that they are being watched by drones or eavesdropped on somehow. Marcus is so struck by the incident that he decides to change the route: they will walk further down south than they planned in order to reach the street leading from Motairehe to the west coast. Then they will try to hitchhike home. That way they can save a whole day.

Marcus and Cynthia return a day earlier than they planned, but it turns out that this was still one day too late: Stephan left the day before with a backpack and a suitcase, leaving only a letter behind for Marcus.

Marcus opens the letter, his hands shaking. He reads it and sighs deeply. Aroha and Cynthia stand next to him and look at him quizzically.

*Marcus explains in a stuttering voice: "This is a very nice letter. He writes that he finished high school ahead of time." (Like Marcus, Stephan can speed up his individual time, so exams are easy for him). "He wants to take a long trip. He also writes that we shouldn't worry about him and that he has to get some distance from what has happened lately. He asks us not to look for him. There's at least one positive thing: he promises he'll be back within four months."*



Aroha remains silent. Cynthia is unhappy: she wanted to tell Marcus that she really enjoyed the time they spent together but that she knows that his heart is still with Maria and that they will get back together. She also wanted to tell him that she is planning to move to Auckland, but after this she is sure that she cannot do this to him now.

In a room he considers absolutely secure, Marcus discusses the 'military zone' with Aroha and Cynthia. He will fly to Wellington and talk to the PM.

The conversation with the PM is not exactly what he expected: she thoroughly assures him that she doesn't know about such an area. She agrees to look into the matter and inform Marcus.

For Marcus, the emptiness on Great Barrier Island becomes more and more depressing. He explains to Aroha and Cynthia that he wants to move to Auckland for a time. Cynthia responds spontaneously that she will also find herself an apartment in Auckland. Marcus is happy about that, especially because their affair can continue this way. He has no idea that Cynthia plans to put an end to it, and the sooner the better. With these new developments, a regular Moller connection between Auckland and the island is no longer guaranteed. That's why Aroha and Herb decide to move back into their apartment in the city too.

There will still be personnel at the estate but the local paragroup has disbanded completely. However, this enables Marcus to cooperate even more closely with Klaus and SR Inc. They often meet privately as well. Most of the time, Cynthia is with them and sometimes Aroha and Herb come along too.

One day, Marcus receives a baffling call from the PM: there is absolutely no military activity on Great Barrier Island. It is also a fact that there is no clearing at the given coordinates. Marcus and Klaus are at their wits' end: what the hell is going on in the north of the island? They decide to investigate the phenomenon as soon as possible. But soon,

there are many higher priorities and for quite a while, the clearing is forgotten.



## 7.     **Stephan's Travels**

*March 30, 2020*

Stephan has been calling Raianda regularly since Christmas. He has also opened his heart to her about his parents' problems. Raianda is always willing to listen and their phone calls often last for a very long time. On several occasions, Stephan asks her to take a trip with him. After all, his role in the Indian operation brought him \$500,000, so money is not an issue. "I have to get out of Auckland but I don't really want to travel alone. I'm already sixteen and I've never done anything like this before."

Little by little he convinces her to take a trip with him for at least a week or so. At first they discuss destinations in India, but Stephan would not be completely comfortable with that. The memories of the horror on the India-Pakistan border still haunt him. Raianda already knows Nepal fairly well. "I could be a pretty good guide for you there, but I don't think you'd want that. I think you'd rather do some exploring with me, so we should go somewhere else."

Finally, they agree to go to Bali: with its tolerant Hindu culture and warm climate, they are sure they have made the right choice. Also, Auckland and Delhi are both a 6300 kilometers flight away from it. On the afternoon of March 30<sup>th</sup> Stephan arrives at Ngurah Rai airport, south of Denpasar, the largest city on the island. He only has to wait about an hour for Raianda's flight to arrive. He has brought a beautiful orchid as a welcome gift for her. He was also able to make some preparations before his departure: in Sanur, only a couple of kilometers from the airport, he booked a room in the Three Sisters, a good losmen<sup>17</sup>, which he discovered on lsewhere.org: 'This losmen is not fancy, but it's clean and it'll give you a good first impression of life in Bali before you go on to

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<sup>17</sup> A small, typical Balinese inn.

discover the less touristy parts of the island, where you will *have to* live in a losmen.'

Carrying just a handbag and a backpack, she runs lightly toward Stephan. Her face is fresh and joyful; she doesn't look at all like a girl who's just got off a 6000-kilometer flight. She gives Stephan a kiss (an act considered out of place in most Islamic parts of Indonesia, and something she would never do in public back home). She is dressed lightly for the tropical climate: a long skirt and a long-sleeved blouse that are sexy but modest.

She says, "What? You already reserved a room? Have you been there already?"

Stephan nods his head.

They take a Bemo<sup>18</sup> from the airport. The prices are not fixed and this is their first experience of Indonesian haggling. When Stephan gives the driver less money than he asked for, the driver smiles: this is still more than the standard price, but there's nothing wrong with trying to make a couple of extra rupees off a tourist. The driver takes them directly to the losmen.

The three friendly sisters welcome them warmly. They introduce themselves as Gusti Wayan, Gusti Made, and Gusti Nyoman. Over the next couple of weeks, Stephan will learn that there are only four names for children: Wayan, Made, Nyoman, and Ketut. These names are always given according to the order of birth. If there are more than four children, it starts from the beginning again, so child number five would be called Wayan too. Stephan will also learn that Gusti is not a family name, but a title denoting a member of the biggest aristocratic caste, the Wesia. Only the members of the second-order caste, the Satria, also carry a title: they call themselves Cokodor. But the majority of the population, the Sudra, has only one name. The caste systems in India and Bali are quite different: in India, though it is illegal, it is strictly adhered to,

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<sup>18</sup> A group taxi or minibus that allows customers to get in and out whenever they want.



while in Bali, it is legal, but has never played an important social role.

They immediately feel comfortable in their room: it consists of bamboo walls covered by curtains and mats. One end of the rectangular room is filled with a large bed and there is no space to get into it except from the base. At the head of the bed there is a window. The rest of the room is filled with old furniture and rattan shelves. The mats turn out to be doors leading out to the veranda, only half of which is covered by a roof. The other half is covered by the leaves and tendrils of passion fruit bushes. They find some wooden chairs with pretty pillows and a table set with drinking water and a wooden bowl full of mangoes, pineapple, passion fruit, jackfruit, and rambutans. Stephan opens one of the rambutans and is pleased to find that they are his favorite variety; the white meat comes easily off the brown pit, like a lychee.

The sink and shower, which are built into one corner of the room, are not walled or curtained off in any way; it will be like bathing outside. There is a hidden corner behind one mat. It houses a door leading outside the building.

Raianda embraces Stephan. "It's so beautiful here, and even though there are all these fruits and plants, there don't seem to be any bugs. I'm so happy to be with you. Do you mind if I take a shower while you enjoy your fruit?"

Stephan does not tell Raianda that he has ordered all the insects to leave the room—she doesn't know about his parability yet. She undresses in front of him and makes Stephan feed her pieces of rambutan. Then she steps under the shower and soaps herself thoroughly from head to toe. Stephan enjoys the scene: there is his lovely Indian girl, and she is cleaning herself for him, right in front of him. He quickly undresses and steps under the water with her. "Man, that's cold!" he shouts in surprise.

Raianda laughs. "There's never warm water in a losmen, didn't you know that? You don't really need warm water in this country and this is actually pretty warm anyway."

Those are almost the only words they exchange over the next couple of hours. There is so much they have to make up for. They enjoy the big bed and are soon surprised to discover a mirror on the ceiling. After their most pressing desires have been quelled, they nestle in each other's arms. A cool breeze adds to their relaxation and they soon fall asleep. They are so tired from the flight that they only subconsciously notice the tropical shower outside: even though the rainy season should be over now, the worldwide climate change has not spared Bali.

After a short nap, they get dressed for dinner. They ask Gusti Wayan if she can recommend a cheap place to get good food, making sure to show how pleased they are with the room and amenities. "I'm really glad you like the fruit because you will have the same for breakfast, together with some toast and jam. Would you like tea or coffee?"

The restaurant she recommends is really small. They sit down on wobbly chairs outside and order two different dishes. From now on they will have a running discussion over which is the better dish, Nasi Goreng or Bami Goreng. Raianda's Indian roots give her a preference for cooked rice (nasi), while Stephan prefers noodles (bami). He knows that all the other dishes come with rice anyway.

The next day is the most touristy of their trip: together with a tour group, they visit the Ulu Watu temple on the southern point of the island. They buy two traditional yellow temple scarves that will allow them to enter all temples in the appropriate manner. They are impressed by the temple complex, especially the huge statues of Ganesh flanking the entrance. Stephan also likes the big Waringin (banyan tree) with its wide canopy of leaves and branches. They find a tree like this at every temple they visit. Its air roots, which can grow into new trees, are the reason for the myth of its immortality. Next to it are white and pink Frangipanis bushes, also typical for temples. White, milky sap drops down from their thin twigs. This assures that the leaves can also grow in the dry season.



Most tourists are attracted to the view of the ocean over the steep cliffs, which are populated by playful monkeys. An American tourist tries to capture the scene with his holocamera. He steps too close to one of the monkeys, which snatches the camera from his hands and runs off. This causes a lot of agitation in the group. The guide has to take the blame for not having warned them about the possibility. Raianda is surprised when Stephan sticks up for the guide: "That's just what monkeys do. They're goofy and nosey, but these guys seem to be trained. He'll only look at the camera and bring it back. He won't try to eat it. You'll see, if we wait a little, he'll bring it back."

All of them, including Raianda and the guide give Stephan a funny look: this kid can't be serious, right?

But Stephan seems to be sure. "Don't make a lot of noise or the monkey won't come back. And hold on to your cameras and stuff."

The tour group gets curious and looks over to the cliff where the monkey disappeared, and suddenly, there he is, holding the camera and approaching the group. Stephan steps forward a little and gets down on his knees. The monkey walks straight to Stephan and almost religiously hands him the camera. Stephan gets a banana out of his bag and gives it to the monkey who takes it and runs off screeching. Stephan gives the camera back to the tourist, who can't believe what just happened.

Raianda notices that the guide gives Stephan an almost reverent look.

They head north of Denpassar to visit the famous craft villages and the artist colony of Ubud.

Batubulan is the village of sculptors, who are mostly young men. They chisel artwork out of soft, light stone, creating pieces not only for tourists. Most of the stone guards of the Balinese temples were 'born' in this city. In the center, there are hidden shops that produce and sell beautiful textiles and woodwork. It is not just a saying that every Balinese is also an artist. When the morning dance shows are over,

Batubulan becomes 'quiet' again, and their tour group is 'only' followed by a dozen persistent merchants.

Celuk is not much quieter but the artwork produced from silver and semiprecious stones makes up for the noise. One can find a good bargain if you know how to haggle.

In Batuan, Stephan finds a picture painted in black ink. He cannot believe what it shows: it is Raianda standing by a rice field. It is more than just a similarity. 'This is Raianda,' Stephan thinks. He buys it without haggling. While the artist wraps the picture up for Stephan, Raianda enters the shop. When the artist sees her, he almost drops the half-wrapped package. He too cannot believe the degree of similarity.

Stephan shows the picture to Raianda. "This guy must've dreamed about you."

The artist disappears and comes back with a camera. After a conversation consisting primarily of gestures and a lot of pointing, it becomes clear what the artist is after: he wants to take a picture of Raianda from a different angle and then draw another picture for Stephan. He indicates that Stephan should come back and pick it up in two days. Raianda only agrees to this after the artist has promised not to sell any more pictures of her to other people.

They visit Mas, famous for its masks and woodcarvings. This is the high point of the trip so far. But the guide makes sure that Ubud will be the real high point and will take a whole day for it. While Raianda takes a tea break with the rest of the group, the guide convinces Stephan to visit another shop with him. In Balinese, which sounds as much like Greek as Indonesian to Stephan, the guide tries to persuade a woodcarver to do something. The artist looks Stephan up and down, then he calls in his wife, who soon enters the room with tea for their guests. The artist himself disappears.

"I'm sorry but we'll have to wait a little."

After three cups of tea, Stephan begins to get impatient but at this moment the artist comes back with a filigree wood carving the size of a hand. When Stephan looks at it, he finds



detailed carvings of animals surrounding a monkey and a young man. The monkey is looking up to the young man.

Stephan is amazed. "Hey, he looks like me. Did it only take him ten minutes to do that?"

The guide pays a large sum for the carving and gives it to Stephan with a deep bow. "This I for the man who can talk with animals," he says reverently. "It is an honor for me to be your guide."

A woman in the background has watched the scene in astonishment. Suddenly, she starts talking quickly with the guide. While she is talking, the guide keeps shaking his head unwillingly. Finally, he sighs and turns to Stephan. "This woman has heard that you can talk to animals. This family lives off chickens and their little son left the door to the coop open last night. All the chickens are gone now. They want you to tell them to come back. Eighty chickens they have, and they offer to give you all the woodcuttings you want if you can help them. Some of the carvings are very beautiful."

Stephan takes a closer look at the shop: it's a very modest hut. In the back corner, he can see what appears to be the place where they all sleep. The boy sits there, his face streaked with tears. Stephan hesitates. 'Maybe it would help them more if I gave them 100 dollars, then they could buy new chickens.' But he has heard rumors about such 'sad stories' that the locals make up to swindle gullible tourists. Also, this is not an easy task, not even for him. How is he supposed to call back the right chickens when hundreds more are running around out there too? What kind of an order could he give that would only attract their chickens? Of course, people would start talking about him if he could handle the test. But aren't they already talking about him because of the incident with the monkey? 'Who cares?' Stephan thinks, 'They still believe in ghosts and magic, so why would they freak out about my animal tricks?'

"I'll try," Stephan answers, "but I can't promise anything. Show me the chicken yard."

Nervously, the woman leads him outside. What he sees there gives him courage: in the middle of the yard there is a wooden rooster the size of a man. Feed has been scattered on its wings. "Is this how you always feed the chickens? Do you always scatter the grain on the wings and let it slide down?"

The woman nods.

Stephan smiles inside. 'That's how it could work.' He formulates a telepathic order for the animals: 'All chickens must come back to the big rooster with the spread wings.' Then he 'listens' for any emotions within the chickens. After a while, he says, "I think I managed to call them back."

It is good that no one is there filming the scene and that there are no further witnesses to what is about to happen: from all sides, chickens stream from the bushes and hedges. They fight for the best position to get through the small gate of the coop as fast as possible. Shortly thereafter, they are all back.

"How do you do that?" the guide asks, puzzled.

Stephan shrugs. "Let's go back now. And don't tell anyone about this. We who can talk to animals like to remain anonymous."

The rest of the group is waiting impatiently for their arrival. Raianda gives Stephan a reproachful look. Stephan hugs her and whispers in her ear, "Sorry for making you wait. I'll tell you everything tonight. I should have told you long ago."

The sun is still burning down when they get back to the losmen. They decide to walk to the nearby Sanur Beach to take a swim. When they arrive there, they are disappointed: it's low tide and the water over the reef is so shallow that they can't really swim. The evening event that is part of the day tour is a little disappointing: the 'Balinese buffet' could better be described as 'American buffet with a dash of Indonesian'. Even Stephan and Raianda can tell that the 'Balinese' dances<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Stephan and Raianda watch a fake Kechack dance. A real Kechack is only interesting when it tells the whole story of Prince Ram and Princess



are fake and make no sense. Even the Gamelans (a sort of local xylophone-like instrument which Stephan and Raianda saw in Mas) have been replaced by synthesizers made in Japan.

"Tomorrow we'll rent a car and do our own thing," Raianda decides.

With a bottle of Arak, the local rice schnapps, they disappear to their room. "I have to tell you a couple of things," Stephan says.

"Yes, you promised to tell me something. But let's have a shower first." Even though the shower does not take long, there are other reasons why Raianda wants him to postpone his 'confession' till the next day.

The next day, they rent a car, and though Raianda and Stephan are both used to driving on the left side in India and New Zealand, driving here is still 'interesting'. They cannot even imagine what it must be like for Europeans or Americans who are used to driving on the right side. They find everything incredibly chaotic until they understand rule number one of driving in Bali: all you have to do is watch out for the traffic ahead of you. Whatever is behind you is none of your business. So when the driver in front of you signals for a lane change, you just let him in. Conversely, if you want to change lane, you just signal with your blinker and can be sure that the driver behind will give way.

Not only do many cars in Bali not have mirrors, they are even considered a nuisance. The Western system of always keeping an eye on all traffic around you soon seems completely absurd to Stephan. It's just unnecessarily taxing for the drivers. It makes much more sense to concentrate on your natural field of vision instead of craning your neck around all the time. The whole world should use this method. Stephan is sure that this would reduce stress and prevent many accidents. Raianda does not completely agree with this; she is used to

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Sita and how they get together with the help of the Monkey King. It should have a choir and not just be accompanied by a Gamelan.

Indian traffic, which has always been a strange mix of Asian and European conventions.

Their first goal is Ubud, located in the hills north of Denpasar. All the travel books rave about this place, but the couple can't share their enthusiasm. Once they have passed all the towns they visited yesterday, they reach Ubud, this so-called Oasis of Peace. It is true that it is a bit cooler here because of the altitude, but there are even more tourists than in the other places and with all the crap they sell there, mostly produced in Mauritius and Madagascar, they find it very hard to relax. There are only two positive aspects: Raianda soon notices that there are still original dances here, which can normally only be found in Peliatan, the neighboring town that can be reached by foot from the Temple of Death and through the Monkey Forest. Unfortunately, the dancing shows are scheduled for very late in the evening, which would make it necessary to spend the night there. The other interesting aspect is the nearness of many temples, like the Pura Gungung Labuk, which is supposedly 1000 years old. It is located under a steep bridge that crosses the convergence of the Wos and Cerik rivers.

However, Raianda and Stephan are much more impressed by the temple complex of Pura Besakih, located 1000 meters up the side of the 3000-meter volcano Gunung Agung. The complex consists of thirty separate temples situated on seven terraces. Here they accidentally become part of a great event. Even though they are not treated like tourists, they don't feel right there because of the brutal cockfights.

Overdoing it a little, they also visit the 'famous' bat caves, which turn out to be nothing but a dirt hole in the mountain housing several thousands of dormant bats. However, the little village by the sea on the way back makes up for it all. For the first time, they can really experience the traditional dances<sup>20</sup>. The locals treat them like their own, even

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<sup>20</sup> Raianda and Stephan get to see the Barong and Rangda dances, which are accompanied by both the ritual seven-tone gamelan and the 'funny'



though they are considered stupid because there is so much they do not understand and because they ask so many 'dumb' questions.

Afterwards, they restart the Nasi Goreng-Bami Goreng spiel. The food tastes great, even if they have to eat it sitting on the sidewalk because they bought it from a 'bicycle kitchen'. It was so cheap that they consider it a present.

Back in their room in the losmen, they nearly collapse from exhaustion. A cold shower and a glass of Arak (it's funny what you can get used to) get them back in gear. "We have to try two more positions from the Kamasutra tonight," insists Raianda.

The next day, they want to visit the Tanah Lot temple. It turns out to be spectacular but much too crowded. Maybe they should have listened to the warnings from the three sisters. The temple is located on a tiny island and can only be reached on foot at low tide. This also allows them to visit to the Cobra Caves. Stephan wants to find out if the cobras are real or just plastic. He does not trust Balinese tourist attractions anymore. He scares the hell out of the guide there when he orders the cobras to come nearer to them. The guide completely wigs out when Stephan takes one in his hand. "I know how to handle snakes," he explains to his frightened companions.

They have a mediocre dinner in a huge restaurant on a nearby beach. Because of the many flashes from tourist cameras, they can still see the temple in the waning daylight. Once night has fallen, floodlights are turned on and they light up the temple.

Raianda and Stephan have fallen totally in love. This is why they can even enjoy a tourist trap like this. But they know that this is not the true Bali and that they will have to move out of their comfortable losmen to get away from the tourists.

The next morning, they pack their bags and leave their 'tach zrag', the Balinese word for sex room. They head for the

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five-tone gamelan. Barong and Rangda symbolize good and bad respectively.

north coast, which they plan to reach via a little detour to Batur Lake. The lake, located at the foot of a 2000-meter high volcano, fascinates them. They get lost driving down a vanishing street on its southern shore. This 'misfortune' gives them the opportunity to be alone with nature for the first time. While they can see the tour busses roll in to the hot springs on the other side of the lake, their original goal, they have to leave their car behind in order to reach the little village of Bali Aga, one kilometer away.

When they arrive there, the villagers treat them nearly like aliens and they are granted the most beautiful room in the only losmen in the village. For the first time they have to face a mandi. This half-open barrel is filled with ice-cold water. It is not possible to step into it and they are told that they have to dip water out of it if they want to wash themselves. The owner of the losmen promises to cook whatever they want. Unfortunately, he only has rice and onions.

"No fish in the lake?"

"Many fish, but they don't bite. The whole village is desperate."

Stephan is tempted to open his bag of tricks again. For the most part, he wants to help the village, but he also wants to impress Raianda.

"When did you pick the onions?"

"At the new moon," the locals answer. It is obvious that they could also do with more than rice and Arak for a change.

"Great!" Stephan exclaims. "There's a full moon today, so we'll be able to catch as many fish as we want. Who's got a net?"

The villagers think that Stephan must be a little crazy, but since he is willing to treat them to several bottles of Arak, they let him do what he wants. Some of the locals rush away and bring back different kinds of nets. Stephan chooses one after making sure that it is fine enough to hold the onions. "Fishing time!" he shouts.



Raianda, who has not had quite as much Arak as the others, comes along too, but she has no idea what Stephan is planning.

Stephan throws several big onions into the net and tells four of the villagers to hold the ropes attached to the four corners of the net. They lower it into the water. "When I say pull, pull, all at once, and the net will be full of fish." Stephan rolls up his trousers, takes off his shoes and wades into the water. He makes sure the net is flat on the bed of the lake and returns to the shore. Then he turns to the full moon and mumbles a string of unintelligible syllables. Then, all excited, he shouts, "Pull!" Three helpers pull, but the fourth is so drunk that he falls in the water. Stephan jumps in to replace him and pulls too. The many spectators cannot believe their eyes: there must be at least a hundred big fish in the net.

"Do you want more or will that do?"

All of them are gluttonous: "More!" they shout almost simultaneously. They repeat the procedure with the same results.

"Good fishing today," Stephan mumbles, "More?"

"More!" But suddenly the moon disappears behind a cloud.

"Sorry guys, the cloud is telling us that there is no more fishing tonight."

But the crowd has already tasted blood. They lower the net into the water again and almost force Stephan to repeat his magic act. He does it without hesitation, but the net comes up empty. This time he 'forgot' to give the telepathic order.

Dinner is great and the locals worship Stephan like a saint. When it begins to become a bit too much for him and Raianda, they go back to their room.

Raianda makes sure that they leave the village very early in the morning. They head further north. They pass Singaraja, the old capital and head west. Stephan suggests that they spend the night in the area so they can go snorkeling at a reef. He also wants to watch the dolphins the next morning.

"I don't know how to snorkel," Raianda confesses.

"No problem. It'll take you five minutes to learn," Stephan assures her.

They buy several tropical fruits from a stand. One of them is a durian. "Do you know this fruit?" Raianda asks. When Stephan shakes his head, she is happy that she finally has a surprise for him.

They are surprised to find a super-modern motel. The bathtubs inside the apartments are big enough to hold several people. They sit down on the terrace and Raianda opens the durian and offers a piece to Stephan. Stephan shies away. "What's that? It smells terrible."

Raianda laughs. "Yes. That's why we call the durian 'stinky fruit' but it tastes really good. You only have to ignore or get used to the smell. Someone once said that eating a durian is like eating strawberry mousse from a dirty toilet bowl." She takes a bite, forcing Stephan to do the same.

He says, "I think I still have to acquire a taste for it."

Raianda and Stephan give the rest of the fruit to the bellboy, who pretends to be pleased, then they rent some snorkeling equipment and go back to their room. Stephan fills up the bathtub with lukewarm water and shows Raianda how to test the mask and put the snorkel in her mouth. "Only five seconds are difficult. Put the mask on, put the snorkel in your mouth, and breathe normally. Then, slowly dip your face into the water and keep breathing calmly through the snorkel. As soon as your face touches the water, your instincts will tell you to stop breathing, but just don't stop. Don't forget, air is still coming through the snorkel. It's as simple as that."

Raianda kneels down in the bathtub, breathes deeply and calmly and doesn't stop when her head goes into the water.

Stephan applauds. He is careful to explain how you can get water out of the snorkel if it fills up. Then they leave the room and go to the beach. They put on their flippers, masks, and snorkels and start the swim.

Raianda is a natural. She acts as if she was born with the gear on. Stephan makes it even more exciting by ordering many interesting sea creatures into Raianda's view.



Raianda is spellbound and Stephan cheers her up even more. "You're going to be a super diver too. I'll teach you as soon as I can."

Raianda nods eagerly. She cannot wait for that.

The next morning, they rent a boat and go dolphin watching. The dolphins come all the way up to the boat and even want to be touched...

They find 'Bali paradise' where they never expected to: far in the west of the island, after Pengastulan, they hear about a gravel road leading to the headwaters of the Yeh Sumbul. Originally, they planned to cross the island all the way to the south and then slowly drive back to Denpasar because Raianda has only four more days before her return flight. But now Stephan insists they change their plans. He wants to follow the Yeh Sumbul and later hit the Southern Coast Road west of Medewi Beach. They plan to make a stop at Sandark village, situated right on the river.

Sandark feels almost like their new home: they are welcomed there as if they have returned from a long voyage. They are integrated into village life straight away. In the evening, all the villagers go down to the river to bathe. They all undress completely and Raianda and Stephan can't help but to follow their example. There they are, in the midst of hundreds of naked bodies, enjoying the intimacy of the situation. However, this procedure has a very special quality of privacy. Stephan is reminded of an elevator scene: you stand only centimeters from other people, maybe even touching them, but you are able to ignore them completely. Yes, maybe you notice somebody's tie, a spot on a shirt or a deep neckline, and it is the same way here. Sometimes you notice a tempting backside, a delicate shoulder, or a friendly face, but everything is fleeting, and without voyeurism.

Sandark was only supposed to have been a way station but they stay there. They sing and dance, play and cook; they live with the people. Stephan is able to prevent some small incidents with his parabilities, but nobody notices anything.



They learn to appreciate rice as more than just food. The terraced rice paddies that lead down the slope like steps built for a giant, look like they were designed by an artist: green becomes yellow becomes gold, no matter if they are filled with water or just damp soil. Rice is harvested here twice a year, independent of the season, creating a wide variety within the crop. In the early stages of growth, the flooded paddies are home to giant frogs and eels, which are considered a delicacy and are hunted by teenagers. The Agricultural cooperatives called 'Subaks' are more important to the villages than any caste hierarchy. They ensure that everyone gets enough water for their rice fields.

Stephan is especially impressed by the symbiosis between humans and animals. Every morning, the families bring dozens of ducks to the rice fields and plant a flag in the ground. For the rest of the day, the ducks keep busy by eating the bugs from the fields, but in the evening they surround the flags like good tourists around an umbrella and wait there to be taken 'home' to get fed, or eventually eaten.

The days fly by. Often, the rules of the community separate Raianda and Stephan during the day, but in the evenings, they always find each other again. One day around noon, they make love in a harvested rice field, protected by mulberry bushes. Suddenly, they hear applause: some of the villagers were watching their activities but no one finds them indecent or out of place.

Raianda has to change her flight schedule and contacts her father. He understands but asks her insistently to stay only three extra days. They are sad when they leave 'their' village and they promise to return.

Back in Sanur, 'their' room at the Three Sisters Losmen happens to be vacant and they spend their last night there. "Stephan, there's something you wanted to tell me. Would you like to do it now?"

Before Stephan starts his 'confession', he makes Raianda promise that she will not tell anyone what she is about to hear.



He starts by showing her the wood carving the guide gave him on the second day of their trip.

"But that looks like you, Stephan," Raianda says, astonished, "and the animals almost seem to be praying to you."

"When I was away for so long with the guide, he handed me this piece with the words, 'for the man who can talk with animals'. That same morning, he noticed that I'd ordered that monkey to bring back that holocamera. Remember that?"

Raianda nods. "Did you really give him an order? Can you really...talk with animals?"

"Yes, I can give them orders. I can even feel their emotions, but there are some animals that only have very weak emotions and animals that...I don't really understand. When I know them, like with horses or dogs sometimes, I also understand them well. I'm sure that subconsciously you've already noticed a couple of these orders. Do you remember when you got scared swimming on Great Barrier Island and the dolphins came to carry us? I told them to do that. And during this trip you were always surprised that there were no flies or mosquitoes around. Well, I told them to piss off. I'm sure you noticed how they bothered some of the other tourists, but they never bothered you. I ordered them to leave you alone. And do you remember the fishing at Lake Batur? I ordered the fish to swim into the net."

Before he continues, Stephan waits a couple of seconds and sighs. "You also know that our group prevented a nuclear war between India and Pakistan. We destroyed a nuclear base in India and both bases in Pakistan. It was me who did the job in India. I told all the cattle near the base to storm it, and the Hindu soldiers were so surprised that the holy animals were making a statement against nuclear war that they didn't know how to react. On top of that, I sent swarms of wasps into the command center and had mice and rats chew through all the cables there."

"So that's why the dolphins in Singaraja came so close to our boat and why it was so easy for the villagers to catch all



those big frogs and eels in the rice paddies? I'm sure you did many more things that I never even noticed."

Stephan nods. "Raianda, every member of the group on Great Barrier Island has a special, as we call it, parability. We try to use them to help humanity. We also try to get behind these skills and reproduce them technically. It's terrible how the operation in India brought discord into the group and...I just didn't know how to handle it anymore. I missed you so much. I really needed your support. The last ten days have been like a dream for me. Please stay longer. Please change your mind. Please stay here with me or...we could also explore a different part of the world. I'd love to go to La Reunion. I've read so many great things about it."

For a long time, Raianda remains silent. Her mind is racing. Stephan is right: these last few days have been the best of her life too. Up till now, she still considered ignoring her father's wish to return to India. But all of a sudden, everything is different. Will Stephan ever be able to understand? She loves him, she would do just about anything for him, but now it turns out that he, and the whole group on Great Barrier Island, are not human, but superhuman. And she's not one of them. She will never be one of them. She knows that her father is very sensitive: maybe he senses that there is something unusual here and that is why he insists that she put some distance between herself and Stephan. She'll have to mull it over: she does not want to give Stephan up, and she does not want to lose him, but will she ever be able to live with someone like that? Will she ever be able to live with a group of people like him? Her thoughts run in circles but one thing is clear, she needs some time away.

As calmly and tenderly as she can, Raianda says, "Stephan, I thank you for your trust and that you told me all this. I love you more than anything. I'll never forget these last few days, but I have to comply with my father's wishes. I know he has a good reason for telling me to come home. Please stay in touch, but now, you should go to La Reunion alone, without me. When you come back to Great Barrier



Island, and you're still thinking about me and need me, then let me know. Maybe I'll be able to get away again. But now let's make love once more, we don't have much time."

Stephan is disappointed. He has told her a secret he had promised never to give away and still, he cannot change her mind. He is almost bitter about this. 'I shouldn't have even told her,' he thinks. It does not even cross his mind that what he told her was the reason for her decision.

During the night, they make love like there's no tomorrow. They don't speak much on the way to the airport, and not only because they are tired. They have to say goodbye in public and their kisses are fleeting. Raianda hopes that Stephan would lead her into some hidden corner again, but today he seems to have closed up. She has to fight back tears but manages to suppress them until she can put on her sunglasses inside the plane.

Stephan returns to the losmen, which now feels empty and sad. He calls the rental car agency and tells them that Raianda wants to keep the car a little longer: because of his age, he couldn't rent a car in his own name, despite his New Zealand driver's license. He says goodbye to the three sisters and gives each of them a little woodcarving. Then he heads back to Sandark, where he and Raianda spent six wonderful days. On the way there, he stops in Batuan to pick up a pen and ink painting showing Raianda in front of a rice field. The artist does not want to accept his money. Stephan thanks him and 'accidentally' drops a fifty-dollar note on his way out. He hopes that the right person will find it.

Against all reason, Stephan is drawn back to Sandark. He stops in Singaraja to buy a carload of household items as gifts for the villagers in Sandark.

When he arrives there, the people are happy and surprised. They ask him time and again about his 'wife'. He finds it very difficult to explain that Raianda was only a good friend, and not his wife. He will regret this later.



This time, he does not take a room in a losmen, but decides to rent an empty house for a month. A merchant from Singaraja built it years ago, but for some reason he and his family rarely use it. Compared to the losmen, it is almost luxurious. It boasts a full bathroom, a kitchen, a huge living room with a veranda, and several bedrooms. An old couple living in a little hut nearby take care of the garden. Without even asking him, they find a maid to take care of the house.

Her name is Amelie and she moves into a room on the ground floor. Amelie is originally from Java. She speaks good English and turns out to be a real find. At their first meeting, she strikes Stephan as unremarkable, but he soon changes his mind when he sees her again in the evening at the washing ceremony. However, this ritual now makes him uneasy. 'What the hell am I doing here? I have a beautiful house and a fine bathroom with spring water.' But the gardeners insisted he come.

So there he is, soaping himself like he did every day with Raianda. Suddenly he feels a hand on his back. It is Amelie. Naturally, she starts soaping his back, then turns around, encouraging him to do the same. Stephan gets the feeling that the villagers see him in a different way now. Was he just so busy with Raianda that he never noticed how they discreetly looked him up and down?

The next morning, Amelie puts on a colorful, short skirt and a simple, white shirt that shows her brass armlets. Her slender feet and long toes are perfect and she wears no sandals in the house. She even puts on some make up for Stephan.

Stephan spends the morning around the village: he helps repair a plow, calms a stubborn ox, and has black coffee and a glass of Arak underneath the central Banyan tree with the men. Today, Stephan's suspicions are confirmed: when Raianda was still around, they were talking about rice, the weather, health issues, and animals. While they used to ask him to tell stories about his travels, they now insist he elaborate on his plans for the future:



"How long are you going to stay? What are you going to do? Where are your parents?" One man is especially nosey: "Are you looking for a girl to marry?"

This makes Stephan understand: before, he was just a generous and interesting guest. Now he is a potential suitor for one of the many girls, or at least a potential father with the financial means to support a child.

As it was with Raianda, he is often invited to dinner, but now he is always approached by one or two marriable young women who seem to know him well. Stephan walks a tightrope between politeness and rejection, between curiosity and abuse of his hosts' generosity. What is much worse is the strange competition among the girls and among their families. He is *the* bachelor. They all seem to want him. They all make eyes at him whenever possible. All the other young men see him more and more as an intruder.

When his 'friends' start turning down his invitations to a glass of Arak and goat meatballs, the local specialty, he realizes that he has to do something. He decides to go back to the house.

He steps on the veranda and can see through the window that Amelie is taking a shower. What a beautiful sight.

When Amelie realizes she is being watched, she reacts with a lighthearted "I'm coming!" Still only wearing a towel, her wet hair flat against her skin, she shouts up to him, "And which drink may I bring the young master?"

Stephan detects a little irony in her voice.

She brings him a rum fruit punch. Stephan suggests she make one for herself and join him on the veranda. When she comes back, she asks, "Are you worried about something, Stephan?"

He tells Amelie how much he thinks the situation has changed here.

Amelie laughs. "I think every unmarried woman would like to have you. You look good, you're nice, and apparently you have a lot of money. When Raianda was still here, we all

envied her. Now that we know that you're free, all the girls want to catch you. I can understand them," she says saucily.

"So what can I do about it?"

"Very simple, just go out with me in public. It's OK if you don't want to sleep with me. I'm sorry that you don't fancy me, but if you just pretend we're sleeping with each other, which they are sure about anyway, then your life will be normal again."

"But when I leave this place without you, won't you have a problem with it?"

Amelie gives him a baffled look. "Of course not. I'm sure you'll give your lover jewelry or money as a goodbye present. And having been with you will only make me look like the 'winner' here in the village. When you come back a couple of years later, you'll see that I have married into a good family."

While she was talking, Amelie slowly rolled up her t-shirt to the point where the roundness of her breasts is visible underneath the fabric. This, and the topic of the conversation suddenly make Stephan very horny. "Take your clothes off. I want you to do me."

"With my mouth?"

"Yes," Stephan nods.

"It will be a pleasure, young master, but maybe you should use your fingers to get me in the mood."

Unfortunately for him, Stephan has to leave the house again in the evening. "I'm sorry, but I've already told the Jacks that I'm coming over." As usual, he takes some gifts with him: coffee, Arak, a set of kitchen knives.

Before he leaves, Amelie says, "Today I'm not too scared that some girl will seduce you. But Stephan, be careful. Some of the young men out there are no longer your friends."

Stephan nods.

The evening is unremarkable: He feels that he is part of another bridal show.

It is pitch black when he walks back to his house, deep in thought. Suddenly, he hears steps behind him and turns



around. He can make out the figures of two men but cannot make out their faces. And there are two more further to the right and...Stephan realizes that he is surrounded by at least twelve guys who apparently want to beat him up...or even more.

Stephan carries no weapon. All he has are his parabilities. He could speed up his individual time or ask animals for help. He decides to do the latter because he is better at this. He orders thousands of mosquitoes to attack his opponants. The mosquitoes do a good job and once he is back in his house, he orders them to fly away again.

In the living room, Amelie is waiting for him in a sexy outfit. "I heard screams. What happened?"

"Ten or so of my neighbors wanted to beat me up," answers Stephan, "But they were suddenly attacked by a swarm of mosquitoes. Very strange...so if you run into any young men with swollen faces tomorrow, you'll know they were probably part of this."

"A swarm of mosquitoes? There're hardly any mosquitoes around at this time of the year. And why didn't they get you?"

"For some reason, they don't seem to like the taste of me. Have you ever seen a mosquito bite me? Whatever; I think this is it. I'm leaving. Do you want to come?"

"Where are you going?"

"I think I'm flying to La Reunion for a couple of weeks, then back to New Zealand. The two of us could have a lot of fun in La Reunion."

Amelie has no idea where La Reunion might be. But it is clear that she can't go with him anyway: she has no passport.

Amelie helps Stephan pack. He leaves a nice tip for the gardeners. He gives a princely sum to his lover. She can't even believe the amount at first. "That's a hell of a lot of money for one afternoon of sex," she laughs.

Stephan laughs too. "Well you could return the favor and come to Denpasar with me. We could spend a couple of nights

in the fancy hotel there until I've organized my flight to La Reunion. You can help me buy myself some clothes. We could also buy some more things for you, like a nice necklace or something. That way, I can enjoy you for a couple of more days and you can return here in triumph."

So Stephan spends his last few days on Bali in luxury with his friendly and willing companion. But he is in no doubt: the first couple of days with Raianda in the simple lodges were much, much happier.

When Stephan arrives at Roland Garros<sup>21</sup>, La Reunion's airport, a rental car is waiting there for him. The French influence here is the reason he can easily rent a car: as long as a customer has money, there are never any problems.

He drives through extremely heavy traffic. He has to stay aware of the fact that everyone drives on the 'wrong' side of the road here. Stephan is tired from the flight. Even though Bali and La Reunion are only 6500 kilometers apart, the flight turned out to be 8000 kilometers because he had to change planes in Singapore.

He has reserved a room at the Le Juliette Dodu in St. Denis, the capital of the island. After he checks in, he has a quick dip in the pool and then goes back to his room for a long nap. It is 2 p.m. Before he falls asleep, he receives a call from his travel agency. A woman introduces herself as Veronique and offers to meet him to recommend some tours around the island. Stephan explains that he really has to take a nap first. He asks her if it would be possible to meet around 6 p.m.

"That's after my working hours," Veronique tells him, "but I don't have any plans for the evening, so OK, I'll meet you at six in the hotel lobby."

Either Veronique is very attractive or Stephan is in a phase where he finds every woman pretty. From the first moment he sees her, he is very attracted to her. He's surprised

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<sup>21</sup> La Reunion's airport is named after the pilot who first crossed the Mediterranean Sea in 1913.



she is so young, maybe only a couple of years older than him. She is not in a hurry and they order a drink at the bar. "I'm sure your e-Helper has saved my address, so don't hesitate to call me for whatever you want to know. When I'm busy I turn it off anyway. Do you want me to give you a short summary about the island or have you already read it all?"

"I could use a little introduction," Stephan replies. He is amused by Veronique's French accent.

"La Reunion is not big and almost circular. It's fifty kilometers in diameter, and the main road circles the whole island. The island was created when an old and new volcano grew into each other. The young one is still active. It's situated in the east where you can find volcanic cones made of lava and debris. When it's not active, such as now, there's not much to see there besides the beautiful tamarisk and tamarind forests on the slopes. The old volcano is more than 3000 meters high and is broken into three huge basins: the Cirque de Mafate, which is accessible only on foot, the Cirque de Cilaos, reached via the craziest road in the world, and the Cirque de Salazie, where the road actually goes through a waterfall<sup>22</sup>. The bottoms of these basins lie 2000 meters below their rims. You can find huge columns that sometimes even have little villages on top of them. That's particularly the case in the Mafate. Normally they'd be very inaccessible, but they've been using helicopters for the last twenty years."

"The climate in Reunion is subtropical. We're only at the beginning of the dry season, which means that it's not that hot yet and it still rains frequently. What's really great about this island are the many rivers and the tens of thousands of waterfalls. The center of the island is so wild that only the coast and parts of the Cirques are populated. That's why the traffic is so chaotic despite the low population. St. Denis has only 100,000 inhabitants but the traffic on the main road might

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<sup>22</sup> The locals use this waterfall as a car wash. They have invented the perfect method: 1. Drive through it to make the car wet. 2. Soap it thoroughly. 3. Drive back through the waterfall to rinse off the suds.

still lead you to believe that you're in a megapolis. We don't have many beaches besides maybe St. Gilles-les-Baines, our main tourist destination. But this has the positive effect of keeping the tourist crowds in Mauritius. If you want to swim in some really nice water, you have to go to one of the waterfalls and jump into the pools underneath. You can also go snorkeling: the lagoons here are OK, but people have told me that they are only average compared to other places in the world. So the main activities are in the ocean: diving, deep-sea fishing, etc. The island is also great for hiking, rafting, and canoeing, and even canyoning and paragliding if you are experienced. You'll get the best first impression from a helicopter flight, but it's very expensive, of course."

"If you're interested in nightlife, and other tourists, then you should go to St. Gilles. I can see that you've booked a room there in the Saint-Alexis for four days time. That's the best hotel on the island. You'll like it, there's a lot of action there."

Stephan has listened carefully; he has also watched her carefully. He even made her blush a little. 'Maybe I dressed a little to sexy for this kid,' she thinks, 'but who cares? He's old enough, and I have nothing to hide.'

Stephan interrupts the short silence: "Thanks for the info, but what do you suggest I do for the next couple of days?"

"Well, if money isn't a problem, and for some reason I have the impression it isn't, I'd take the helicopter tour. I think I can still get you a booking. If you like rivers and water, then I can reserve a place for you on a rafting tour on the Riviere des Marsouins."

Stephan nods. "I'll definitely do the helicopter tour if that's still possible. But the day after tomorrow I'd like to do something on my own. I'll need your advice on that. It'd be great if you could book me on the rafting trip the day after that. On the fourth day, I'll just take it easy and head to Le Saint-Alexis. Then, we'll see."



Veronique nods. 'A nice customer,' she thinks. 'He books two expensive tours right away and he's probably only eighteen, like me.'

E-Helpers are also ubiquitous in Le Reunion. It helps Veronique book the rafting trip in just a couple of seconds. All the necessary information and transactions run automatically between her and Stephan's e-Helpers. There is only a problem with the helicopter. "I'm afraid no one has signed up for the trip tomorrow. Even the smallest helicopter only flies with at least two passengers."

"That's not a problem: just book for two people, one for me and one for an acquaintance under my name. And please book the longer flight from 7 to 11 a.m. so we can avoid the clouds you said come in the afternoon."

When Veronique tells Stephan the considerable price while booking the flight, Stephan simply nods in agreement.

"Do you know someone here on the island?" Veronique wants to know.

"Yeah, she's a very nice and pretty girl. Her name is Veronique and she's sitting here with me now."

Veronique is confused for a moment. "But...you mean...there's no way I can go, I have to work tomorrow."

Stephan is not easily refused. "Of course you can accept it...do you think I would enjoy doing it alone? It'd be a shame to waste a seat. The way you were talking before told me that you've never taken the tour before. I also get the impression that you've wanted to for a long time. And about work, you'd be back in the agency by 11:30, and the catalogue says you open up at ten. I'm pretty sure you could find an excuse for that hour and a half."

Veronique sits there flabbergasted, and Stephan continues, "And think about it—by now you've worked two hours overtime *and* sold two tours. That's a good excuse already, and in case you feel you really have to give me something in return, then take me to a Creole restaurant and buy me a glass of Cilaos wine."

"How do you know about the wine?"

“Well, I did read an introduction to the island. You want to go?”

She nods. ‘This kid really knows what he wants,’ she thinks when she finally gives in. They leave the hotel and Stephan starts to turn left. Veronique stops him.

“Where do you think you’re going? I’m the guide here.”

“I thought you were going to take me to the Rue de Leclerc.”

“I thought you didn’t know about Reunion. What did I give you this lecture for? You seem to know everything already, but I’m taking you to the Rue Pasteur.”

“I swear I only know the street from the airport to the hotel, but I lost my way three times coming here, that’s why I remember the names of the nearby streets. And I came all the way from Indonesia, so I had plenty of time to read on the plane. I also read that you won’t find any real Creole food in St. Denis unless a local takes you there.”

Stephan gets exactly what he wanted: once they have sat down in the little smoky tavern, Veronique orders Gratin Chou Chou with Bakalaos pieces in it and palm-heart salad. The main dish looks like a disgusting black mass interrupted only by pieces of salted fish but...it is delicious. Chou Chou is like spinach. It is produced from the shoots of wild ferns.

The first glass of wine is on Veronique, but the bottle that follows is on Stephan. They enjoy a relaxed evening and Veronique appreciates that Stephan doesn’t try anything.

“So 6:30 tomorrow in the lobby, right?”

“Right,” answers Veronique, and wishes him a good night.

Veronique, who grew up on Reunion, enjoys the flight as much as Stephan. The amazing basins, the uncountable waterfalls, and the wildlife in the interior of the island, which contrasts so starkly with the coastal area, make one thing clear to Stephan: he will have to stay here longer and take long hikes in order to have a closer look at all this. He plans to climb the Piton de Nieve, which is the highest mountain on the island



(3070 meters) and has a mountain cabin at 2470 meters. He also wants to explore the Galet Valley, the Cirque de Mafate, and also wants to cross the Cirque de Salazie to the Hell-Bourgh village.

For the next day, he has made out a spot at the Rivières des Roches in the eastern part of the island. Veronique tells him that it is called Bassin la Mer, and that she only knows about it from what people have told her.

"I'm going there tomorrow afternoon. I'll drive in as far as I can, then I'll walk to the three waterfalls that we've just seen. You want to come with me, Veronique?"

"I really can't tomorrow afternoon. I've got a German class."

"My parents are both from Austria, like President Schwarzenegger, so I think my German is pretty good."

"Yeah, but your English is better."

"Thanks! How about this, you come with me and I'll give you a private German lesson in the evening."

Veronique likes how Stephan handles things. She likes his relaxed, self-confident manner, so she gives in again and agrees to go the next day.

From St. Denis, they first head east to Bras-Panon. They have some difficulty finding the little street that follows the Rivières des Roches upstream and ends at a big waterfall with a parking lot. From now on, it is hiking time. Veronique shows Stephan what the chou chou shoots he ate the day before look like. Veronique is very surprised when Stephan points out a family of tanreks: these porcupine-like animals are considered a culinary specialty on the island, which may be the reason they are nearly extinct.

The hot sun shines down as they walk for a long time, high over the river before reaching the critical point: here they can go down to the river and from there will have to fight the strong current upstream. But it doesn't take long and they reach a true wonder of the natural world: a basin fed by three extremely high waterfalls.

The main river comes down with such force that it is impossible to swim against the current. The waterfall to the left is smaller and hides a moss-covered boulder. They sit there, comfortably and dry, and for a moment, Veronique loses her cool:

“This is really marvelous.” She presses Stephan’s hand and gives him a big kiss. “You’re showing me my island!”

The third waterfall is opposite the second. Where the water from all three meet, you can almost see a hole in the water.

“I don’t want to go in there,” Veronique remarks.

Stephan throws a piece of wood into the whirlpool. It spins deeper and deeper and even disappears, but comes back up again, ten meters downstream. “If you’re very brave,” Stephan begins, “you could try to do it like the branch. Personally, I don’t have the courage.”

They carefully leave the basin and put their hiking clothes back on. After everything he experienced in Bali, he finds the way Veronique tries to hide her intimate areas a bit exaggerated.

On the way back to the car they are caught in a heavy but warm rain shower, and are soaked to the skin.

As they drive back to the hotel, they stop on the roadside for a couple of samosas (meat stuffed bread pockets) and hot tea.

Back at the hotel, Veronique hesitates to follow Stephan into his hotel room. She sneaks past the reception desk, an action that Stephan doesn’t really understand. They are still wet so they take separate showers and put on thick, white bathrobes.

Now Stephan starts his German lesson. It is a little different to what Veronique expected. He points at her nose and says, “Nase.”

She repeats, “nose-Nase.”

Stephan continues with ear, forehead, eye, mouth, tongue, lips, neck, shoulder (taking the opportunity to remove her bathrobe a little), back, chest (again he has to loosen her



bathrobe), armpit, upper arm (he loosens her robe more and Veronique is getting a little nervous). Then Stephan starts from the bottom. When he reaches the word, "thigh," Veronique stops him.

"Those are enough nouns for now. Let's do some verbs."

Stephan likes the idea. He starts with streicheln (stroke), then moves on to tickling, sniffing, caressing, and finally kissing. Veronique has learned to enjoy the game, but again and again she refuses to memorize "kiss-küssen." He has to kiss her repeatedly because she just can't seem to get it. Then they move on to more nouns: breast (left and right), nipples, belly...and soon Veronique starts to ask for words that only describe Stephan's body.

At some point, the German lesson turns into a different game altogether. Stephan puts on a condom and they make love tenderly.

Afterward, when they are relaxing in bed, Veronique looks at him gratefully. "And so many people have told me that the first time is never good."

Stephan orders a prodigious meal. When the waiter comes, Veronique hides in the bathroom. Then she calls her parents and tells them that she is going out with some friends. In truth, she stays with Stephan for half the night.

He invites her to spend a couple of days with him in the Saint-Alexis, but she flatly refuses. "Stephan, I really like you, but I know that you'll be gone in two weeks. I want to meet you as often as I can but it has to remain a secret."

"Are you telling me that you have a boyfriend and you don't want to lose him?"

"It's not like that. There are a couple of guys who are chasing me but they don't have your style." She laughs. "The Europeans in Reunion are devout Catholics. If it comes out that I'm having sex with somebody who's only here to visit, they'll consider me a slut forever. Did you know that sex before marriage is still considered a sin here? I'm afraid that I'll be committing this sin more often from now on."

Stephan is fascinated by the differences between the two cultures: on Bali, Amelie considered it an advantage to be thought of as his lover, but here Veronique would be considered a whore.

Stephan has to move into the Saint-Alexis alone. He meets up with Veronique several more times over the next couple of weeks, but sometimes those meetings are so short and hidden that they don't go beyond a little kissing. Stephan goes rafting and gets to know the three Cirques. Sometimes he is alone, sometimes he is with a tour group. He has a couple of flirts with tourist girls in the hotel or in the bars at St. Gilles, but nothing really interesting develops. It is not just because of Veronique, who has decided not to lose her head over a tourist—it is more because of Raianda, who Stephan is missing. She is the only one he really wants. Even though they never spoke about being true to each other, he cannot help worrying that she is doing the same things that he is.

When he takes a long hike up the 2200 meter high La Roche Ecrite, he gets homesick for the first time on the trip. While he has a great view over the Cirque de Lafate and the Cirque de Salazie, he thinks about Raianda, about his parents, about Great Barrier Island, and about Herb and Aroha. Suddenly, out of nothing, it hits him: 'What was it that Aroha said? That she lost her Mindcaller and found it two weeks later in the winter garden? If the Mindcaller was always there, then it must've recorded the argument between my parents and the one between Dad and Barry. What did they say that led to this terrible situation?' Stephan has to follow this up. He has to find out what the Mindcaller recorded.

While still on his way down from the peak, Stephan organizes his flight to New Zealand. He also calls Veronique, who is so busy at the agency at the moment that there will be no more chances for them to meet. "Maybe it's better this way," she says. "There would've been tears otherwise. You're a great guy, Stephan. I'm a bit worried about whether I'll be able to find a guy who can measure up to you."



Stephan can't accept that. "You'll find someone who'll suit you much better than me. That guy will make you very happy. You deserve that. I wish you all the best!"

## 8. Return

*March to mid-June 2020*

Marcus and Klaus stay busy developing portable and safe antipara devices. They base their work on the documents Marcus brought back from Brussels.

Their goal turns out to be more difficult than they expected, mostly because the necessary silatraviate-B variations differ from normal silatraviate in two crucial ways: a carbon atom has to be replaced by a silicon atom, and one whole complex sub-compound has to be aligned differently.

Using nanotechnology, they do in fact find it relatively easy to manipulate the individual molecules in the right way; however, in order to produce only a couple of grams of the substance, it would be necessary to engineer  $10^{20\ 23}$  molecules. Because of this, they have to revert to classical methods of chemistry and also expand the SR Inc. buildings to accommodate a large chemistry department. Half of its employees are now researching methods that should enable them to synthesize the material they want from subcomponents, while the other half is dealing with methods of disintegration where much more complex substances are chemically broken down in the hope that some of the components can be extracted and further isolated. Both methods require thousands of experiments, and even then, finding a way to produce Silatraviate-B (Sila-B for short) in quantity will require quite a bit of luck. It astonishes Klaus and Marcus that, even in 2020, chemistry frequently cannot produce a large quantity of a substance whose existence and structure are already well known.

They enjoy the little free time they have together with Cynthia. The three of them take a trip to Uruwera Park, the

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<sup>23</sup>  $10^{23} = 100,000,000,000,000,000,000,000!$  This is based on Avogadro's number, which gives the number of molecules of an ideal gas per cubic centimeter under normal conditions.



oldest national park in New Zealand. They spend three days following creek beds in the wilderness looking for hot springs described in old books. Their efforts are fruitful: they find a landslip that apparently has covered a spring. At its lower end, the landslip has blocked the creek. Here, hot water comes out, turning a cool mountain stream into a basin of twenty-eight degree water. Enthusiastic as children, they jump into the water, behaving just like very grown-up children. Both men admire Cynthia. She lets them both put lotion on her. All three become excited about their shared nudity and they don't shy away from touching each other in intimate ways.

Klaus looks at Marcus several times as though to ask, "Does it bother you, what I'm doing?" But Marcus continually waves him off. On one hand, Marcus is excited by the situation: two 'older' men (Klaus is forty-six and almost twenty years older than Cynthia) together with one young, pretty woman. On the other hand, he feels that Cynthia is increasingly drawn toward Klaus despite the budding ménage à trios.

They spend the rest of the day and the night there. They all sleep under a tarp, each in their own sleeping bag, but Cynthia's sleeping bag is closer to Klaus than to Marcus. It's unspoken but clear that Cynthia and Klaus are getting along better and better. Marcus is surprised at his self-observation: he is neither appalled by, nor jealous of Klaus. It is exactly what Cynthia and he agreed on: he thinks of her as a very lovable companion with whom sex is a lot of fun; she admires him, but they have never spoken or even thought about 'love'. Their closeness and friendship were all right for a short time, and they will remain friends, but they don't really belong together. This shift becomes even clearer two weeks later when they take a trip together to the Coromandel Peninsula.

They take Motorway one from Auckland and exit west at Pokeno. They follow Motorway two for twenty-five kilometers until they reach the road to Coromandel. When they cross the



one-lane bridge over the Waihou River, they reach Kopu, already on the peninsula.

The interior of the big peninsula is still mostly undeveloped, but the road around most of it is one of the most popular excursions available to Aucklanders. The road curves wildly around the many bays and overgrown rocks, offering spectacular views. They follow the road north. Shortly before they reach Tapu, where they want to begin crossing the island east on a gravel road, Cynthia makes them stop. She makes it clear what she wants to do by taking out a couple of lemons: it is time to get their pocketknives out and pry some rock oysters from the cliffs. They have soon collected about twenty. They open the oysters, squeeze a few drops of lemon juice on them and slurp them out of the shells. There are very few places in the world where you can 'collect' fresh oysters so easily.

It would be strenuous to cross the island if they didn't keep finding reasons to stop. The forest offers a wide variety of domestic trees, including a few large Kauri and impressive ferns. Of course, they also visit the famous 'square Kauri'. Klaus insists on making a detour to a waterfall he once heard about. There does not seem to be a path there so it takes them forty-five minutes to pass through 800 meters of thicket. It reminds Cynthia and Marcus of their hike around the north of Great Barrier Island. When they finally reach the waterfall, its beauty and solitude make up for the strain of the hike.

Once they reach the eastern coast road at Coroglen, the drive becomes more comfortable again. They decide to rent a bungalow in Cook's Beach and use the rest of the day to visit the famous Hot Water Beach where hot springs flow directly onto the sandy shore. At low tide, this spot is above the waterline, and at high tide, it is underneath. When the water is ebbing, you can dig a hole in the sand and fill it up with hot water. Then you can sit inside and defend the basin against the breakers. It is funny to watch visitors sitting in holes and defending their 'sand dams' as if their lives depended on it.

Sometimes it almost becomes a competition: which group can hold onto their 'bathtub' longer? When Cynthia



insists that they win, Marcus decides to be more foolish than he has been in a long time: with his pseudohands, he breaks the incoming waves long before they reach their dam. He also keeps the softening wall intact while Klaus and Cynthia shovel sand or use their bodies to protect their 'castle'. There is laughing and cajoling all around as the ocean wins back the basins one by one. The rest of the tourists start to wonder when only the group's basin still stands against the sea.

Klaus tries to stop Marcus by whispering, "We'd better let the next big wave come in, I think they're beginning to suspect something."

Marcus nods. He almost feels guilty at letting himself get carried away like that. When the next big wave approaches, he shouts, "Evacuate! We're doomed!"

Cynthia, Klaus, and Marcus leap from the pool and their battlements succumb to the waters once and for all. The surf comes a long way up the beach, much to the surprise of the spectators who have sat down there. They get a round of applause and a tattooed Maori brings them a case of beer. "Let's celebrate! That was a hell of an effort. I can't remember anyone holding their position for so long."

Years later, Marcus will still feel uneasy about a photo of him, Cynthia, and Klaus in their 'castle' hanging in the Grange Road Café in Hahai. However, this place has the best pesto in all of New Zealand so he finds it hard not to go there whenever he's nearby.

In the evening, they decide to take the dead-end road from Cook's Beach further north to Cook Bay, a small cove off Mercury Bay. The town of Whitangi on the north of Mercury Bay can only be reached by ferry, the last one departing at 10 p.m. Hence the houses belonging to Whitangi south of Mercury Bay, including the ones on Cook Bay, are cut off from the main town for most of the night. A little hill with steep cliffs separates Mercury Bay from Cook Bay. They have heard that, despite the latter bay's isolation, it hosts a great restaurant. Even though there are only about a dozen houses within a few kilometers, there really *is* a restaurant. A dropout

American expatriate owns the restaurant and runs it with much love and attention to atmosphere and cuisine. During dinner, Klaus tells them why everything here is named Cook: James Cook laid anchor here to observe the passing of the planet Mercury, hence, Mercury Bay.

"What do you mean by 'passing of Mercury?'" Cynthia wants to know.

"Once in a while, the path of Mercury across the sky runs in such a manner that seen from Earth it crosses the Sun. This only happens at moments well known to astronomers and navigators. Cook needed to observe this phenomenon in order to be able to reset the ship's clocks," he explains.

"And why was that so important? Didn't they have accurate clocks then?" Cynthia interjects.

Now Marcus continues the explanation. "No, they didn't. They had to find out the exact time in order to figure out their latitude and longitude."

Marcus and Klaus discuss the history of longitude<sup>24</sup> measurement through the course of the meal.

When they step out of the restaurant, an almost full moon welcomes them. The proprietor accompanies them outside. When he realizes how amazed his guests are by the moonlit scenery, he asks, "Do any of you have a flashlight?"

Klaus nods.

"I suggest you walk down the street a little toward the ferry. You'll find a small cemetery there. It's a pretty romantic spot, especially on a night like this."

Since they are so taken by the atmosphere of this mild, late summer night, they follow his suggestion. The two men walk on either side of Cynthia who seems to enjoy their sense of intimacy. Suddenly, they see a bundle laying half on the street and half on the grass strip close to the edge of the thirty-meter high cliff. As they go closer, the bundle turns out to be a young man. 'Is he dead?' they wonder.

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<sup>24</sup> For those who want to know more about this curious history, please refer to *Longitude* by Dava Sobel.



Cynthia examines him quickly. "He's not dead, he's piss drunk."

The three of them try to wake him up. They scream at him and even shove him a little. Nothing. It is hopeless. But they can't just let him lie there—the next car will drive right over him, and they can't just move him further into the grass because if he turns in his sleep, he'll fall over the cliff and onto the rocks below.

Finally, Marcus decides to use his parability again. He lifts the man thirty meters down the road, where the grass strip seems to be wider.

With their moods a little tempered, they continue, and soon find the graveyard. Old, half-fallen gravestones each lie under their own large tree. Each tree is different, so they come to the conclusion that they represent the favorite trees of the deceased. The flashlight enables them to read the inscriptions on the gravestones: tragedies, family histories, and success stories that all ended here.

Cynthia takes Klaus's hand. Klaus looks at Marcus. It is midnight under a full moon and patches of clouds scamper across the sky. They all agree: this should be really scary, but it is not. It is the first time Marcus understands the meaning of the German word for cemetery, *Friedhof*, which means 'peace yard'. 'Yes, here is a place of great peace,' he thinks.

They find it hard to leave this place of such magic and atmosphere, but slowly make their way back. When they reach the point where Marcus deposited the drunk, they hear screams. The moon has disappeared behind a thin layer of cloud and it is very dark. In front of them, they can barely make out the man, embracing a girl. This must be his wife or girlfriend, who has somehow managed to wake him up. The man is insulting the girl in a loud and vulgar way and slowly forcing her closer and closer to the cliff. It is like a scene from a bad thriller: a big, black, screaming shadow trying to push a smaller one with flying hair down a cliff.

Klaus reacts instinctively. He runs at them screaming, "Stop!" But it is too late. With one more push, the girl

disappears over the edge and into the blackness. The drunk turns toward the voice he just heard.

Marcus acts quickly; he catches the girl in his para-arms, brutally throws the drunk to the ground, then runs to the cliff. Slowly, he lifts the shaking girl back up until she is standing safely on the grass. He looks at Cynthia. She knows what she has to do now. She erases the last few moments from the girl's memory: from now on she will only remember the push, that she was about to fall, and that a stranger grabbed her hands and pulled her back.

"Are you all right?" Marcus asks the girl.

"Thank God you were coming by! I think you saved my life! But...it's all right now...he's just completely wasted again and he always loses control when he's like that. I'll take him back home."

They lift up her friend. She puts her arm around his shoulder and starts to guide him toward the houses by the ferry landing where it seems they live. The three paras follow them until they can see her lay him down in front of the door. Then they go back to the restaurant, where their car is parked. They find the proprietor, who is just about to close for the night, and tell him the story.

"That's terrible! It would've been better if you'd thrown the guy off the cliff. I know them. She's such a nice girl and he's a real asshole. She just can't leave him. Sooner or later, he'll kill her when he's drunk. He's already injured her son on more than one occasion."

They drive back to their bungalow in Cook's Beach. They sit down in the kitchen and discuss the incident.

"How strange love can be," Klaus and Marcus agree.

Cynthia looks at them in a strange way. "I'm proud of you guys and the way you dealt with the situation. I was only watching; that's not good." She then goes to bed.

When Klaus and Marcus wake up the next morning, Cynthia and the car are gone. "She probably went out to buy breakfast," they speculate without conviction.



Soon, Cynthia returns with donuts, orange juice, and coffee. Something sparkles in her eyes. "This time I've done more than the two of you together," she says, almost in triumph.

Both men look at her quizzically.

"The girl from last night doesn't love the drunk anymore; now she only has bad memories of him."

"Did you really intervene so dramatically?" Marcus asks in astonishment.

"Yes. This time I erased quite a bit. I'm a little bit uneasy about it, but, like the owner of the restaurant, I'm convinced this is the only way to save her life in the long run<sup>25</sup>."

Before they drive back to Auckland, they visit Cathedral Cove. This small bay can only be reached through a rock arch that cannot be passed at high tide or when the sea is rough. The sea is wild today. No reasonable person would want to walk the thirty-five minutes down to the cove in such weather. But Marcus insists, "I'll get you there safely." Because Marcus uses his powers, not only do they get down there and through the arch safely, they also get there completely dry.

On the way back, he's apologetic. "I think I just wanted to show off a little because the two of you seem to have grown so close. I don't know, maybe it was some kind of self-affirmation."

Klaus and Cynthia laugh. "We really enjoyed it, actually. We're glad you're not angry with us."

Marcus is not angry at all. He is happy for Cynthia and congratulates Klaus. He is a little worried about this kind of

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<sup>25</sup> When Cynthia and Klaus come back to the area one year later, they visit the restaurant again for dinner. They are happy to see that not only does the young woman work there now, but the nice proprietor also seems to be her boyfriend. When they ask her about her ex, she explains, "The night you were here was a kind of turning point. I broke up with him the next day. Two weeks later, he hurt his father so badly that the police arrested him. He's still in prison."

sympathy, though. 'I'm only thirty-seven and my last sexual partner replaces me with another guy. What's wrong with me?'

Klaus is pleasantly surprised that his new relationship with Cynthia does not seem to be driving a wedge between him and Marcus. But Cynthia knows the real reason: in truth, Marcus is still with Maria, and she was just a pleasant diversion.

Feeling like a third wheel, Marcus gets deeper and deeper into his work and leaves Cynthia and Klaus to spend more time with each other during their trips.

Their work continues to progress but they can't finish their devices before the chemistry department delivers more silatraviate-B. They make a long list of experiments that will have to be carried out once they have the substance.

When Cynthia and Klaus plan the next trip north, they cannot convince Marcus to come, even though the weather forecast promises several gorgeous days. So the two of them pack some light camping equipment and drive via Whangarei, with its beautiful waterfall, to Dargaville. From there, they take the winding road toward Hokianga Bay, which is situated on the west coast and reaches almost thirty kilometers into the mainland.

They check into a motel in Omapere at the southern end of the mouth of the bay. This time, there are no discussions about whether they need two rooms. From the motel, they can see the huge sand dunes at the northern end of the bay mouth. The dunes reach directly into the ocean and are perfect for sand surfing. They rent a motorboat and surfboards and walk up the 100-meter high dunes, a strenuous hike. Then the fun begins. They sit down on their boards and slide down the slope in long curves until they splash into the salty water. "Too bad there's not a lift," Cynthia observes as they climb the steep dunes again.

Their real goal is a thirty-kilometer long beach situated five kilometers south of Hokianga Bay. This beach is especially interesting because it is difficult to get to: to the



south it's blocked by the 450 meter high Manganui Cliffs, and landward it's a difficult trek through crops of marijuana cultivated by Maoris and guarded by their vicious dogs. To the north, the beach is cut off by the Waimamaku River that is so deep it is impossible to swim across with a heavy backpack.

There is only one way to reach the beach without a boat: you have to wait for low tide when the water is only forty centimeters deep, then cross the river where it flows into the sea. They discover that the tide is the lowest at 7 a.m. That is when they will give it a try.

Their plan to go to bed after a simple dinner fails: it is the first time they are spending the night alone together. When Cynthia washes out her bikini after a quick dive, Klaus can hold himself back no longer. Naked, he gets up and stands behind her and presses his body against her. Then he turns her head toward him and kisses her before throwing her down on the big double bed. Cynthia's protest, "Shouldn't we have dinner first?" is not meant seriously.

A couple of hours later, they are really hungry and realize that it is now too late for a real dinner. This place has hardly any infrastructure. A hamburger will have to do, and maybe it is better that way. While they are eating, Klaus cannot keep his eyes off Cynthia's tight t-shirt and shorts. She notices this and starts to laugh. "You'll get your share, my stallion."

Back at the motel, Cynthia wants to play games. She insists they flip a coin. "Heads, you can do with me whatever you want. Tails, you're my slave."

Klaus is getting excited. "Whatever I want? And for as long as I want?"

"Yes, I hope I can trust you on that."

Klaus has not played any of these games since his days in Brussels, but now he suddenly recalls certain scenes that make his sap rise.

It turns out that Klaus will be Cynthia's slave. She makes him caress her with his hands and tongue. She also makes sure he gets some pleasure out of it, but under one condition: he

may only reach climax when she allows it. Several times, she makes him so hot that he is almost ready and can barely hold back. Finally, she works on him so intensely while he has to stay still, that he cannot restrain himself any longer.

"Yeah, you men have a disadvantage there. It's very easy for us to know when you're coming. You just disobeyed me, now I'll have to punish you. Cynthia looks around the room until she finds a candle. "I don't see anything else I can use, so this'll have to be it. I think ten drops should be enough for now."

"Drops, huh?"

"Drops of wax...hot wax, dear. If this is new to you, don't be scared; it only hurts a little, at least on most body parts. And I'll only drop it on more delicate spots if you disobey me again."

"Disobey what?" Klaus gets a little worried.

"You may not move when you feel the drop, and you may not make a sound, understand?"

Klaus remains brave. When Cynthia gets a camera and even uses the timer to get shots of them both, he utters a slight protest. But Cynthia remains firm: "I can do whatever I want and we both want some nice souvenirs of the trip, don't we? You'll get to take your share of photos of me at some stage too. I trust that you won't show them to anyone, and you can trust me too."

Cynthia carefully peels the drops of hardened wax off his skin. This is probably what hurts him the most because here and there a strand of hair comes off with it. "So here's my last order," she says, "we've had enough for today, let's sleep now."

At two in the morning, Klaus wakes up from strange dreams. He can see Cynthia's beautiful naked back, half in darkness, and her mouth half opened and almost smiling. He immediately stiffens again: 'What's the matter with me? This is not like me.' Without hesitation, he starts rubbing himself against her, slowly at first, then more and more intensely.



Cynthia lets him proceed without opening her eyes once. "Animal!" she whispers when he is finished. "If you keep doing what you're doing, we won't get anywhere tomorrow."

They reach the mouth of the river by 7 a.m. anyway. They are ready to cross it, but there is not a soul in sight and when Klaus makes out a huge tree trunk by the shore he has an idea. He asks Cynthia to undress, then leans her against the trunk and takes pictures of her in all possible positions.

They almost miss the lowest point of the ebb tide but it was worth it: one of the pictures showing Cynthia's beautiful body reclining on the tree trunk comes out so well that Klaus will get it reproduced in oil years later. He will give it to her memorializing their first unusual trip alone together.

Their hike turns out to be unusual indeed. With the whole beach to themselves, there is nothing to see but mile after mile of sun, sand, and surf. When it gets too hot, they jump into the sea, only to get hot again in many unusual ways. The beauty of the landscape is only a backdrop to their games. However, they never forget two basic rules: they always put on new, dry clothes when they continue their hike, and they make sure to put sun cream on every square centimeter of their skin.

In the evening, Klaus gets out his gas stove and cooks a soup from all the different varieties of mussels they picked off rocks or dug from the sand. Cynthia is skeptical at first when she sees how he cooks it all with a powdered tomato soup mix. When they finally eat it, she is truly surprised. "Either I'm really hungry or this is actually a great combination." She also compliments Klaus on the fish he wraps up in aluminum foil with some salt and puts on the side of the fire. When Klaus unwraps it, the skin sticks to the foil, making the fish perfect finger food. For desert they have Zespri<sup>26</sup>, which goes without saying.

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<sup>26</sup> The modern New Zealand Term for Kiwi-fruit. When farmers in New Zealand started to grow the 'Chinese Gooseberry' they called it Kiwi. When countries all over started to do the same, the name Zespri was introduced to distinguish it from Kiwis not grown in New Zealand.



The evening is like a picture book. When they crawl into their sleeping bags, they are too tired to notice that all the stars have disappeared. The night turns out to be less of a pleasure. They both sleep restlessly without knowing why. When Klaus opens his sleeping bag and turns on his flashlight to find out why he is itching so badly, he is startled: he is covered all over with red sand flea bites. He knows that this will get even worse and it will take at least a week for the itching to stop. He thinks, 'I didn't bring any insecticide! Damn I'm stupid, if stupid is a strong enough term...'

He wakes Cynthia up; she does not look much different. While they are still considering what to do, the wind begins to pick up and the clouds open. They are baffled. "That's just what we needed," they agree with a mix of humor and despair. They have only brought thin raincoats because the weather forecast was so favorable... It is clear that they will not get any more sleep. They pack up and start back to the river, only wearing their underwear and raincoats. They hope to make the morning low tide just in time; otherwise, they will have to wait by the river another twelve hours. While they are hiking through the night, they realize that the tide will no longer make a difference: everything they have, besides their camera and whatever else fit into the waterproof bag, will be so wet that they might as well swim across the river with their backpacks.

The hike back is a nightmare. It is pitch black because of the clouds and their flashlights start to dim. The wind blows angrily. In spite of their quick pace, they are still cold in the wind and pouring rain. The little gorp<sup>27</sup> they have left is not enough to ease their discomfort. What is worse is that the high waves roll so far up the coastline that they have to walk on the upper end of the beach. Here the soft sand and low brush make their hike very strenuous. When they reach Waidrau Creek, they cannot believe their eyes. What was a dry sluice the day before is now raging torrent, carrying branches and other

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<sup>27</sup> Gorp: Good Old Raisins and Peanuts



debris into the sea. They have only a two kilometers hike ahead of them, but how are they to get through this?

The sky begins to lighten with dawn and at least they can see a little more now. But still, this obstacle seems impassible. They carefully fight their way upstream: the brush is thick; their raincoats are soon torn to shreds. In addition to the bites from the sand fleas, their skin gets scratched more and more by twigs and thorns. Finally, they reach a place where the driftwood has piled up and created a huge pond. The water is nearly still in there. This might be a chance to cross: a big log floats calmly in the pond. "Cynthia, let's get on top of this log and try to push ourselves to the other side."

They are afraid that if the dam breaks when they are in the middle of the pond, they'll be flushed down the gully, but they cross without a problem. Now they have to hike back downstream and continue along the beach to the Waimamaku River.

It is almost seven a.m. when they reach the river. The whole 'expedition' has only lasted twenty-four hours. They easily overcome the last obstacle even though the current is raging. Klaus swims across the river first without his backpack. He is surprised he is not swept further downstream. Then he walks to the car, which is parked nearby, and takes out a rope. He ties the rope to the tree trunk, which made such a great set for Cynthia's photo shoot, and swims to the other side with the stray end. Now they can both easily cross the river 'New Zealand style' (both holding onto the loose end). The river carries them a bit downstream, but the rope guarantees that they get where they want.

Back at the car, they soon warm up, even though they are still wearing their wet underwear. Getting back to Auckland is all they can think about. The windows keep fogging up. It seems sheer mockery when the wind and rain abate and the Sun starts shining down again. They stop at a food stand and Klaus, still only in his bathing suit, buys hot coffee and some

sausage rolls<sup>28</sup>. On the way home, their conversation only touches on one topic: who has the bigger bathtub and who has the bigger bed. They decide that Klaus does.

*June 15, 2020*

When Stephan arrives in Auckland from La Reunion, he first contacts Klaus. He wants to find out if Klaus approves of his idea to check the Mindcaller. Stephan is sure that it must have recorded the quarrels between Marcus and Maria and Marcus and Barry. He does not want to see his parents before he knows what they were fighting about and what the situation is at SR Inc.

That's why Stephan insists on not meeting with Klaus at SR Inc.'s offices but at his apartment. Stephan is surprised to see Cynthia there too. Without hesitation, Klaus explains it to him. "Cynthia and I have become very close during your absence. She has moved in with me and we both hope to make the best of it."

Stephan explains his idea while Klaus listens with interest. Then he suggests, "Maybe it really would be good to find out what it was that Maria accused Marcus of. By the way, your mom seems to be slowly finding herself again. She's still living with Barry, but we have the feeling that the relationship has cooled considerably. She seems to be thinking back to the days with your father again, and she also seems to know now that she didn't treat him right, and that her thinking was clouded by her despair over Lena's death."

Klaus calls Aroha on his e-Helper and explains the situation to her. Aroha remarks in surprise, "Yes...the Mindcaller should have recorded all that. If you want, I'll come over and get it started for you. But if you don't mind, I'd rather not listen to it myself. I really don't feel I should violate

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<sup>28</sup> Unidentifiable preserved meat served in fried dough, and New Zealand's version of a hot dog, only somewhat tastier and much greasier.



their privacy. But don't get me wrong, I understand your intentions."

Soon after the conversation, Aroha arrives. She has some news for them. "You seem to want to get Maria and Marcus back together, so I think you should know that Maria has called me several times recently. She always wanted to know about Marcus and if he is now together with Cynthia, but she always asked me not to tell Marcus that she asked about him. I told her that Cynthia's been living with you now for almost two months and that Cynthia and Marcus are just friends and no more. Maria seemed to be relieved by that. But anyway, let's start the Mindcaller now. I found the argument between Marcus and Maria and I put the part with Barry right behind it. I'll leave you guys to yourselves now. I'll be back in about an hour to get the Mindcaller. If there's anything important I should know, you can tell me if you want."

Klaus, Cynthia, and Stephan listen to the many points that Maria accused Marcus of after her parents left in mid-January. They can feel the hate that she unloaded on Marcus after he told her that he wanted to go to Europe with Cynthia. They also listen to the fight between Barry and Marcus. The Mindcaller has recorded it all. It could also project an image, but they decide that this would not be a good idea.

They listen very closely, but they don't understand all the background for the reproachful remarks. Both Cynthia and Stephen pale at several points.

Not only has Klaus been listening to the conversations, but he has also been watching Cynthia and Stephan. He noticed that some of the remarks really touched them deeply.

"What do you say?" Klaus opens.

Stephan answers first. "This is terrible. But Mom and Barry aren't right, mostly. They just didn't want to understand Dad. I really feel guilty for all this now."

"What do you mean, Stephan?"

"When Dad woke up in the hospital in Delhi, I told him that Justo and his team were dead but...then I felt so guilty about killing them that I didn't tell anyone else. And both

Mom and Barry blame Dad for not telling them about it. He must have thought that you all knew that already. And Cynthia..." Stephan reddens a little. "Were you in love with my dad when you were in Europe with him? Did you...did you...you know?"

Cynthia hesitates a little. "No. We were not in love. We never even touched. But you should know that we took a hike later on Great Barrier Island, right before you left, remember? Then we became sort of a couple for some time. But that was when Maria was already living with Barry, so he never 'cheated' on her. Cheated, what a stupid word. So I never felt guilty about it. We just had a good time, and were friends that got a little physical. We both knew that it wouldn't last, and we separated as lovers soon after, so to speak. I fell in love with Klaus and he fell in love with me, I hope. Marcus was never jealous about that. He was happy that we'd found each other."

They all remain silent for a while. Then Cynthia bursts out again: "Stephan, if you have the feeling that it's your fault that they were fighting, then just think about my role in the whole thing for a second. Remember when Marcus tried to kill himself in the hospital? You ran over to me and begged me to save him. I did it, I had to do it, but I erased a part of his memory, and this is what made him feel most guilty afterwards: that Lena had forced him to let her go to India with them."

Klaus and Stephan can't believe what they are hearing. Cynthia continues, "Yes, Lena was so desperate at not being allowed to come to India that she jumped out of a window to kill herself. At the last moment, Marcus saved her with his pseudohands. So he just had to let her come. I also erased the huge wave of love that Lena and Marcus shared in that moment. I just wanted to make sure that he could somehow deal with her death. What have I done? Now Maria blames Marcus for letting her come, and Marcus didn't only lose his memory, he's also colder now toward Lena's death than he should be."



The three of them look at each other helplessly. They are still shocked when Aroha returns. They tell her the most important details. Afterwards, Aroha picks up the Mindcaller and presses it to her chest. Then, with unusual certainty, she says, "Cynthia, you have to tell Marcus what you did. You have to free him from his guilt. You'll also have to talk to Maria and make her understand how wrong she was. I'll talk to Maria too, later. If I get the feeling that she's ready to talk with Marcus, or even wants to apologize, then we'll do the following: Herb and I will invite her to a restaurant for dinner and Marcus will 'accidentally' drop by. Then Herb and I will make ourselves scarce. The rest will be up to them. Cynthia and I are both sure that Marcus still loves Maria and that he understands now that she just wasn't her regular self after Lena's death. So whatever she might've said or done, he'll be able to forgive her."

A few days later, Aroha, Maria and Herb are sitting in a quiet room of the Sails Restaurant at the Auckland Yacht Harbor. Aroha has good reasons for choosing this restaurant. It has always been one of Maria and Marcus's favorites since as far back as 2003 when Jürgen, the charming Austrian headwaiter, still worked there.

When they are almost finished eating, Marcus is suddenly standing at their table, clearing his throat. Maria almost jumps out of her seat. Before she can say anything, Marcus stops her. "I'm sorry to intrude. I know I promised I'd never bother you, but I think it's time we spoke. Would you please talk with me?" He looks at Aroha and Herb. "Is that all right with you guys?"

"We didn't want to make this a late night anyway. It'll do you two good to speak civilly; it's been such a long time. Come on, Herb, let's get out of here."

For a long time, Maria and Marcus sit in silence. Maria looks at him: yes, that's her Marcus, the man she always loved, the man she still loves, and the man she lost because of her rash behavior. Marcus has similar thoughts: There's the

woman I would do everything for. Is it possible to simply erase five months?

Maria speaks first. She thanks him for coming. She tells him that there are so many things she has to apologize for. But Marcus interrupts her. "Maria, please don't apologize. We both made mistakes. We both know that. We were so messed up, so close to insanity, that we were just not ourselves. Did Cynthia tell you that I wanted to commit suicide in Delhi and that she saved me by erasing my memory?"

Cynthia didn't tell her about that, but now it all makes sense.

Marcus continues: "I almost lost my mind over what happened in India, and you too, just in a different way. Can we ever put this behind us? Do you think we can just sit here for a while and enjoy each other's presence?"

For a very long time, the two of them just sit there and talk. There is so much to catch up on and so many good memories they share from before the disaster. They both want to know where the other is living at the moment. Marcus is happy to hear that Maria is living alone again. They completely lose track of time until the waiter steps up to the table to remind them that they are the last customers and that closing time has long passed.

Once outside in the cool night air, they say goodbye formally, shaking hands. But Maria breaks the ice: "We should meet again some time."

Marcus cannot hold back and hugs Maria once, hard but quickly. Then they get into their cars and drive to their homes, alone.

Two days later, Aroha meets up with Maria. That same evening, Aroha, Herb, Cynthia, Klaus, and Stephan decide to hold a 'war council' over the issue of Maria and Marcus. They all agree that the two belong together and will realize it soon enough.

"I think I should move back home," Stephan remarks.

Klaus and Cynthia look at him quizzically.



“Well, my parents don’t know that I’m back in Auckland yet. I’ll call Dad tomorrow and tell him that I’ll be back the next day. I’ll tell him to pick me up from the airport and bring me back to Great Barrier Island. I’d really like to live there again and I hope Dad will want to live there too. Couldn’t we all move back there again?”

This strikes a chord with the others: they have all missed the island and the sense of community there but have never dared admit it.

Klaus is the first to react: “If Cynthia’s up for it, I am too.”

Cynthia is not only ‘up for it’, she’s really into it. Aroha and Herb also nod in agreement.

Klaus elaborates: “In a couple of days, I’ll pick up Maria with the Moller and tell her that we’re going to meet Stephan. Maria and Marcus will be really surprised when they meet and we tell them that we all want to move back there. We’ll prepare a big dinner in the winter garden and simply not let them leave...but what about Barry?”

Aroha answers, “He and Maria separated ten days ago. They were friendly about it though. I talked to Barry the day after. He told me that it was a mistake for them to move in together and that it was never true love between them. It was more an act of desperation. They had been drifting apart over the last few months. He told me that Maria began reminiscing about the past and he felt that she was thinking about Marcus a lot. He said that he really didn’t have any bad feelings toward Marcus anymore and that his judgment had been rash. But he is somehow sure that his life had become much more complicated since he joined the group. He wants to change this. He said he’s planning to leave New Zealand for good in the next couple of days, and that it wouldn’t make sense to go looking for him because he made sure that no one will be able to find him. I tried to find him two days later. His office was closed and he’s left his apartment too.”

After all the good cheer shared over the coming reunion on Great Barrier Island, the first doubts begin to surface: Is it

really OK to interfere with the lives of other people so completely as they are planning to do?

Aroha wants to make sure. She presses the Mindcaller against her chest again and holds Herb's hands tightly. They both concentrate and stare into space. After a couple of minutes, which seem like hours, Herb lets go of Aroha's hands and is sure: "Yes, that's what we should do. The Mindcaller is sure that everything will turn out for the better this way."

Klaus looks at the Mindcaller thoughtfully: despite all they now know, this thing remains a riddle. How is it possible for it to plumb the depths of human feelings and know that this experiment will be a success?

Aroha reads his thoughts: "The Mindcaller knows all the people involved. It's been in telepathic contact with all of us. It probably knows more about us than we do."

June 28<sup>th</sup> turns out to be a very special day: the day of the rebirth of the paracolony on Great Barrier Island. Cynthia and Klaus, and Aroha and Herb already moved in the day before. This was easy because none of them gave up their apartments there completely. But now, they decide not to give up their apartments in Auckland either.

At the airport, Stephan has no problem mixing in with the arriving passengers. Wearing his backpack, he runs into his father's open arms.

"Stephan, it's great to have you back. Just look at you, you look great! You have to tell me about everything you did."

Stephan goes on enthusiastically about Bali and La Reunion. Marcus smiles knowingly. "I'm sure you're leaving out some details...or were you really alone all the time?"

Stephan tries to get off the topic and asks Marcus about SR Inc. Marcus confirms what Stephan has already heard from the others. His father seems to be back on track.

Marcus is very surprised when he finds Aroha, Cynthia, Herb, and Klaus waiting for him on the island. When they tell him that they plan to move back in, he is completely



overwhelmed and spontaneously agrees to move back in as well.

When they walk around the complex, which they have not seen in months, they do not even notice that one of them is missing: Klaus is in the Moller, on his way to pick up Maria.

When they land, Stephan runs toward his mother. His heart starts beating faster when he sees that she is her old self: smiling, and with no wrinkles on her forehead anymore. Maria hugs Stephan and doesn't seem to want to let go. With tears in her eyes she says, "Half the family is back here again. How wonderful!"

"No, mother, more than half the family," Stephan answers and leads her to the others. When Maria and Marcus see each other, they understand what has been arranged, but they don't want to hold back any longer. They embrace.

It is only June 28<sup>th</sup>, but it feels like Christmas to everybody and no extra presents are necessary.

When the sun goes down, Klaus offers to fly Maria back to Auckland. Maria reacts almost angrily. "You can't get rid of me so easily. I was stupid to leave in the first place."

Klaus laughs.

When all the others have gone back to their rooms, Maria and Marcus go to the whirlpool and then down to the dock. Marcus gets a blanket and something to drink. It is almost like it was once before, so long ago. For a long time, they sit there leaning against each other, talking about life and the world. Everything feels right again. Many things have not yet been discussed, but they both know that the right time for that will come.

Even though an extra room has been prepared for Maria, she decides to go with Marcus. She lies down next to him on the big double bed. They talk a little longer and say goodnight with a small, soft kiss. It is like their first night together in Vienna. It is the beginning of a new intimacy, a new closeness.

## 9. The New Daughter

*June 29-August 2, 2020*

As in the old days, Maria and Marcus have their breakfast in the winter garden. A buffet is set up on the table and everyone comes and goes as they please. Some of them only stay for a bite while others stay for hours.

Maria and Marcus are the first ones to sit down at the table but Cynthia and Klaus soon join them. A couple of minutes later, Stephan joins the group. Cynthia and Klaus decide to fly to Auckland with the Moller. Stephan says he wants to go too.

For Maria and Marcus, it feels good to be together again, but still, they will have to wait a while for the closeness they once had to develop again. They talk about a lot of things, but there is tacit agreement that certain subjects remain taboo for the time being. They both have the feeling that they should try not to scare the other. Everything would be much easier if they both realized that they love and trust each other once again. However, Maria is sure that it will take Marcus a long time to forgive her for her intermezzo with Barry. At the same time, Marcus hopes desperately that the affair is over and that Maria will not pull another Jekyll and Hyde on him.

Aroha comes to breakfast before Herb and she is pleased by what she sees. Then Herb rushes into the winter garden, still pulling a faded tie-dye t-shirt over his head. "Man, you won't believe this! The Fox Glacier has receded fifty meters already this year. They just found some dude who's been missing up there for thirty years, and they're saying that the heat wave on South Island isn't going to end anytime soon. The creeks have already flooded the Coast Road."

Their moment of harmony fades. All of them are suddenly reminded of how dramatically the climate has changed over the last thirty years. The average temperature has risen so much year-to-year that experts are expecting some



kind of catastrophe soon. The sea level has risen more than a meter, the deserts all over the world are growing, and the permafrost zones at the poles and in the mountains are shrinking dramatically.

When Maria and Marcus lived in Austria, there were still places where you could ski in the summer, but now it has become difficult to find a good place to ski even in the winter. Famous skiing resorts like Kitzbühel and Schladming are nearly bankrupt because of the lack of snow. Perhaps if they'd had better computers a few decades ago, weather patterns could have been projected and this disaster could have been avoided.

But Marcus does not want to be bothered by this now; he'd rather spend the day with Maria. He has an idea that will enable him to combine work with pleasure.

"Maria, do you remember when we visited the Fox and Franz Josef Glaciers about ten years ago?" Maria nods. "We also wanted to visit Mt. Cook<sup>29</sup> back then, but we couldn't even see the peak because it was so cloudy that day. Maybe we should try to make the best of this hot weather and fly there today. We can also find out how much the glacier's have changed."

It does not take much to convince Maria. She knows that this could be a beautiful trip and an ideal opportunity to spend some time in peace together. Marcus calls SR Inc. He tells them to organize a flight to Christchurch on the South Island and to charter a single engine airplane to take them across the Southern Alps, over Mt. Cook, to Fox Glacier Village. He also tells them to book a hotel room there, a guide for the next day, and a return flight for the day after. They have just enough time to pack before the Moller lands to pick them up.

While the hour and a half long flight from Auckland to Christchurch is not very special for them, the fifty minute flight from Christchurch to the Fox Glacier is really something: Marcus has asked the pilot to fly a special route,

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<sup>29</sup> At 3764 meters, Mount Cook is the highest mountain in New Zealand.

first along the mountain range, then west over the Murchison and Tasman Glaciers, then south again, passing over Mt. Cook and Mt. Tasman. Then they will circle back north over the Fox Glacier to the little airport at its bottom.

During the flight, Maria and Marcus are so amazed by the scenery that they hardly speak a word. Now and again, the pilot explains what they are looking at. The weather is so perfect that they can occasionally fly very close to the glacier. The glacial streams have grown dramatically. They rush down the sides of the mountains before disappearing into huge glacial crevices. The Tasman Glacier still seems endless. They can make out the terminal moraines and a glacial lake. Then the plane gains some altitude and flies by Mt. Cook and Mt. Tasman in the setting sun. Then they change direction again and fly north toward the sea.

When they land at the little airport, a hotel shuttle is already waiting for them. But they still have time to enjoy a glass of champagne and a wonderful meal on the terrace. When the sun finally sets, it's time to put on their traditional Austrian *loden* jackets. It gets cold quick here.

When they get to their room, they tenderly enjoy their naked bodies for the first time in months. They cannot get enough of each other. Marcus cannot help thinking a couple of times that Barry possessed her not long ago. Maria seems to notice this.

After a long sweet silence, Marcus says, "It's so wonderful with you, Maria."

Maria nods and says shyly, "Marcus, I don't even know if I should say this now, but maybe it is important for you. Barry never really made love to me. It was only ever Parabarry."

Marcus tries to digest that. "You mean, even when you lived together, you always had sex with his projection?"

"That's right."

"But why?"

"I never really understood it, and I think he never did either. In the beginning, it was just easier that way. He was



used to picking up girls like that, and, if he didn't like it, he could just disappear. And then there was always this thing about diseases; there was absolutely no risk of getting anything. There was also another thing. Barry hates skin contact. He hates other people's sweat. Even when we thought we were in love, he never even let me hold his hand or kiss him on the cheek. I was only allowed to kiss Parabarry."

Marcus thinks about this for a long time. "Isn't it strange how things go sometimes? You can be true to each other, but in your thoughts, you're not. You were not true to me, but legally, maybe you were. If I get a girl interested with my pseudohands, does that count or not?"

They speculate on this and for the first time, they also talk about India, the accident, and Lena.

Marcus asks carefully, "Would you mind if we unlocked Lena's room, just once? Just to air it out and have a look? I promise, I won't change anything there."

Maria smiles. "That's all right. I think I'm becoming normal again. At least I hope so."

The next day is perfect for hiking and climbing. They get up very early in the morning to meet the guide and drive up the glacier in his four-wheel drive. They can soon see how much of the Fox Glacier has melted. In the past, the snow was heavier, fell further down into the valley, and continued for longer into the year. There was so much snow that the glacier was pushed well below the tree line, and until only a few years ago, as far down as sea level. Now, they have to drive above 1000 meters to reach the tongue of the glacier. This is still below the tree line, but much further up than only a few years ago.

The first hour of the trip is disappointing. They hike along a well-beaten path over dirty ice. But slowly the ice becomes whiter and the path almost peters out. After three hours of hiking uphill, they reach a big, flat glacial table. They cross it quickly and soon reach a wild mix of crevices and icefalls. They could not negotiate this alone. It is their goal to

reach the Geike Snowfield of the Franz Josef Glacier. This is where the helicopter will pick them up. The last hour of the tour is as disappointing as the first one. More and more helicopters swarm above their heads. When they reach the landing place, there is even a photographer there offering to take souvenir pictures. This makes them realize that lonely trails have become scarce in New Zealand, too.

Nevertheless, they are proud of themselves: they have climbed over ice to reach more than 1500 meters in altitude, and they have experienced some wonderful and scary things.

That evening, they regret having to leave the next day. This is almost like a honeymoon for them.

When they return to Great Barrier Island, all their friends notice right away that the problems between Maria and Marcus seem to have been resolved. In the evening, Maria and Marcus half seriously complain about the matchmaking efforts of the group, but they have to admit that it paid off this time.

The following morning, it is Maria who takes the initiative. "Come on, Marcus, let's open Lena's room together."

Without hesitation, Maria unlocks the door and they both go inside. They are overcome by waves of memories. They soon find two letters on the table, one for Marcus and one for Maria.

Maria entreats him, "Do you want to open yours first? Please?"

With a bit of reluctance Marcus opens his letter. The both read it.

*Dear Daddy:*

*If you are reading this, then I did not come back from India. So something must have happened. Please don't be sad about me. I had a wonderful life and I knew that India would be dangerous for me. I just wanted to be near you and Mommy the most of all. When you didn't want to let me come, I wanted to kill myself but you kept me from doing it. So I made you let*



*me come. And I am glad you did. I am sure that not many people have had such beautiful experiences even if they lived to be 100 years old. It was all because of you, Mommy, and Stephan. Thank you for everything. I don't have time to write a letter to Stephan so please tickle him for me.*

*Love, your daughter,  
Lena*

*p.s. I have three wishes. Never give up Mommy, never give up the Island, and never give up the paragroup. I have one more wish for Mommy. Please help me make her accept it.*

Maria and Marcus look at each other sadly. 'Our sweet daughter!' they both think.

Marcus turns to Maria. "I understand everything except the part about her wanting to kill herself. What does she mean by that?"

Maria feels guilty. "I didn't know anything either until a short time ago. Cynthia erased this part of your memory in the hospital in Delhi because you were going to kill yourself."

Marcus slaps himself on the forehead. "That's why I changed my mind in the hospital. Now I know why I let Lena come to India with us... I never understood why the hell I would've allowed that. I really have to talk to Cynthia: she can't just screw around like that with people's brains."

"Marcus, leave Cynthia alone. She suffers because of her skill even more than we do because of ours. It's so difficult for her to decide what kind of effect erasing a memory will have. Should we read my letter now?"

*Dear Mommy,*

*You are the best mom in the world. Please forgive me for forcing daddy to let me go to India. He knew that I would kill myself if he did not. I did not want to be without you for so long. I hope that you and daddy are well when you read this.*

*Thank you for all the love and all the beautiful times. My life was not long but it was wonderful. Please take care of daddy and Stephan because they both need you.*

*Hugs and kisses,  
Yours,  
Lena*

*p.s. Please do not be sad because of me. But I have one great wish. My best friend at school in Claris was Linda Carlson. She is an only child. Her father is a drunk and her mother is really awful. She hits Linda sometimes and lets her go hungry. Once she had to stay home sick for three days even though she was not really sick. They just locked her in her room without anything to eat or drink just because she did not vacuum well enough. Please get a social worker to take her away from them. Please try to adopt her and love her as much as you loved me. I put some more things about what happened to her on my computer. User: Lena Password: Linda*

Maria wails. "Lena, oh my Lena. We will do what ever we can."

"Do you know Linda?" Marcus asks.

"She was here after school a couple of times. I remember how worried she was about being late. Now I know why."

"Come on. Let's go to Claris. I know a councilman there; maybe he can help us."

Half an hour later, they are sitting with the councilman in Claris, a tiny village near the only airport on Great Barrier Island. "Linda Carlson? Yes, I'm quite familiar with her case. Her father was a drunk who drowned about six months ago. Her mother abused Linda so much that at times the police had to get involved. Linda is now at an orphanage in Auckland. It shouldn't be a problem for you to adopt her. The only thing is, theoretically, the mother could appeal the decision and try to get custody rights back. It's unlikely, but you should take this into careful consideration."



“Linda is already thirteen years old. She’ll have something to say about it too, won’t she?”

“Yes, that’s right. But until she’s sixteen, juvenile court makes all the final decisions. Do you really want to risk it? I could call Auckland right away and give them my official OK, which means that I can guarantee you are capable of taking care of the child responsibly. For the first six months, they’ll make surprise visits to check on your situation, OK?”

Maria and Marcus nod. Ten minutes later, they have the necessary documents.

“Long live the non-bureaucracy of New Zealand,” Marcus comments as they leave.

Soon afterwards, they land in Auckland and go straight to the orphanage. Mrs. Karpaty, the director, welcomes them with a smile. “Yes, I got the phone call. Linda’s so excited you’re coming that she’s already packed. She can’t believe that she can go with you, and she thinks this is only a visit; she doesn’t know that it could be more than that yet. I suggest you let her go on believing that. If things don’t work out over the next two weeks, it won’t hurt her so much. I can’t force you, but I strongly suggest that you follow this advice.”

“We’ll do it like that,” Maria answers quickly. “Thank you.”

Mrs. Karpaty calls Linda, who comes in only a few seconds later. “Mrs. Simmer,” she addresses Maria, “I’m so happy that I can visit Lena for two weeks. And you are Mr. Simmer?” Marcus nods. “Thank you, sir. Do you still live on Great Barrier Island?”

“No, we live mostly in an apartment in Ponsonby<sup>30</sup> now,” Maria answers with sudden inspiration. “We’re really happy that you’re coming to visit us but...” Maria swallows, “but I’m afraid we have a big disappointment for you: Lena died six months ago.”

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<sup>30</sup> Ponsonby is a district in Auckland. Since 2003, Maria and Marcus have maintained an apartment there. See “*Xperts: The Telekinetic*”.

Linda is frozen for a moment, staring straight at Maria. Then she breaks into tears. "My only friend in Claris is dead? That's why she never called me?" she wails. "But how? And why do you want me to visit you?"

"It was her last wish," Maria chokes.

"Her last wish? But you said that she's been dead for half a year."

"Yes, but we were so sad that we didn't touch her things until yesterday. That's when we found her letter. Please come with us. I know Lena really would've wanted it."

Both Linda and Mrs. Karpaty look worried. The director gets a searching look from Marcus. Then she takes Linda by her shoulders and says, "If this was the last wish of your friend, I think you should really do it. If you really don't like it there, just call me and we'll pick you up right away."

Linda nods. "OK, I just want to go and tell Albert and Eliza. I'll be right back."

When Linda has left the room, Mrs. Karpaty goes over to her desk. "Here are Linda's documents. Her friend Eliza has a birthday in eight days. Maybe you can find a way to get them together somehow. And please, don't spoil Linda too much. If she decides to stay with you, it should be because she likes you. It wouldn't be good if she based her judgment on good food or money. In case you need anything, advice for example, please contact me immediately. Just put my information on your e-Helpers."

"Of course. Thank you for your help, Mrs. Karpaty. My wife told Linda that we live in our apartment in Ponsonby; really, we mostly live on Great Barrier Island. But for the next couple of weeks while we have Linda, we'll stay in Ponsonby. Maria, I presume you mentioned Ponsonby to make sure that Linda doesn't like us just because of the island."

Maria nods. "That's right. But we still have to tell Stephan. I hope he's willing to move to Ponsonby for two weeks."

"I think he'd do anything for a new sister," Marcus replies.



They all try to live a good, normal life. Marcus goes to work at SR Inc. every morning. Stephan is still on vacation before he begins his studies at university. He also puts in some time at SR Inc. but mostly he hangs around with his friends or with Linda. He is proud that he can now 'officially' drive her around Auckland, where they both discover places they've never seen before. On the weekends, they all make a trip to the Waitakere Mountains and Bethel's Beach, the family's favorite. Maria takes Linda shopping and lets her help out in the kitchen. In the evenings, they sometimes go out to eat or to the movies. Sometimes they just pick up some burgers or fried chicken on Ponsonby Road. They do not forget to organize a birthday party for Eliza and to invite Linda's friends from the orphanage.

The fourteen days pass all too quickly. On the tenth evening, Maria finds Linda crying in her bed. "What's wrong, Linda?"

"It's so nice here with you. I don't want to go back to the home yet."

Maria calms her down. She tells Linda that they would all be happy if she were to stay until school starts in four weeks. "There's only one problem. We have to fly to Europe for a week or two because Marcus's mother is sick again. Would you maybe be interested in going too?"

The sparkle in Linda's eyes says it all.

One problem still remains: Linda does not have a passport and they can only get one if her mother gives her permission. That does not put off Marcus. He bribes Linda's mother with a large sum, but he's afraid she might see this as a source of income from now on.

They fly to Austria. As he did before, Marcus 'operates' on his mother with his pseudohands without her even noticing it<sup>31</sup>. After a final gastroscopy, the doctors discharge her with disbelief written on their faces. Marcus is more worried than

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<sup>31</sup> See "*Xperts: The Telekinetic*".

the doctors: he knows that, despite the best medication, the stomach ulcer will continue to grow. This will be one more reason to continue coming to Austria regularly.

They visit Maria's parents in Graz and Marcus's parents in Eisenerz. Everyone is crazy about Linda, who has learned some German to impress them. Maria's parents treat her like a real grandchild. They are happy to see that the tension between Marcus and Maria seems to be gone. They promise to come back to Auckland for Christmas.

As a high point for everyone, but especially Linda, Maria and Marcus plan a mountain trip to their beloved Lower Tauern. The many lakes there will ease the effects of the ongoing heat wave in Central Europe. In the afternoon they drive to the Etrachsee via Murau. The beautiful houses—made half from wood and half from stone, and lovingly decorated with flowers—fascinate Linda. All of them are happy to be back in Austria: this would be the most beautiful place in the world if only it wasn't so crowded.

They cool off in the Etrachsee, hike up a lumber road, and then get on the path toward the Rudolf Schober Hut. They arrive at the rustic hut with its blue and white curtains, and are welcomed by the charming proprietor, who, to everybody's surprise, is willing to cook the chanterelle mushrooms they found on the way up. Both Linda and Stephan watch her cook them with eggs and onions. Mushroom picking and eating is a completely new experience for them.

In the evening, nature has another surprise for Linda. One of the visitors to the hut has an accordion and sings old Austrian songs. All of a sudden, two chamois bucks emerge from the woods and stand peacefully in front of them. Linda is the only one who is convinced that it the girl's singing and playing that has attracted them.

They rise early the next morning to reach the peak of the Bauleiteck before the hottest part of the day. As always,



Marcus writes a poem in the *Gipfelbuch*<sup>32</sup> describing what happened during their ascent:

*When going up to Bauleiteck,  
the kids, they seemed to loose their track!  
I told my wife: "Don't worry, dear!  
They can't be far, they must be near."*

*A dog showed up, a German Shepard.  
He wants my sausage "Bist du deppat?"<sup>33</sup>  
"I'll give you some on one condition,  
go find the kids, that is your mission!"*

*I made him smell at Stephan's socks  
and he ran off just like a fox.  
Alive and well he brought them back,  
So he deserved the promised snack.*

*They kids were down there by the lake  
And skinny-dipping, goodness's sake!  
Before they got too cavalier  
We dragged them up the peak, to here!*

*Marcus, Styrian Gipfelbuch-poet  
August 22, 2020*

The beautiful days in Austria come to an end all too soon. During the long flight back (they spend one night in

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<sup>32</sup> Almost every Austrian mountain has a huge cross on its summit. At the foot of the cross you can be pretty sure of finding a tin box that contains a book and a pencil. It's an old and living tradition to sign your name and the date of your hike in the book. Some people, such as the author and translators of this book, have the habit of writing pithy verse or drawing stupid pictures in them.

<sup>33</sup> German for "Are you nuts?"

Singapore), Maria asks Linda if she wants to stay with them for good. She also tells her that this would mean that she would mostly have to live on Great Barrier Island, where they are returning to now.

Linda is thoughtful. "It's really great with you and your family. I know I'm young, but I'm not stupid. You only like me because I remind you of your dead daughter, isn't that right? And now you want to adopt me, like a substitute daughter. I don't really mind it but I want you to admit it and think about it. I'll always be Linda, not Lena. I'll only live with you if you understand that".

Maria takes a long time to answer. "How can a thirteen year old think like that? But is she really right about everything? Does she really consider herself a substitute?" Maria thinks about it: Linda has by now entered her heart. Would it have happened with every child? No, that's impossible. It's really *Linda* she likes, even if her presence fills the space left by Lena. She always wanted three children and the third one just never happened. She considered adoption even before Lena's death, so why not now and why not Linda? Why not even have another baby? There's so much room at their place on the island and children make life so much more enjoyable. That's why Linda fits in there, and maybe someone smaller will fit in there too one day.

Carefully and slowly, Maria tries to explain this to Linda. She doesn't gloss over anything and tries to be as honest as possible. She also doesn't hide the fact that Linda eases the pain of Lena's death.

Linda starts to cry. "Why couldn't I have a mother like you? Yes I want you to be my mother until I grow up. But let's make a promise: we will have the same conversation again in a year and if one of us has changed her mind by then, then we won't have any hard feelings about it. Promise?" Linda says, offering her hand to Maria.

Maria takes her hand. "I promise."

Within a few days, everyone on Great Barrier Island accepts Linda as one of the family. Soon, Marcus gives up his



reluctance to exposing his parabilities to Linda...why should he hide something from his daughter that most of the personnel already know about? But with Linda it is different in the end. He tells her many of the details. Marcus can only hope that she will really keep her promise not to tell anyone.

Once again, Marcus realizes how few people he has let in on his secrets. Somehow he feels that they are muddling through life without making any big, personal decisions. No one knows exactly what Maria can do with her eyes; no one knows much about his and Stephan's ability to control their individual time. He doesn't want to be a man of mystery, but would the others be able to handle the knowledge that Maria can see them anywhere and everywhere, and that he can think more in one second than others can in an hour? And could they handle knowing that Stephan can give orders to animals too?

Marcus is also sure that neither his friends nor the PM would be able to handle the fact that he has 30,000 armed minidrones flying around and collecting random data. It wouldn't even make much of a difference to them to hear that these drones have already prevented dozens of terror attacks. The level of infrastructure involved would shock them. No one has the slightest idea that he has one 'nest' in a cave west of Calgary in the Rocky Mountains, and another in the Hochschwab region of Austria.

Marcus knows that, whether he wants it or not, he's always playing his song on a piano of half-truths. It is good that he does not know about the sorrow that lies ahead of him. If he could look into the future, he would ask himself, "Why me?" But now, he has to turn to more physical issues.

He has noticed how Stephan sometimes seems to act a little too 'mature' toward Linda. When they were in the whirlpool together, it even seemed like Stephan was hitting on her, and not like a brother might with, say, a tennis racquet.

Linda is feeling more and more at home with her new family. Maria is simply Mom; Marcus is Dad. And Stephan is 'bro'. Maria idolizes her and sometimes Marcus is worried

about this. He has noticed how Maria has started to slip, and calls her Lena now and again.

But very often, Marcus worries about the wrong things.



## 10. The Breakthrough

*August 4, 2020*

Stephan's restlessness finally comes to a head: he has finished school and toured like a rock star; he is happy that life on Great Barrier Island has returned to normal, and he likes his new sister, who looks up to him a little more than he would like...But now he needs a challenge. He feels superfluous in the development process of the antipara device; it's Klaus's and Marcus's project. On top of this, it is getting more and more frustrating because they still haven't received the silatraviate-B they need.

He has a long talk with his father. Finally, Marcus decides to tell him that he and Cynthia accidentally wandered into some kind of military zone in the north of the island. He also explains that this zone does not even exist, officially. Stephan is fascinated by this news. He decides to look into this phenomenon.

He prepares for a two-day hike. With the exact coordinates of the clearing and the 'prohibited zone' recorded on his e-Helper, he sets off. Just one day later he finds the place: there is no clearing, but something strange must have gone on here. The trees growing there appear to have been planted only a few months ago. This is probably why the PM's search group didn't turn up a clearing either. But who made the decision to put something here in the first place? And who made it promptly disappear after Marcus and Cynthia discovered it?

He contacts Marcus on his e-Helper and explains what he has found. He asks for several pieces of equipment to be delivered by the Moller, including a metal detector and an underground camera. Stephan quells his father's worries: "I want to make a detailed search of the area. Some kind of organization is, or was, hiding something here. I want to find out what's going on."

"All right, Stephan, you'll get what you need, but please leave your e-Helper on standby. At least that way you'll be able to send an emergency call and we'll be able to locate you immediately. The whole thing is a riddle to me. It scares me somehow. Wouldn't it be better if we sent a team to help you out?"

"No, it's all right. Please let me do this alone. I always have the animals to help me, and they can help me more than ever now. Since India, my parabilities have changed a little: I can't really see around corners anymore, but I've somehow learned to sense the emotions of animals to a certain extent. It probably sounds strange, but I can cooperate with them much more effectively now. I was only able to reach this place so fast because of help from animals. But I'll leave the e-Helper on standby. That should be good enough, right?"

Marcus wonders to himself how the animals could have helped Stephan to get through this thicket any faster than he and Cynthia did. He is sure that his son will let him in on that eventually. Ultimately, he agrees to Stephan's plan. After all, Stephan is an adult now and smart enough to accurately assess the situation.

Klaus is not satisfied with the chemistry division's progress. He is even a little angry and decides to take his mind off the topic and have a talk with Aroha and Herb about the Mindcaller. The fact that this thing can 'detect' if two or more people will get along well, as they saw in Maria and Marcus's case, is completely new territory for him.

The long conversation with Aroha and Herb does not provide any revolutionary insights into the Mindcaller, but it begins to round the picture out for Klaus. Before they part, Aroha explains another strange detail that makes Klaus think:

"In principle, the Mindcaller is a communication device that allows you to contact people you get along well with. All this is done with a technology that we know nothing about. The complete unit uses a combination of language, pictures, and feelings to communicate using something like telepathy. In addition, the Mindcaller's ability to sense feelings allows it to



more or less predict how people will act when they meet each other. This is what we used before Maria and Marcus met up. But you know this already, don't you?"

Klaus nods.

Aroha says, "What you may not know is that the Mindcaller is also a kind of a super video recorder. Whatever it is, it records its whole environment in three dimensions. It saves it in pictures, sounds, and even smells. We're sure that it can record certain types of feelings too. It uses several mediums to project what it records: sometimes it only plays back language, but more often it shows pictures too. It does it mostly with telepathy, which can suddenly make you feel like you're in another world. It's even possible to interact with this other 'world', but it's always just a recording: it's the past. And it's only a virtual environment, like the holodeck in those old Star Trek films, and what you do in it has no influence on the real world."

"Also, the Mindcaller seems to have a wide array of sensors. It can predict a volcanic eruption, for example. It can also forecast the weather with much greater than any meteorologist<sup>34</sup>. All in all, I would say that the Mindcaller is really a powerful computer with an almost unlimited memory. It has unusual sensors and can communicate telepathically with certain people. Do you agree with this assessment, Herb?"

"Yeah, that sounds good, but there are a couple of other things. We still don't know anything about the—whatchamacallit? Sensors. We also don't know who made the thing, and Maori legends state there is more than one of them. But I think I have to disagree with Aroha on one thing: I think that this world of the past that we can see and even visit can really change the present. For example, it could show us where a sunken ship is lying on the ocean floor, and we could just go and salvage it. It could also get us into caves that can't be reached from the outside anymore and we could find something inside and maybe use it. It also seems to react in a

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<sup>34</sup> See "*Xperts: The Paracommunicator*".

special way to certain objects. Remember when we found those little black pellets in 'my' cave in Rotorua, Aroha?"

"How can I ever forget? I had the Mindcaller around my neck when I touched one of them. It nearly drove me insane! It was like an electric shock; maybe it was a telepathic shock."

Klaus listens up: they never mentioned this. "What was that? Little black pellets that reacted to the Mindcaller?"

Herb starts to tell the story about the hot little cave in the Rotorua Geyser region. He found small black pellets there when he was very young, but he considered them 'natural' and didn't take any with him<sup>35</sup>. Once they found out they weren't natural, they decided to collect some, but they were so frightened of the Mindcaller's reaction that they left them there<sup>36</sup>.

"But couldn't you walk in there again without the Mindcaller? Then it would be easy to get the pellets out, right? They could be of such great help for our research. It would be great if one of you could get some for me."

Aroha and Herb look at each other doubtfully. When Klaus adds that this could also bring new insights into the Mindcaller, they give in. "We're going to visit my family in two weeks. I'll go to the cave and get them then," Herb promises.

"We won't take the Mindcaller with us; that would be safest," Aroha adds.

*August 14, 2020*

Klaus storms into Marcus's office in Auckland. "They did it!"

Marcus looks up. "Who did what?"

"The chemists!"

"You mean..."

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<sup>35</sup> See *"Xperts: The Paracommunicator"*.

<sup>36</sup> See *"Xperts: The Paracommunicator"*..



"Yes! They've synthesized the sila-B. We can make as much as we want now!"

"Rock and Roll!" Marcus exclaims in delight.

Marcus and Klaus are excited for a reason. The prototype of the antipara device has been ready for a long time, and they were only waiting for the Silatraviate-B crystals.

They soon manage to cut the crystals down to a size that will fit into their devices. Now they can start a long series of tests, which will ultimately prove successful and yield two results:

First, someone carrying a p-Helper (an e-Helper plus an antipara device) loses his parability. This will allow them to turn off a 'skill' in a dangerous individual.

Second, and even more important is that everyone and everything that is protected by a p-helper seems to be safe from para-attacks. For example, Maria cannot look through an object if it is equipped with a suitably large p-helper, and Stephan cannot effect an animal with the device attached to it.

When Klaus and Marcus spread the news on Great Barrier Island, everyone reacts enthusiastically; for a short time, it seems as though all their problems are solved. Now they are all safe and will be able to go public with their powers because they no longer constitute a real danger. At least that is what they think at first.

But their enthusiasm is soon dampened: if you attach p-Helpers to objects, for example, they will be safe from negative parainfluences, but at the same time, they will also be 'safe' from the positive ones. If, for example, a fire broke out in an apartment building and people were trapped inside, an antipara device would stop Marcus helping them with his pseudoarms. In addition, people wearing a p-Helper are not completely safe. Stephan, for example, would still be able to order a swarm of hornets to attack them. So the protection against para-influences is not a protection against 'mechanical' attacks. To be completely safe, you would have to take more precautions than simply wearing a p-Helper. "Maybe it might

be enough to combine it with Ryan's parashield<sup>37</sup>...but he's still in Australia."

They agree that they have made an important advance, but they are still far from their true goal: to be able to use their parabilities to help humanity without being feared, and to be safe from their enemies without having their skills taken away.

Marcus visits the PM in Wellington. He tells her about the new developments and suggests that SR Inc. produce 100 p-Helpers for the PM, her staff, and the paragroup. He suggests that some of her staff should not be told exactly what the device does, and he makes sure that the p-Helper will not become an official product and the group will not be 'outed'. He insists that SR Inc. has to do a lot more research before that can happen.

The PM is excited about the new p-Helpers and that the group on Great Barrier Island has reunited. "I hope your group will start become more and more powerful again now." Also, she agrees to Marcus's suggestions.

When Marcus gets back to SR Inc., he tells Klaus about the conversation. But Klaus is surprisingly unenthusiastic. "Do we really have to continue looking for even better protection methods?"

Marcus is baffled. "You were always the driving force behind this. What's changed your mind?"

"Well, we're relatively safe against 'evil' para-influences now, and if we make the devices big enough, we can safeguard whole sections of cities. I think that's enough for now. What's more important are those quartz crystals that Barry brought back from Brasilia. We know that the threads inside can somehow strengthen our skills: you told me that your parabilities are stronger when you hold one of the crystals in your hand. Do you remember?"

Marcus nods.

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<sup>37</sup> See "*Xperts: The Parashield*".



“We chemically analyzed those threads back then and we classified them as silatraviate. Well, I actually re-analyzed them and found they consist of sila-B and modulate weak variable-frequency waves, which is caused by the passage of normal light through the quartz. We call these un-modulated rays Qu-0, and they are exactly the same as the antipara rays we use for protection. But if we change the modulation, we get rays that strengthen parabilities. The quartz that strengthened your telekinetic skills has the modulation Qu-4. I’ve identified a kind of quartz with Qu-6.6 that strengthens my skills. When we analyzed the Mindcaller, we found modulations Qu-6, Qu-6.23, Qu-6.24, Qu-6.45, and Qu-6.48, and I’m sure there are others. That’s why the Mindcaller is so multifunctional. All the modulated rays are very weak.”

Marcus’s interest grows as Klaus continues: “While you were in Wellington, we worked day and night to produce modulation Qu-x, where x denotes any number. We also tried to produce stronger rays than those we got by using natural light on the quartz. Surprisingly, it didn’t take us long to find a solution: you get a different result for Qu-x depending on what wavelengths of light you expose the silatraviate to. Put these electrodes on your forehead. They will deliver a strong Qu-4 radiation and should strengthen your telekinetic skills.”

Marcus puts the band of electrodes on and cannot believe it: he can suddenly extend his pseudoarms to several kilometers, even though his normal reach is only 300 meters.

Klaus smiles when he sees Marcus’s face. “Pretty cool, isn’t it?”

Marcus does not yet realize the enormous potential of this discovery. Almost stuttering, he remarks, “But why do I have to put this band on? Are you going to try to find the right modulation for each of us?”

Klaus waves him off. “The headband is more efficient than a hand-held device, but that’s not important. I think that what we have found has much farther-reaching consequences: we know what skills can be strengthened with some of the Qu values, but what about all the other values? Wouldn’t it be



possible to find the value for a weak emotiopath, like Greta in Vienna for example, and strengthen her skills with this? What if there are thousands of people on this planet who have just a very weak parability, and what if every human being has some kind of parapotential? Couldn't we just turn them all into supermen? Maybe there are parabilities that we know absolutely nothing about yet, or maybe they're so weak that we've just never noticed them. What would happen if we could strengthen them a hundred or a thousand fold?"

Marcus is getting dizzy. Are they on the verge of opening a Pandora's box? Are they able to turn anyone into a para now? Do they want that?

Klaus carefully observes Marcus's reaction. "I can see by your expression what you're thinking. I feel the same way. By chance, we have made a discovery that could completely change humanity. It scared me at first."

"What do you mean, *at first*?"

"I'm no longer scared by this because even if we had a much bigger team, it would take us decades of testing before we could hope to find the paragenome. Don't forget, the x in Qu-x is infinite and every individual value would have to be tested in detail for any possible effects. Doing research in this field is so interesting and so important for the field of paraprotection that I just don't think we should try to find any new methods. That's why I was a bit reluctant before."

Marcus nods. "So where are you trying to lead this Qu-x research?"

Klaus shakes his head. "You're still the boss around here, but I suggest that we 'measure' every person who shows signs of potential parabilities in order to learn about the meaning of more Qu values. Remember, I have become much more effective as a parascout with the Qu-6.6. But I would really like to continue analyzing the Mindcaller and all its various activities. Maybe we can find the Qu values for recording, projection, and telepathic communication. Is that all right with you?"



Marcus agrees to this. "Great. By the way, is there any news from Stephan?"

"Not really. He said that he was on the trail of a very interesting phenomenon, but he doesn't want to give us any details yet. But I told you about the little black pellets before. Aroha and Herb managed to bring some back here. I haven't had time yet to analyze them. Do you want to take care of that?"

Soon afterwards, Marcus holds the two black pellets in his hand for the first time. He does not really know what to think of them and asks Maria for advice: "Do you have any idea what these could be?"

"No, Marcus, but it's clear that they're somehow connected to the Mindcaller. You don't even have to get it near the pellets and both it and the pellets start to glow. It's almost scary."

Marcus starts to analyze the pellets with his team. They begin with the slightly bigger one. For no reason except that it is mysterious, they name it 'Atlantis', The smaller one they call 'The Black Pearl'. They are made of a material similar to that of the Mindcaller, albeit a bit darker. It is an extremely hard substance and even a diamond cannot scratch Atlantis's surface. Marcus would like to try to scratch a diamond with the material, but Atlantis is perfectly round.

When Marcus tries to reach inside Atlantis with a pseudohand, he is stopped abruptly by an intense jolt of pain. They also try to examine the pellet with x-rays and ultrasound, with no success. Whoever created Atlantis made sure that it couldn't be penetrated easily.

After numerous tries, they decide to take Atlantis to Stockholm, where one of the only quark microscopes<sup>38</sup> is

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<sup>38</sup> This microscope is an extension of the electron microscope and is based on the Olson principle, for which Eric Olson was awarded the Nobel Prize for Physics in 2015. While electron microscopes only allow you to look into the molecular structure of a substance's surface, the quark microscope allows you to get into the atoms themselves. You

located. This instrument allows you to 'look' into the interior of every known substance.

After strenuous negotiations with the KTH<sup>39</sup> (the instrument is booked for years in advance) in Stockholm, Marcus flies to Sweden with three of his best scientists: two of them are his best physicist and chemist, and the other is SR Inc.'s leading computer scientist. After meeting strict security precautions, they start a thirty-hour research session.

They return to Auckland with a huge mass of data. They also have a suspicion, which hardens after two more days of research: Atlantis is a supercomputer based on photons. It outperforms every other computer a billion times over. Apparently, it has even more sensors than the Mindcaller. There must be thousands of parameters and their functions can't even be guessed at. But how can you communicate with such a thing? It has neither an input nor an output function. It can somehow store data from the outside, but it does not seem to be possible to confront it with a specific problem. Even if it could somehow solve such a problem, how could anyone ever read the results?

Again, chance plays an important role: if they had analyzed Atlantis only a couple of months before, they would not have come to any conclusion, but now there is an obvious approach. Marcus asks Klaus to measure if Atlantis gives off variable frequency waves. Neither Marcus nor Klaus are surprised at the result: Atlantis gives off a form of radiation

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send particles, so-called 'quarks', which are much smaller than atoms, into the spaces between the nuclei of a given compound. The quarks are sent inside in two horizontal directions. Most quarks are not absorbed in this process: they are deflected by the energy of the nuclei and exit from a different area of the substance. Olson managed to measure the angle of deflection and draw conclusions about the composition of the substance. He also managed to transfer this into a layer system with the help of modern visualization methods.

<sup>39</sup> "Koenigliche Technische Hochschule", the famous Swedish University of Technology.



with Qu-6.23 modulation. This conforms to one of the Qu values of the Mindcaller.

"Klaus, can you produce a headband with strong Qu-6.23 radiation? Who knows, maybe Qu-6.23 corresponds to a rudimentary parability that one of us has."

Marcus has a theory about what this kind of parability might be, but he doesn't dare express it yet...

Marcus cannot wait for the moment he can put the Qu-6.23 headband on. When the time comes, he asks Klaus to turn it on and to lower the energy in case something unpredictable happens.

Klaus energizes the headband. Immediately, Marcus can see images and hears a voice that, though not unpleasant, is strange and contains a certain tone of reproach.

"This is Atlantis, as you call me. I thought you would never find a way to communicate with me, but you seem to have done it. I know you have many questions. But you owe your friends an explanation, don't you?"

Marcus rips the headband off and gasps, "6.23, that's telepathy; I can talk with Atlantis! It knows I have a lot of questions."

Klaus stares at Marcus. "This ancient...thing...is talking with you? The whole idea of parabilities is crazy enough already, but..."

"I feel like I'm dreaming. If it's OK with you, I'll speed up my individual time to get as much out of it as possible, OK?"

"Yes, I'd really like to find out about Atlantis."

Marcus puts the headband back on and Klaus energizes the Qu-6.23 modulation to its highest level. There is immediate contact again.

"Are you all right, Marcus?" Atlantis asks jovially.

Marcus is surprised at the tone of the conversation with the computer. Without hesitation, he starts asking his most burning questions.

"Atlantis, who are you? How old are you? Where do you come from originally? Who built you? Are you a computer? Is

whoever built you still alive? Can we contact them? How do you know so much about us? What about the other black Obsidian pellet? Are there more of your kind? Will you help us?"

A hairless human head appears in Marcus's brain. It smiles and stops Marcus's stream of questions.

"Not so fast, I'm just a normal photon computer. I was built several million years ago by the 'Ancient Ones' as they call themselves. I'm only a machine, but intellectually I'm a bit more developed than you. I have no emotions but I can understand them. Even the Ancient Ones didn't know the difference between having and understanding feelings. Somehow, I seem to have developed certain feelings, though. I felt frustration because I was always waiting to communicate with you humans. The image you can see right now is not mine, it's an artificial face of one of the Ancient Ones."

Marcus tries to interrupt but Atlantis continues: "I know that you would like to know if the Ancient Ones are related to humans. They are, in a certain way, but humans aren't descendants of them, rather they share an original source<sup>40</sup>. But now back to the other questions".

"I came here with my creators a long time ago. They lived here for a while. They were not trying to found a colony; they were here because of the minerals, variations of what you call Obsidian. These minerals are very useful for creatures that can communicate telepathically. And yes, the Ancient Ones could talk but they rarely did. They only talked with children; otherwise, they only communicated telepathically. This was easier and more natural for them. That's why we computers don't have any input or output devices. Everything is controlled through thought. The Ancient Ones are still alive, as far as I know, but you won't be able to contact them. There are certain rules in the galactic family: whenever you meet creatures who haven't colonized their solar system yet, who aren't able to communicate telepathically, and who have no

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<sup>40</sup> See "*Xperts: The Beginning: The Galactic Zoo*".



quantum or photon computers, you may not make contact with them. Otherwise, a culture like yours would be destroyed, like the Europeans destroyed the native cultures in North and South America."

"This is also the reason why I can't tell you many of the things I know: it would violate the law. But in a limited way, I can help you and maybe pave the way for later contact. There are many complicating facts. One of them is that the Ancient Ones do not know about the phenomenon of telekinesis. And there are other phenomena on your island that don't fit into the normal pattern. You will understand this sooner than you think. The reason I know so much about you is simple: I have thousands of sensors that have been collecting information for millions of years. I was able to condense and organize this information into knowledge. But I'm not alone. The other pellet, which you call the Black Pearl, has helped me. Are there more computers like us on this planet? Yes. There are several thousand, and we're all in contact. We're here to help creatures like you. The Ancient Ones left us here together with some Mindcallers in case they return or other intelligent life forms develop."

Marcus's head is swimming: Is all this just a dream? He has no idea where to start: it's just too much. "What's the connection between you and the Mindcaller? How many light years are the Ancient Ones from here? Did some of them stay on this planet? Will they ever come back? Does their scientific knowledge far exceed ours? How about your knowledge? Do the Ancient Ones know music or art? Are they able to enjoy a Mozart symphony, for example? Do the Ancient Ones communicate like we do now or do they communicate in images or symbols?"

"The Mindcaller, as you call it, is a simpler form of computer than me. It was constructed in such a way that sensitive people without telepathic skills can use it. With its large archive of the past and its intelligent sensors, the Mindcaller offers a lot of important information to the skilled user. I can't tell you where the ancients live, but none of them

have lived on the Earth for a long time. Once in a while they visit this planet usually without ever setting foot on it, but for reasons I've already mentioned, they're not allowed to make contact with humans. Of course, the Ancient Ones know more about nature than your race; just think how much *humans* have learned over the last 200 years. The Ancient Ones can't help laughing sometimes at some of your theories on physics, biology, and cosmology, just as you sometimes laugh at the scientific efforts of your kind 2000 years ago. Just consider Xeno's Paradox and how it was accepted as a 'proof.' The Greeks simply didn't yet understand the principal of an infinite converging series."

Marcus nods. He knows the argument: a man standing 128 meters behind a turtle can never really catch up to it, even though he can run twice as fast as the animal. Once he has run 128 meters, the turtle will then be 64 meters ahead of him, and once he has passed that, it will be 32 meters ahead again, then 16, etc. So every time he reaches the spot where the turtle used to be, it is always a little bit ahead of him again. Since this goes on infinitely, he will never be able to catch up with it.

Atlantis continues: "Of course, I know more about the natural sciences than humans; ask me any question you want if you want to test me." It sounds to Marcus like Atlantis just *giggled*. "Of course the Ancient Ones also knew about art. They appreciate your music very much. They used drones to eavesdrop on traveling bards as long ago as medieval times. These days it's much easier for them. Your radio waves have been polluting the solar system quite thoroughly. They're very easy to pick up. Telepathic communication uses many types of media: not just language, as we are using it now, but also pictures, films, and moving symbols. The fact that you've already developed so many different forms of communication is a sign that humanity is slowly preparing itself to overcome the limits of written and spoken language. In 2003, there were



already strong efforts to implement a language of moving symbols<sup>41</sup>.”

Marcus nods again thoughtfully. “I have to consult with my friends and make a list of questions we need to ask you. Would that be possible to do at any time?”

“The answer is yes, for now anyway. It will amuse me.”

“But you said that I could ask you something difficult. Well, my son Stephan gave me a book a couple of days ago. It’s called *Uncle Petros and Goldbach's Conjecture*. The conjecture is: Every even number greater than two can be expressed as the sum of two prime numbers<sup>42</sup>. This has still not been proven. Is the conjecture correct? Can you prove it?”

Atlantis laughs. “This is a very nice riddle...for children, but yes, the assumption is correct. I can give you the proof; it’s so simple that you can write it down in a mere five pages without ever using complex mathematics. But it takes some cunning tricks to solve it. I’ll show you later. Now I have to consider how I can communicate with humans non-telepathically. I already have an idea there, but let’s discuss this some other time.”

Marcus feels that he will have to digest what he has just experienced for a long time. He says goodbye to Atlantis.

He gives Klaus the most important information. Klaus starts bombarding Marcus with questions that he cannot answer yet but that he would like to ask Atlantis immediately. They will have to proceed systematically.

Klaus tries to sum it up: “What’s maybe most important is that there are other intelligent species out there: creatures like the Ancient Ones, who are older and more intelligent than

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<sup>41</sup> One of those languages is MIRACLE, a classic that can still be found at [www.jucs.org/jucs\\_9\\_4](http://www.jucs.org/jucs_9_4).

<sup>42</sup> A prime number is a number greater than one that is only divisible by one and itself: 2, 3, 5, 7, 11...As far as we know, every even number greater than two can be expressed as the sum of two prime numbers, e.g.  $30=13+17=7+23$ . At the time of publication, this conjecture remains unproven.

humans. Atlantis and his 'colleague' are our new allies and probably mightier than all of our parabilities. And we'll meet these Ancient Ones someday, when mankind has advanced enough."

*The next day, Klaus and Marcus ask Atlantis a prepared list of questions:*

*Can the Ancient Ones travel faster than the speed of light?*

*Answer: No.*

**Are there any other beings in the universe who can?**

*Answer: Not as far as we know.*

*Does faster-than-light travel contradict the laws of physics, according to the Ancient Ones?*

*Answer: No.*

*Are there many inhabited planets in the universe?*

*Answer: Yes, but they constitute less than one tenth of one percent of all celestial bodies.*

*Are there intelligent beings who look completely different to us and have a completely different metabolism?*

*Answer: Yes and yes.*

*Are there great wars in the universe between different species?*

*Answer: No, wars are considered acts of immaturity, as bar fights are here.*

*Could you help us to learn more about the science and technology that would enable us to create a computer like you, or a space ship?*

*Answer: No and no and no. You'll have to do that work yourself.*



*But how will you help us then?*

*Answer: I can predict natural catastrophes like earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, hurricanes, and the like. I can also carry out simulations, using the methods you are already familiar with, but which your computers are too weak to perform. I can also tell you about certain events from the distant past.*

*Did the continent Atlantis ever exist?*

*Answer: No. That is an invention of the Greek (ha ha) philosopher Plato.*

*What are you made of?*

*Answer: My exterior is only a few molecules thick, but the molecules are so tightly packed that it really surprised me that you were able to penetrate it with the quark microscope. We are impregnable to all normal substances on this planet.*

*In the event of an emergency, would you help us if it were for the good of humanity?*

*Answer: This question is too vague and hypothetical.*

*My computer colleagues and I don't want to answer your questions for some time now. In a matter of days, we will be willing to cooperate more closely. But we need a form of communication other than telepathy. When one of you talks, we can hear it, and when you write something on a piece of paper, we can read it with our sensors. From now on, we will give you plans for machines that you'll have to build for us. They will allow us to write. You won't be able to understand part A concerning the transformation of telepathic signals into mechanical ones. Part B is the actual writing device. We'll be able to write with it by attaching a writing instrument. There won't be any electronics, as you understand them. At some point you will discover why.*

They try again and again to contact Atlantis one more time, but to no avail.

They all wonder about this strange mechanical writing device Atlantis wants them to build, but Marcus makes sure that the construction process begins immediately.

Day after day, Marcus tries to contact Atlantis. While he is standing in his office again on August 28, 2020, with his electrode band on, Stephan rushes in. He has spent the last twenty-four days in the wilderness but has no time for greetings:

“Dad! I found something really weird. Just listen!”

But Marcus is busy on other things. Atlantis has at this very moment finally responded:

“Hello, Marcus, I apologize for our unavailability, but there were new and unexpected developments. Go ahead and tell Stephan about us, but make it short. When you’re finished, put the headband on him before he can tell you anything. There’s something urgent I must tell him.”

Atlantis’s silence and the breaking of that silence must have something to do with Stephan’s new discoveries.



## 11. Stephan's Discovery

*August 28, 2020*

On August 7<sup>th</sup>, Herb takes Stephan and his equipment as close as possible to the 'military zone'. With a Land Rover, they go north from the estate and turn west toward Rangihakaea before the road ends in Motairehe. Shortly afterward, they take a barely discernable track north into the bush. The weather is good and they are able to drive a further two kilometers.

When they can drive no further, they stop and unload the equipment. Stephan takes his e-Helper from his backpack and activates it. Now he can be reached and located at anytime and from anywhere and can call for help if necessary. Stephan thanks Herb and starts hiking north. From here on, the track they were driving on becomes a vague path through the brush. It helps Stephan to come closer to his objective, but soon he realizes that he has walked too far east. He decides to leave the path. He makes sure to cover his tracks from here on, and proceeds carefully through the thicket.

After two hundred meters, Stephan changes his strategy. He knows that he'll have to walk the same route back, perhaps even back and forth, and maybe more than once, so he decides to blaze a trail. He could remove branches and other obstacles with his laser axe, but this kind of destruction of nature is a criminal offense in New Zealand, and it's is not the only reason he does not use the tool. In case there is really something mysterious going on ahead of him, it's better not to leave human tracks. Stephan decides to use his parabilities to search through the thicket for large animals: it is mostly wild boar he is after. He soon has a pack of thirty of the animals together. He orders twenty-five of them to break through the wood ahead of him. This creates a beaten path, if one of limited height. He orders the other five to tromp along behind

him in order to conceal his own tracks. When he can tell they are getting hungry, he lets them go and gathers another group.

This 'trick' allows Stephan to proceed much faster than Cynthia and Marcus did on their trip. But the whole endeavor is not exactly pleasant; it is necessary to walk bent over double almost every step of the way.

He finally reaches the coordinates Marcus recorded. There is no clearing, but it does not take a forest ranger to tell that the trees were not planted more than a couple of months ago. Even the frequent rain, which has allowed the brush to grow so quickly, cannot hide the signs of the intense activity that must have gone on here. Stephan has a close look at the area surrounding the individual trees. He does not know what it is, but something is wrong: everything is unusually orderly. Who took the effort to flatten the forest ground so regularly? He has an idea. He orders all ants to the surface of the clearing. Several hundred appear, which is far fewer than there should be here. Then he fights 100 meters deep into the thicket and gives the same order. Within a comparable area, the ground literally writhes with insects. Something very strange must have happened at the clearing. He realizes that he will have to make camp here for a while and that he will need much better equipment than he has brought with him.

Stephan calls Marcus on his e-Helper and tells him briefly what he has found so far. He keeps the 'ant test' to himself, though. He asks that the Moller deliver additional equipment. He knows it cannot land here, but it will be possible to lower the equipment with a winch. In addition to the gear necessary to survive in the bush for two weeks, Stephan requests an underground camera and chemical and metal detectors. Marcus thinks this list is a little exaggerated: the food alone is more than enough for *four* weeks. Apart from the expensive high-tech equipment, which also makes the delivery of a generator necessary, Marcus is surprised at Stephan's request for an extra sleeping bag and other things you don't really need in the wilderness. After a short



discussion, Marcus gives in: 'after all, Stephan is finally doing something sensible and goal-oriented', he thinks.

Marcus tells Stephan that it will take at least three days to get the equipment together and obtain the necessary flight permission. "Will the things you already have do until then?"

Stephan confirms this with a guilty conscience. In fact, he does not even want to spend three days there. He has different plans.

Before he called his father, Stephan had already contacted Raianda in Delhi. He remembers what she said at their parting on Bali: "...you should go to La Reunion alone, without me. When you come back to Great Barrier Island, and if you're still thinking about me and need me, then let me know. Maybe I'll be able to get away again."

It took all his courage to call her again. After all, he only called her once, briefly, from La Reunion. But Raianda reacted lightheartedly as always: "There's no reason for excuses, Stephan. I could've tried to reach you too. Are you back with your parents on Great Barrier Island now?"

Stephan is reminded of her promise not to tell anyone about his parabilities. Now he'll have to ask for another promise: not to tell anyone where he is and what he is doing. "I'd really like you to be here with me, even if it's only for a couple of days. But even though I'll love having you here with me, I also have a reason for myself. I think I could really use your knowledge of biology here. It would only be the two of us here, in the bush. I only have a tent, sleeping bags, and simple food. It'll rain a lot and it could get cold, so don't expect a holiday like the last time you were here. It'll be more of an adventure trip. It could even get a little dangerous because I don't really know what's going on here. You should definitely leave a letter for your father to let him know where you are exactly, in case you don't return as planned."

Raianda laughs. "It'll be at least as comfortable as a stay with our relatives in the country. When do you want me to come? For how long?"

“Well, as soon and for as long as you can. The next Bombay-Auckland flight leaves in five hours. I’ve already reserved a seat for you, just in case.”

Raianda switches her e-Helper to picturemorph, which enables Stephan to see the exaggerated angry expression on her face. “I don’t like it when you do things like that. It’s as if you think that you can just tell me what to do whenever you want. It doesn’t work that way, mister. I have to think about it first and then I have to talk it over with my father. But be sure of one thing: if I really come this time, it’ll be the last time that you just surprise me like this.”

Stephan feels guilty. Raianda is right, of course. He tries to apologize. Raianda begins to snap at him, but stops, and says in a calmer voice, “I’ll call you back. I need to think about this, and don’t you bother me.”

Hours pass. In the meantime, the Bombay-Auckland flight has left. Stephan is dejected. He should not have put so much pressure on her. Then his e-Helper goes off. It is not Raianda, but her father:

“Stephan, as long as I have known you, I’ve always treated you like a son. I know there’s something special that you hide from most people. I know that you like Raianda and that she likes you too. But you two are not courting, and certainly not married! And even with a married partner, you have to discuss big plans in advance. So I have to say that I don’t like this ‘attack’ on Raianda after weeks of hardly any communication. My daughter didn’t like it either. However, she is on the plane to Auckland and she’ll take the ferry to Port Fitzroy from there. You’ll be able to pick her up there tomorrow afternoon. I hope Raianda won’t regret her decision. She made it against my advice. Take care of her and do not hurt her. I don’t want regret having helped you and your family.”

Stephan answers very seriously: “Thank you for your call, Dr. Sharma. You’re right. I was too impulsive. I promise to do everything I can to protect Raianda both physically and psychologically.”



Sharma nods and cuts the connection.

Stephan walks back the same way he came. He leaves his small tent and the contents of his backpack behind. He only takes a book, some fruit, and a bottle of water with him. He finds it easy to reach the spot where Herb had to stop the Land Rover. Now he only has to walk back two kilometers to the main road. When he reaches it, there is hardly any traffic. Nevertheless, it doesn't take him long to hitch a ride to Port Fitzroy before night falls. He takes a room for two nights at the only motel in the village. He'll have enough time to read the book on the flora and fauna of Great Barrier Island before tomorrow afternoon. He already knows a lot of what he reads, but he hopes that some of the new details will help him with whatever is about to come.

With his stomach knotted up like he's on a first date, he waits for the ferry the next day. It should arrive at 5 p.m., but the rough seas delay it almost an hour. Stephan finds it hard to stay patient.

It takes him a little while to pick Raianda out from among the mass of passengers. She is dressed completely differently this time. She wears heavy shoes, jeans, and a flannel shirt. With her hair tied back and her backpack on, she looks just the same as most of the other disembarking passengers. After they catch sight of one another, they run together and hug. Stephan gives Raianda a fleeting kiss.

A little snippily, she reacts, "I don't mind your kisses, I just hope that you didn't make me come here just as a diversion. I hope you really need my help here."

Stephan is a bit embarrassed. "I think that once you've seen what I tried to describe to you, you won't only be fascinated, but you'll also have an idea about what it all could mean. But even if you don't, I'm really happy to see you. We won't be able to make it through the forest today and the Moller isn't delivering the equipment until tomorrow afternoon. So I've got us a room here for tonight. I wouldn't call it princely, but it's the best they have."

Raianda likes the room. It is simple, but it has a pleasant view over the ocean. The motel's café serves good coffee, fresh fish, and a strange salad made from the leaves of a local bush. This is even new to Stephan. After dinner, they stroll together through the little village. The light slowly dims. The wind has calmed and the clouds have scattered, but the large waves still roll in across the gravel beach. The sound of the pebbles rolling back and forth soon becomes a familiar background to the stories they tell each other. Stephan does not bring up Veronique, and Raianda only mentions Varma, the new doctor at the clinic, in passing.

Later on, they are relaxing on the bed watching a romantic X-rated comedy on an old fashioned TV. They do not mind that the set cannot even show 3-D images. The film is amusing and when the young hero starts to get his girlfriend in the mood, Stephan tries to imitate him as well as he can. He kisses Raianda at the same time the actor kisses his co-star, and then he opens her blouse. Just like the actress, Raianda acts coy as Stephan unhooks her bra and starts kissing her breasts. Then they have to stop for a commercial break. They both laugh.

"Hurry up, won't you?" Raianda complains.

The movie gets spicier and spicier and Raianda and Stephan continue to imitate what they see. This is exciting, funny, and a new experience for them both. When the young heroine gets a call from her mother, her boyfriend drives her so crazy that she has problems speaking. Stephan and Raianda also enjoy imitating this scene. After the phone call scene, the film becomes so daring that the two feel obliged to ask each other for permission to continue, but then they go on to follow the stage directions throughout the whole program.

When the woman 'comes' up a little short in the movie, Stephan makes sure that Raianda's part plays a little better.

"It looks like you've experienced a couple of things since we were together last," Raianda comments. "This was quite interesting. I think most of the things that we just did we wouldn't have dared do back then, right?"



Stephan agrees. He admires Raianda for not chickening out from some of the scenes.

The next morning, they take a taxi to a spot near where the track leads into the forest. Stephan is in a bit of a hurry as he does not know exactly when the Moller will come with the equipment. But they reach the clearing in time.

Raianda realizes immediately that, if what Stephan said was right, something very unusual must have happened here. "So you said that five months ago this was a clearing without any trees."

Stephan confirms this. "At the end of March, there were no trees here. Now it's mid-August, so that makes it less than four and a half months.

"But that's not possible. Just look at this tree. It's three meters tall and in full bloom. This is only possible if someone planted it here with its own giant root ball; otherwise, it would take years to get a transplanted tree to bloom. But there's not really enough room to have replanted all these trees here, and, normally, you'd have to brace the trees with ropes against the wind for at least a year. All this is not possible. Those trees were not replanted using 'normal' methods. I have no idea how they did it, but, nevertheless, I'll start checking the roots to find out how big the root balls were, if they really *were* replanted".

While Raianda gets a shovel, Stephan is advised over his e-Helper that the Moller will arrive momentarily.

The Moller is unloaded without problem by its winch. Once it has gone again, Stephan has to put up the big tent for them and a smaller one for the equipment. Then he unpacks the camping beds, the stove, and the dishes and then sets up the generator and the chemistry lab. In the meantime, Raianda keeps working away at the roots of the tree. She is so into her work that Stephan has to almost drag her away from her hole and force her into the tent when it starts raining at 5 p.m. Raianda is surprised how comfortable the tent is. There is even a shower and a sink, both of which are fed by a barrel into which water is pumped from time to time by the generator.

"What's the matter, Raianda? Why are you so fascinated by those roots?"

"I'll tell you in a minute, Stephan. Just let me wash myself a little and get my thoughts together, then I'll tell you what I've found. I hope that together we'll be able to find an explanation for this."

While Raianda takes a shower, Stephan fixes a simple dinner, the first meal since breakfast. When she is finished, they sit down together on camping chairs at a collapsible table. The rain is coming down heavier and suddenly they realize how hungry and thirsty they really are. Almost inhaling her food, Raianda explains:

"The trees were not replanted with a root ball. The ground is much too loose around it. I still have no idea how they replanted them. Neither the main roots nor the root hairs have been cut or damaged in any way."

"Couldn't the hairs have grown back by now anyway?"

"No," Raianda answers curtly, "you can tell the age of even very small root fibers in a way similar to how you tell the age of a tree by the number of rings in its trunk. The fibers I checked are at least one or two years old, so they must have already grown before the tree was replanted."

Stephan is as befuddled as Raianda.

Raianda shrugs her shoulders and continues, "I have no rational explanation for this. But I have a crazy idea. Before digging up the tree, you could try to fix it completely in its position. Then you could scrape off the earth like I just did, almost grain-by-grain. Then, you could replace the dirt with some kind of gel so you don't change the position of the root fibers. Once you've done this for all the roots, you put the tree into a prepared hole and replace the gel, grain by grain, then replace the soil. If you can also find a method of dealing with the overlapping roots of the other trees, which would be very complicated, then you could reproduce what we have here. But I seriously doubt that human technology is capable of something like this."



The long discussion that follows brings no satisfactory results.

The following day they start to search the area thoroughly with the metal detector and the underground camera. Stephan leads with the detector while Raianda follows with the camera, which can detect and display hollows and compressions down to one meter beneath the surface thanks to ultrasound. Raianda is glad that she has already learned how to operate the device in her studies at the university because some of the pictures that are displayed are very difficult to interpret: it is hard to make out the difference between a stone and a compression or between an empty hollow and one filled with water. Now she understands that Stephan really needed the help of a geology and biology student and not just a sexual diversion.

A frustrating morning of scanning almost half of the area passes with no results. After their lunch break, Stephan's metal detector picks something up. The underground camera shows a small, unusual compression about forty centimeters down.

They carefully dig down, and soon find something strange: it is a longish object about the size of a finger and made from a black material. On one side, six thin bent sticks stand out like small legs. On the other, thin, short stumps protrude. The material immediately reminds them both of the Mindcaller. Have they just found an ancient artifact that is somehow connected to the Mindcaller?

They take the object and run into the tent with the lab and the chemical kit. The results from the analysis destroy their initial assumptions: this thing is at most eighty years old. It is not made of obsidian, but of a stainless steel alloy. As opposed to the Mindcaller, this object can be easily penetrated by x-rays and ultrasound. They soon find out that it contains strange and complex wiring: apparently, this is a six-legged robot and the stumps must be some kind of sensors. The energy source seems to have been destroyed, and this must be the reason why the robot was left behind in the dirt. Every

attempt to elicit a response from the robot with sound or light fails. Either there is no energy at all or it was ordered or programmed in the wrong way. Finally, they lock the robot in a metal strongbox to make sure that it does not become unexpectedly active.

"Is this getting us anywhere?" Stephan mumbles.

Raianda remarks thoughtfully, "Maybe it is. An army of thousands of such robots could've helped in replanting the trees."

Stephan looks at her, fascinated. "You're right. That's how it could've been done. But who the hell built this robot and all the rest that must've been involved? The technology is so different from the one we use for the e-hummingbirds. I'm not sure, but this technology could outperform ours. And we always thought that SR Inc. was way ahead of everyone when it comes to microrobotics."

"We still don't know enough, Stephan. Let's keep searching."

In fact, they find one more object. It is a hollow plate about two centimeters thick, one meter tall, and almost two meters long. On the short side, the edge runs straight. On the long side, there is an indentation. Apparently, a small piece was broken out there. On one side, tiny drawers about one centimeter high and two centimeters wide are spaced across the plate. There are about 10,000 of them altogether. They can all be opened easily and they contain...dust; there is a little bit of dust in each one.

The chemical analysis of the dust shows it to be made up of different organic molecules. The formulae mean nothing to Raianda and Stephan. It is interesting, however, that the amount of dust and its composition varies only by a small percentage between the drawers. Also, the plate and the dust are not more than ten years old.

This plate makes the situation even murkier, if that is possible. "Stephan, we have to find out who was here. Can't you 'ask' the animals around here who these people were and where they went?"



"I already tried but the emotions I can sense from most of the animals around here are very weak. The birds are sort of angry with the people who were here, but I don't know why. The ants are just happy that they're gone. They have more room now."

"What about the wasps?" Raianda asks.

"What wasps?"

"Didn't you seen that huge wasp nest by the pond?"

Stephan missed this. Raianda leads him there and Stephan concentrates on the animals. Again, he can only sense very non-specific emotions, but there is one important piece of information. "Raianda, the wasps are happy that the clearing is free now and that whoever was here has moved far away. Apparently, these people didn't really like the wasps and tried to kill them. I think we might at least have some kind of direction now. If we draw a straight line between the clearing and the nest, we can deduce what direction they went in when they left; the line leads more or less directly toward Miner's Head. That's about five hard kilometers from here, but I think it would worth heading that way tomorrow."

The next morning they get up early and pack enough gear to stay the night if necessary. Stephan decides to use the wild boars as a thicket breaker again. Raianda is very amused by this trick, which allows them to proceed more quickly through the thicket than she thought possible.

After two kilometers, the brush thins a little below a couple of big kauris. It's a good spot for a snack.

When they get up again and prepare to continue the hike, they are suddenly surrounded by voices. "Don't move. Stay where you are or we'll shoot!"

Raianda and Stephan freeze. Stephan finds his voice again. "We don't mean any harm. Who are you? Why don't you show yourself to us?"

Suddenly, the area around them begins to shake. Hundreds of robots that look exactly like the one they found whirl and buzz all around them. Even though they have six

legs, they stand upright on two and use the other limbs for working, in the same way that humans use their hands.

“What do you want? Where are your superiors? Or are you here alone?” Raianda asks in astonishment.

“These robots are not autonomous. They follow our orders and now act as loudspeakers for us. It’s very bothersome that you can’t leave us alone. No one knew about us before your father and that woman found the clearing. We told them not to tell anyone about it or there would be consequences. Unfortunately, they broke their promise and told you about the clearing, and now you are here snooping around. We can’t allow this. We’ll have to punish your father and the other woman for breaking their word.”

Stephan shakes his head, even though he is not sure if they can see this gesture. “It’s not like you say. You lied when you said that this was a restricted military zone. Also, you only asked my dad and Cynthia to remain silent, and they never promised that they would, so no one broke any promises. But since you were talking about a restricted area, my father thought it necessary to contact the Prime Minister and ask her about this ‘zone’ as you call it. When my dad found out that there was no military activity here, he only told me and another associate, Klaus Baumgartner. And I only told my friend here, who I know is absolutely reliable. Only six people know about the mysterious things going on around here. If you had let my father and Cynthia in on your secret and if you had given them a good reason to leave you alone, then we wouldn’t be here right now. So just tell me now what you’re doing, and I promise we’ll leave you in peace again. But don’t forget, more and more people are settling on this island, so someone will discover you again eventually. Maybe that someone will be less trustworthy than us.”

There is a long pause, then the voices return. “There is some truth in your words. We aren’t sure how to proceed, but we’ll take you into custody for now. We’ll talk more later. Now, follow the robots, and don’t try any tricks. Even though



they're small, the robots are very powerful. Look at the big Kauri north of you."

One of the robots extends a probe the size of a pin. It points it at the Kauri, 100 meters away. A barely visible beam shoots out of the probe and turns the enormous tree to dust.

They follow the robots that move rapidly through the bush on tiny arms and legs. The robots only stop to wait for Raianda and Stephan. Suddenly, Stephan senses the emotions of an animal he is entirely unfamiliar with. They are incredibly sharp and clear. Then the animal starts to communicate with Stephan telepathically:

"I am one of the masters of the robots. I am not human, I am an animal, or at least that is what you would call me. That's why you can interpret my emotions. I can even let you read my thoughts if I want to. That's what you are sensing now. But still, I'm an animal, but a kind you never even knew existed. We're more intelligent than any other animals, and probably even more intelligent than humans. Your ability to give orders to animals will not work on us."

"Excuse me, whoever you are, I'd really like to explain what's going on to my girlfriend. Would it be possible to speak through the robots again so that she can hear you and maybe say something too?"

Stephan feels a positive reaction. He explains to Raianda what he has just experienced then says aloud, "Please call us by our first names, Stephan and Raianda. What do you want us to call you?"

"You may call me 'THE WE'. I know that sounds funny, but once you learn to understand our culture, it'll make sense to you. But let's continue this conversation when we reach our destination."

Soon afterwards, a door opens up in the forest ground in front of them. Steps lead down into a huge system of passageways and caves. Some of them are so big that you could drive a truck through them, while others are as narrow as a water pipe. There are robots everywhere. Some of them are the size of ants, some are like those they have already seen,

and some are human sized. One of the 'human' robots escorts them until they reach an underground apartment, apparently built for human habitation.

"This is your home for now. You'll find everything you need and want here. We even have a hololibrary and a whirlpool. Suitable food will be regularly delivered to you, of course," "THE WE" tells them through the robot's mouth. "But now I have to consult with my colleagues about how we shall proceed."

After Stephan feels "THE WE" withdraw, his e-Helper sounds an alarm. Stephan knows immediately what this must mean: the e-Helper has lost contact with the outside world. Stephan reacts quickly. "Hello „THE WE“, excuse me just a minute, but my e-Helper has lost contact with the outside. My father will notice this and he'll send a rescue team. Then your secret will be finished for good. We have to do something fast."

"Thank you for your warning, Stephan. I am happy to see that you're so honest. But we were already aware of the e-Helper problem: for the last few minutes, we've been sending a signal similar to that of your e-Helper from the clearing. We've also programmed a corresponding message in case someone tries to reach you. But now, be patient: we have a difficult problem to solve. It's very important for us to remain secret, but we don't want to harm you or any other humans. I'll talk to you again in eight days. If you get bored, there are long-acting sleeping drops by the bed. They're completely safe for you, no matter how many you take. One drop will work for one day. We'll talk later."

Raianda and Stephan have endless discussions and speculations ahead of them. Their apartment is furnished in a strange but practical style and it takes them a while to get used to the way things work. Almost everything is based on speech recognition: the lights, the thermostat, the water, the doors, etc. Much of what they experience now and experienced before somehow does not fit together. Now they know about the origin of the robot, but why can they only see the robots and



not their creators? The plate with all its drawers remains a riddle. The technology around them is different and somehow further developed than what they are used to. The quality of the holofilms is far higher than that of 2020 3DTV generation. The projection is clearer and larger; you can walk around it. Many of the films are frighteningly interactive: not only can you talk to the actors and influence them, but you can even step into the hologram and join the cast. This is exactly the kind of 'holodeck®' that certain television series predicted about twenty years ago.

Stephan is also interested in the long-term sleeping drops. He asks Raianda to undertake a test with him. He wants to sleep for two days while Raianda keeps an eye on his bodily functions. Stephan shaves thoroughly<sup>43</sup> and cuts his fingernails down to exactly two millimeters. Then he takes two drops. He falls into a deep, soothing sleep.

When he wakes up, he can hardly believe that he has been asleep for fifty hours. His chin is still completely smooth and his fingernails have not grown. Raianda tells him what happened: "Your pulse dropped steadily for the first ten minutes. In the end, it was down to five beats a minute. Your breathing rate went down too. Your temperature sank to room temperature. I was really scared for your life, but when I called for help, someone, probably „THE WE“, explained that this was normal because your metabolism was down to less than one percent. This means that you only aged half an hour over the course of fifty hours. I don't understand what the „THE WE“s are trying to accomplish by this."

Stephan hesitates for a moment before speculating wildly: "I think that those drops could be pretty useful during a long trip through space. Just imagine flying to Alpha Centauri, the sun of the next solar system. If you somehow manage to travel at half the speed of light, it would take you ten years, but

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<sup>43</sup> He remembers this from his father. See "*Xperts: The Telekinetic*".

if you took the drops, you'd only age a month. You wouldn't get bored and you'd consume less energy."

Raianda stares at Stephan. "Do you think that "THE WE" is planning to travel in space, or maybe doesn't even originate from Earth?"

"No, I don't really think so. On the other hand, it would be technologically possible for humans to settle on the Moon. They're even planning to open up a hotel there in eight years<sup>44</sup>. "THE WE" seem to be technologically superior to humans so we can't really exclude the possibility.

Seven days have passed before "THE WE" gets back to them.

"Hello Raianda and Stephan. I have good and bad news for you. Let me start with what's most important: we will set you free again. The bad news is that your release is contingent upon some conditions. They're not harsh but may be somewhat annoying.

First, you have to go straight back to the clearing. We'll take you there. You can keep the robot you found, but you cannot keep the plate. Second, you'll have to spend five more days there, pretending to continue your research. We made sure there is nothing more to find, but my colleagues and I need time to disappear. Third, there is an official version of your story that you may only tell Cynthia, Marcus, Klaus, and the PM. It goes as follows:

"At the clearing, you found tracks of *'intelligent animals'* that were living there. They didn't want to have anything to do with humans, but they also didn't want to do them any harm—even though this would be justified when you consider how humans have systematically ruined this planet and how they have destroyed the animals' environment. The intelligent animals have solved philosophical and

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<sup>44</sup> In 2010, scientists discovered huge water reservoirs in the form of ice underneath the surface of the Moon. Soon afterwards, the Hilton-Marriott chain started sending up all kinds of materials for the construction of a hotel on the moon.



mathematical problems that humans are still far from solving. They've also developed their own technologies comparable to those of humans, but that sometimes go in different directions. You may not tell anyone how powerful even the smallest robots are. They will be able to guess a couple of things when they research the broken one you have. We, the 'intelligent animals', will leave Great Barrier Island and settle somewhere else. As proof that we're at least equal to humans scientifically, we'll give you a five-page proof that Goldbach's Conjecture is correct. We know that both you and your father know about this conjecture; your father will be very surprised by it."

"Fourth, over the next three months, the northernmost point on Great Barrier Island, north of Miner's Head, will be absolutely off-limits from two kilometers on inland. You'll have to convince your father, and he will have to convince the army, to make sure that nobody enters the area. If someone does, we can't guarantee anything."

"Fifth, our vehicles leaving this area between midnight and 2 a.m. may be neither checked nor followed."

"Sixth, you may also tell them that you know a little more about „THE WE“, but that you swore not to tell anyone unless "THE WE" gives you permission. You may also tell them that there will be further contact with "THE WE" in the years to come. Can you promise to keep those conditions? Those conditions are void if you are forced to speak under duress or the influence of drugs. I'm waiting for your answer."

Raianda and Stephan do not need much time to consider their options. They both agree loudly and clearly.

"Good. Then let me tell you a bit more before you go. You may also ask some questions if you wish. We were discussing the possibility of killing all humans who now know about us. It would've been the safest and easiest solution. We decided against this because we analyzed your pasts and realized that we could trust you, at least as far as it is possible with humans. We even found out that we should be grateful for one thing your group has done: by stopping the nuclear war

between India and Pakistan, you probably saved the world, including us. We also decided against killing you because there are new developments on your estate as you will see when you return that are so special that we don't think we should stop them."

"Raianda and Stephan, you're still so young that it is more than likely that we'll meet again some day. No matter how much we try to hide, it may one day be necessary for you to become our allies. We hope we can count on this. But that's enough from me—do you have any questions?"

Stephan looks at Raianda for permission. She nods.

"I have so many questions, but let me just ask a few. Why can't we see you and your friends? What are the little drawers in the plate for? How do you know so much about us? Why do you speak English so well? Will the whole place down here be destroyed? How old are you and how old is your culture? Is there a connection between you and the Mindcaller? Why don't you want to cooperate with the human race? How can..."

"THE WE" interrupts him, "That's enough questions. I can't answer them completely. If you saw what we look like, you would be shocked. We look completely different from you. The drawers have a symbolic meaning that I will not explain to you at this point. We know so much about you and this planet because we have agents and robots with excellent sensors everywhere. Your SR Inc. could still learn a lot from us," and "THE WE" laughs.

"Yes, all this will be destroyed. There will be a huge explosion, which your scientists will interpret as an earthquake. Our culture is young, less than 100 years old, but we've developed much faster than humans in this period. There is no connection between the Mindcaller and us. We won't cooperate with humans as long as they can't manage to cooperate with each other. We consider you intelligent but morally inferior. This doesn't apply to all of you, but just think about it: while you were enjoying all this luxury, 30,000 humans died every day. We don't understand how humans can



live with this fact. But that's enough for now. We'll take you back to your 'clearing'.

But Stephan speaks up one more time. "Raianda and I want to thank you for everything, and for the conversation and your critique of humanity. But „THE WE“, I can't really accept your last statement. You were saying that we're immoral because we don't solve hunger on this planet. This may be true, but it's not as simple as that. But anyway, what are you and your friends doing about it? You don't do anything. You just hide somewhere and solve 'problems' like Goldbach's. You know just as well as me that you could do a lot of good for this world with your technology. You're part of this world too, but you stay isolated. Can you morally justify this?

"THE WE" answers telepathically so only Stephan can hear: "If you knew more, you'd better understand our actions. We're very lonely and, in spite of our abilities, our influence is very limited. Before you leave now, go to the toilet one more time. You'll find a small pellet there that fits into your e-Helper. In case you should ever really need me, you can reach me with it. But this is not a fairy tale and I'm not a genie. It will all depend on the situation, and whether I can or want to help you. You may not tell any of this to Raianda. When she asks, you will only tell her that I told you how lonely I am. Now, farewell, my friend."

Contact with "THE WE" is lost. As predicted, Raianda asks, "You looked so absent for a moment. Did "THE WE" tell you anything else?"

"Yes, "THE WE" told me that he's very lonely. Why do you think he told me that?"

Several robots arrive to escort them away. Stephan quickly disappears into the bathroom and finds the pellet there.

Soon afterwards they are back at the clearing, where they spend several harmonious days without any obligations other than to enjoy themselves.

When Stephan takes Raianda back to the ferry at Port Fitzroy, they don't talk much about the future. They both have

similar thoughts: 'How can we arrange our lives so that they come together?'

Stephan has to go back to the clearing in order to break camp. He spends one night alone and can barely stand his solitude. He decides to call Raianda on the e-Helper to wake her up and to tell her that he cannot live without her.

She is moved and laughs. "But that's what you're doing now. But seriously, I miss you more than I can say. It's not enough to just meet every few months, and if we don't find a solution, you'll lose me, even if it hurts a lot."

Stephan cannot get back to sleep that night.

The next day, the Moller comes to pick up the equipment. Stephan climbs aboard on the rope ladder. Back on the estate, he rushes to his father's office to tell him everything. He sees Marcus standing there with a headband on and staring at a black pellet.

"Welcome back, Stephan. I know you must have a lot to tell me, but this computer which we call Atlantis, and which originates from the distant past, wants to tell you something first. Please put on the headband."

Stephan imagined a different kind of homecoming, but he puts the headband on and Atlantis begins 'speaking' immediately: "Stephan, I'll make this short. I know you have met „THE WE“. Whatever happens, please never break the promise you made him. Make sure that "THE WE" won't be bothered during the three months they need to move. "THE WE" is lonely; you heard that. You should also know that there is only one "THE WE" at the moment. I can't tell you more at this point. Let me just give you some advice: find out the Qu modulation of the robot you brought back. Then you'll understand more. That's it for now, so until next time..."

Stephan takes the headband off. Neither he nor Marcus knows who should begin. Klaus enters the room and interrupts the pregnant silence. Stephan asks, "Klaus, do you know what 'Qu modulation' means? Could you test this robot for it?"



Klaus explains briefly. Then he begins to analyze the robot and Stephan and Marcus exchange their news.

Stephan hands the proof of Goldbach's Conjecture to his father. Marcus is stunned: that's exactly the proof that Atlantis gave him!

Klaus interrupts Stephen in excitement a couple of minutes later: "This minirobot can actually receive frequency-variable radiation. It has a Qu value of 6.23: that's telepathy! One part of the robot is a mechanical telepathic interface. That's just what Atlantis suggested we build. Where the hell did you find this thing?"

For a long time, the three of them talk, often at the same time.

## 12. Meeting with the PM

*September 4, 2020*

Marcus sits with the PM in her office. He has had to wait for this appointment longer than usual because of the coming election. He says to the PM, with whom he has been on a first name basis for years, "Jenny, I'm here today for two reasons: to bring you a gift and because I desperately need your help."

The PM looks at him attentively when Marcus hands her an attractive silver e-Helper. "This is our newest model. It has an inbuilt antipara system. Now you're almost completely safe from para-influences, with the exception of the limitations I explained to you last time.

"In addition, it also meets your high standards of fashion: if you want to change the case of the e-Helper, just press this button and it will come off. You might want to match your outfit with another case, like this one, which looks rather simple but is actually quite special. It's the pride of our chemistry department. You can change the color of this case any way you want with this little slide bar. You can also allow your e-Helper's camera to decide on the right match. Will you allow me to demonstrate?"

The PM nods.

"Today you're wearing a uniformly dark green dress. Now I point the camera at your dress and slide the switch to automatic. Voila! Your e-Helper is now exactly that shade of green."

The PM is impressed: "I assume this can also be used with other devices, or clothes, or even curtains, for example."

"Yes," Marcus agrees, "but we'll have to do some more research because so far we can only do this with one color objects. We can't reproduce patterns yet. But we have a worldwide patent, and as soon as we've solved the remaining problems, it could be an export hit. We'll license the



technology to other companies, and the government can expect some returns from its participation in SR Inc.'s activities."

Both the PM and Marcus are proud of this reliable, long-term cooperation. They even start reminiscing: in 2012, New Zealand had a large budget surplus due to a combination of several favorable circumstances. This surplus was invested in silent shares of several enterprises, of which SR Inc. turned out to be the most successful. New Zealand was able to license many of SR Inc.'s products worldwide, with the e-Helper being *the* export hit.

Seventy percent of New Zealand's budget is now raised this way. It is one of the very few countries in the world that can keep raising social spending while cutting taxes. Marcus finds it hard to understand why economic development institutions around the world still refuse to take this path: investing in enterprises through silent shares rather than subsidizing losers. There's only a return when there's a profit, and the government is not responsible for the company and has no influence on it.

"Thanks for the gift, Marcus. Thanks for this great idea. May I present this to the public?"

"Of course you can. We're grateful for any free promotion of our products." Marcus laughs: "and beginning in October, this model will be on the open market. I don't want to take too much of your time but we're also developing a chameleon material."

"Is that so?"

"Yes, it's a fabric that adjusts its color precisely to whatever surface you put it on. If you wear it from head to toe, you'll be more or less invisible. The fabric shows the same pattern or colors of whatever is directly behind it. But we've had to put a team together to research any potentially negative effects: the fabric could lead to invisible thieves or weapons."

The PM nods thoughtfully, then she changes the subject. "You said that you had a favor to ask. You know that I'll help you if I can in any way."

"Yes. We've made unbelievable discoveries over the last weeks. I'm not exaggerating when I tell you that they could fundamentally change our world. I really don't want to bother you with this before the coming elections, but please come and visit us on the island straight afterwards. You'll be very surprised.

Unfortunately, we also have a little problem: we have to close off the northernmost part of Great Barrier Island for three months. This means sealing off about twenty square kilometers. During this time, no one must be allowed into the area. Yachts that want to visit or anchor off the beaches are not a problem. This area is unpopulated and totally undeveloped. Almost all of it is thicket with no places of particular interest. It's not very likely that someone will want to make a visit there anyway. But in case someone does, we'll have to keep them out under the pretext that it is a temporary military zone."

"So there was some truth to this 'forbidden zone' story?" The PM wants to know.

"Yes. It developed into something very strange. There is no danger unless someone violates the perimeter during the next three months, and that could be lethal."

"It's that dangerous?"

"Yes."

"And you want us to station troops there? I'm not sure how I could explain that."

"No, no, we don't need any troops. We just need permanent airborne surveillance. If we do it this way, it'll be quite simple: we station two or three combat helicopters in the area. SR Inc. can cover the edge of the area with e-hummingbirds; you know, the minidrones that record everything that's going on and send the data back to my control area. If the drones discover any intruders, then, and only then, the helicopters must drive the intruders away. If necessary, troops will have to be lowered from the helicopters to confront them."

"Yes, I think that's doable. Anyway, my defense minister owes me a favor, but is there no other way?"



Marcus shrugs. "There might be, but it might be even more annoying for you. The land in question is Crown Land, so the government could sell it to me; I'd even be willing to pay twice its current value. If I owned it, I could legally keep anyone out. But, selling a piece of Crown Land would probably have to be decided in the parliament, and that could get complicated, couldn't it?"

"Forget it. You have no idea how nosey members of parliament can be. And there would also be hundreds of journalists who would want to find out why anyone would want to buy such a god-forsaken piece of jungle. No, no, no. Let's go with the helicopter plan. You'll have to get in touch with Jimmy Tamera, the Minister of Defense. But don't call him before this evening, I'll talk to him after our 4 p.m. cabinet meeting."

"Thanks, Jenny. And good luck in the elections."

Jenny laughs: "You still have so many bonus points with me! There's no need for thanks. You're the real reason I'll be re-elected by a landslide."

Marcus waves her off even though he knows she's probably right. It's not just the economic upswing triggered by SR Inc. that has guaranteed her popularity—the PM has been amazingly successful at an international level too. She has somehow managed to sign favorable treaties with all the great powers in the world, and it's still a riddle how she does it. The foreign media is full of praise for her charm and talent, and New Zealand is more prosperous and respected than at any time in its history.

Nobody could guess that all these treaties are paybacks for New Zealand's counter-terrorism activities. With the help of her personal secret-service detachment and the paragroup with its army of e-hummingbrids, the PM has been able to 'help out' a lot of governments. The PM only relays the detailed information she receives from SR Inc. on two conditions: First, in order to protect it from reprisals, New Zealand must not be mentioned, and second, the foreign governments must make economic concessions. And how

could anyone not accept these conditions when it means preventing a nuclear strike on Berlin or an explosion on the Golden Gate Bridge or the Eiffel Tower? Who wouldn't want peace to prevail, even in the Middle East? The PM has intervened in many cases like this, and the nuclear disarmament in India and Pakistan is just the most recent.

The PM knows that SR Inc.'s skills will continue to ensure that she plays a major role in combating global terrorism. She can't know that Atlantis will strengthen her position even more.

The election runs as expected: the PM receives sixty-five percent of the votes. This is her third landslide victory in a row.

Two weeks later, she fulfills her promise to visit the paragroup on great Barrier Island. After a relaxed lunch, the PM, Marcus, Klaus, Maria, and Stephan go to the lab.

Marcus explains: "There have been several developments and we only have a small understanding of their consequences. During the development of antipara radiation, Klaus noticed a particular modulation of the rays. Depending on the value of the modulation, they can strengthen specific parabilities. Modulation Qu-4, for example, strengthens my parabilities, Qu-6.6 strengthens Klaus', Qu-6.23 strengthens telepathy, and so forth. This means that if you have a weak telepathic parability, we can strengthen it greatly with a Qu-6.23 modulation. If we do this with two people who may not even be aware of their abilities, they'll suddenly be able to communicate telepathically. We haven't found two people like this yet, but so far we haven't even been able to experiment systematically. There are two reasons for this: there are so many values for Qu modulations, actually there might even be infinitely many. It will take us years to research the most promising ones, and we'll probably discover completely new paraphenomena in the process. But what really kept us behind was that we had to first develop a special headband to utilize Qu modulation.



"Once we've produced a small batch of headbands, we can try to find people with weak telepathic abilities and discover if they are able to communicate telepathically with the help of the modulation. The reason we couldn't concentrate fully on the Qu modulation research is really sensational. You know about the Mindcaller, don't you?"

The PM nods.

"We've known for a long time that it originated in very ancient times, it may not even have been produced by human-beings. Well, now we've found those two black pellets. We've christened the larger one 'Atlantis'. Looking at it, you'd never believe that this is a supercomputer, would you?"

The PM shakes her head.

"It is though. It's millions of years old and was left on this planet by other intelligent creatures called the 'Ancient Ones'. This computer is a billion times more powerful than the best computers we have. We couldn't figure out how to use it until we measured the Qu modulation of its radiation. It's Qu-6.23...telepathy! That's how we, yourself included, can talk to it. We just have to strengthen the weak telepathic abilities that most of us have to some degree with Qu modulation. But Atlantis also understands what we're saying. It has thousands of sensors. We developed an output device according to the plans it gave us. It can guide the device telepathically and write with it. We don't know why it, or rather he or she, refuses to use a keyboard and a screen to communicate with us. It insisted on having a device with a pen or pencil. In the meantime, we've also granted another wish and given him a voice."

The PM interjects, "I must be dreaming! What you're talking about is simply not possible. You claim that you have proof that intelligent life from somewhere out there came here millions of years ago and left supercomputers like this Atlantis here. You're pulling my leg!"

"No, it's no joke. I know how you feel, but we've only told you some of its abilities so far."

Marcus continues to expound on the matter. When he is finished, the PM tries to sum it all up: "So as far as I understand it, we have a super-powerful extraterrestrial computer here that knows more than all of mankind combined and that can solve problems way beyond our own capabilities. In order not to undermine our culture and our sense of self-worth, it is only willing to help us in certain situations. And this is also the reason why whoever produced it has us under observation: if they ever come near this planet again they will not try to contact us because we don't yet fulfill the necessary 'galactic criteria' like the use telepathy, space travel and quantum computing. Is that correct?"

Before Marcus can agree, Atlantis interrupts the scene using his artificial voice. "That's correct, Ms. Prime Minister. However, you shouldn't underestimate what I can still do for you. I can implement methods unknown to mankind and use them to your advantage. My capacity for processing information and my sensory system are much better than those of the computers you have here. That's why I can predict and simulate events. I can support what your very private secret-service," (here Atlantis giggles) "has done to fight terrorism; I can extend your activities into other fields because I can predict natural catastrophes very accurately. You can strengthen your position as head of state even more. You'll see that I can be quite useful even though there's a lot I may not tell you. But there's also a condition: I want to stay with this group. I assure you that this is not an arbitrary decision; it will have its positive effects."

"Marcus, help me here. This is too much for me today. Is what I just heard true?"

"There's no doubt about it. Mostly out of sheer curiosity, I gave Atlantis a mathematic theorem that has remained unproven since it was first proposed over 250 years ago. Atlantis didn't find it hard to figure out the proof. It's simple in a brilliant way and can be understood with only a rudimentary knowledge of mathematics. It's just a series of steps that no one has come up with yet. When I gave it more



mathematical and scientific tasks, Atlantis refused to solve them because it would reveal too many new insights that we have to discover for ourselves. The proof of the theorem was a different case because it has no direct impact on the way we live our lives."

"And do you really believe Atlantis can help us?"

"Yes. We could officially add a disaster-warning department to SR Inc. and Atlantis could unofficially head it. Our meteorologists, volcanologists, and climatologists would be very inspired and would definitely profit from the results. Global warnings would still go through your office 'secretly'; otherwise, our 'knowledge' would draw too much attention. Do you agree, Atlantis?"

Atlantis does not answer. Marcus nods and explains: "Atlantis remains silent very often. He never forces himself into the picture and he refuses to take the responsibility of decision making from our shoulders. But I can assure you that it will be a very powerful ally."

"I somehow get the feeling that you and your group have another parability you don't even seem to be aware of. You seem to attract unusual phenomena."

To everyone's surprise, Atlantis begins howling in laughter: "Ms. Prime Minister, you really deserve all the praise you get. You instinctively recognized modulation Qu-11.4, which Marcus, Klaus, Maria, and Stephan are all responsive to. This modulation corresponds exactly to the parability you have just described: the ability to 'attract' the unusual."

Klaus has paled. He says quietly to Marcus, "Do you know what that means? If we strengthen this modulation in ourselves, our lives would become even stranger."

Marcus is almost angry. "Hands off, Klaus<sup>45</sup>!"

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<sup>45</sup> Despite this, Klaus will try to produce a modulation value of 11.4. To his frustration, he will notice that all possible experiments cannot exceed a value of ten. Completely different methods seem to be necessary.

The PM wrinkles her forehead. "But anyway, what does all this have to do with the military zone in the north? Did you find Atlantis there?"

"Stephan, can you tell her the basics?"

Stephan shows her the minirobot. "This was developed by an unknown intelligent animal species living in the north of the island. It can also receive Qu-6.23 radiation, so apparently it was telepathically controlled." He tells her what he is allowed to tell her, including the fact that "THE WE" is now withdrawing from the island but will probably contact them eventually.

"Highly intelligent technological creatures on Great Barrier Island? I'm slowly getting the picture: some of the Ancient Ones, who produced Atlantis and the Mindcaller, have also developed these robots. They never showed themselves to you because they must not have any contact with humans, according to their rules. This is also the reason they're leaving now. Do you agree that there's a clear connection there?"

They all agree. Each of them has had similar thoughts. Marcus remains silent: When he asked Atlantis explicitly if there are Ancient Ones on the planet now, it gave him a clear "No". Stephan admires „THE WE“: he correctly predicted that the paragroup would make the connection with the Mindcaller, a connection that doesn't exist in reality.

Stephan is the only one who is sure that there is a completely different story behind „THE WE“. He knows that he has no connection to the Ancient Ones, the Mindcaller, or Atlantis and his colleagues. He cannot wait to hear from "THE WE" again someday.

When the PM says goodbye to everyone, Atlantis has something more to say. "I don't want to bother you Ms. Prime Minister, and from now on, I won't speak unless I'm asked to, but there's a natural catastrophe you should know about."

"A catastrophe?"

"Yes. Tomorrow afternoon at 4:23 sharp, an earthquake 7.3 on the Richter scale will hit Tauranga in the Bay of Plenty. Bridges will collapse, water and gas mains will break and



pieces of buildings will fall on the streets. As far as I can tell, no building will collapse completely. If you can make sure that water, electricity and gas will be turned off at 4 p.m., and keep people off the streets, there won't be any casualties. It won't even be necessary to evacuate the city. If you don't take any measures, fires will break out, the gas pipes will explode, whole bridges will collapse, and more than 300 people will die."

Desperate, the PM looks around. "Marcus, can I really trust this thing? Even if it's right, how can I justify the measures that Atlantis suggests?"

"Jenny," says Marcus firmly, "you have to believe Atlantis. Together, we'll figure out a way to justify your actions. Maybe we should have some tea now."

Puzzled, the group sits down in the winter garden. No one notices that Stephan and Maria have been missing for quite a while. When they return, they have a plan.

Maria explains: "We have discussed adding a disaster prevention department before. I did some research. There's a small group at Auckland University run by a seismologist named Simms. He has quite a good reputation. He is having dinner at the moment in Tony's Restaurant near the Arts Center. I found out that he usually has a glass of wine or two before he goes back to work. I happen to know the proprietor of this restaurant, and he'll make sure that Simms's wine will be so strong today that he won't remember much tomorrow. Tonight, Harry, our super hacker, will insert a file about tomorrow's earthquake into Simms's PC. A talented geology student in Delhi is at the moment preparing this file and will forward it to Stephan."

Maria smiles and Stephan reddens a little. "Together with a warning, this file will later be forwarded from Simms's computer to the PM. Harry says that Simms's code will look absolutely real. Jenny, this will be a good enough reason to take the necessary measures. We think that you should call Simms shortly before the earthquake, thank him for his warning and tell him that you took the measures he suggested.

He will be confused, but he'll soon find the 'Tauranga' file on his PC and notice that he really sent it to you. Before he can even express his doubts, the earthquake will occur, unless Atlantis was just playing some kind of sick game. The media will honor the PM and Simms, and SR Inc. will offer him the leading position at our new government-financed seismology department. I think this will solve our problem."

For a moment, it is absolutely quiet in the winter garden. Then the PM jumps up and hugs Maria and Stephan. "You're the best! I think I should make you part of my administration. We'll do it just like that, unless anyone has any better suggestions."

Klaus speaks up. "I think it would be better if we faked the date on the file to before dinner. If Simms really drinks a lot, he could decide not to go back to work. But even if he does, he wouldn't notice that someone sent a file with his code."

The PM nods. "Stephan, tell Harry to do that. Marcus and Maria, could you be in Tauranga around 4 p.m. tomorrow with the Super Moller? That way, you could get involved if necessary and give me the latest news from there. Would that be all right?"

The next day, the measures, which have only been spread via the local media, are carried out relatively late: the PM wants to avoid other scientists interfering at the last moment. Unfortunately, they are forced to start a small fire in the local seismological station to guarantee their non-involvement.

At 4 p.m., the Moller with Maria, Marcus, Stephan, and Klaus, lands in a park in Tauranga. Stephan has come with them just out of curiosity. Klaus insisted on bringing some devices in order to measure the radiation and its modulations. At 4:18, Klaus suddenly gets nervous. "I'm getting radiation with a Qu-2.2 modulation!"



The city is almost empty. Some of the inhabitants preferred to leave, while others have stayed in their apartments, making sure not to sit near windows and to protect their valuables. Many of them have also bought candles and drinking water.

Marcus is wearing his communication glasses to ensure that the PM, at her office in Wellington, can experience everything almost first hand. At 4:23, the earth starts to move. The streets take on the appearance of an ocean as they erupt in waves of asphalt. The Moller shakes, windows shatter around them, and tiles fall from the roofs. The big bridge across the harbor swings and twists wildly before finally collapsing. There is dust everywhere. Because of her paraseeing skills, Maria is the only one who can see anything. The tremors soon abate. Only some bridges and overpasses have collapsed, and all the large buildings are still standing.

The evening news stresses the courage of the PM, who made this difficult decision after a warning from the famous seismologist, Simms. The plan has worked flawlessly.

Marcus remembers that Klaus measured a Qu-2.2 modulation shortly before the earthquake. "What do you think about that, Klaus?"

"I had this strange premonition. That's why I came with you in the first place. I've heard stories about certain animals becoming uneasy just before an earthquake. I just exposed some different kinds of animals to the 2.2 modulation, and they all went nuts! In other words, strong earthquakes cause this type of radiation and some animals notice it shortly before it gets serious. We can do the same thing now with our technology, but apparently Atlantis can do it twenty-four hours ahead of us." Klaus grins. "We'll catch up with Atlantis eventually."

At 10:30, the PM calls the paragroup on Great Barrier Island to tell them that Atlantis's prognoses were 100% accurate. "I thank you all and, give my regards to Atlantis."

Marcus walks into the lab. Out of curiosity, Stephan follows him without Marcus noticing. "You were right on all

counts with the quake, Atlantis. We are all very grateful. Please continue to help us."

Marcus hadn't expected an answer but suddenly Atlantis grumbles, "It's all right, but don't think you'll always find it so easy to act on my predictions!"



## Information on Books in the XPERTS Collection

All books are available in German from Freya Pub.Co., see [www.freya.at](http://www.freya.at) and can be ordered via all good bookstores, but most easily via [www.iicm.edu/Xperts](http://www.iicm.edu/Xperts) . All English versions can be ordered through [www.booklocker.com](http://www.booklocker.com) . However, due to the high shipping costs, international customers outside the US and within the European Union can order “The Paradoppelganger” and “The Paranet” at lower cost through [www.iicm.edu/Xperts](http://www.iicm.edu/Xperts) . Within the US, Booklocker is the best source. Outside the US readers are encouraged to either neglect the high postage ☺ or to buy the e-book versions from [www.booklocker.com](http://www.booklocker.com) : No delay, no postage, lower price, and you just download the file, and print it out locally.

Here is a summary of the books in the Xperts Series currently or soon available. The series is growing rapidly. All books, where no author is mentioned I have written myself. For the others I have written a ‘script’ and edited the resulting book. If you have any questions, suggestions, or are interested in becoming one of the authors of a book in the Xperts Series, contact me at [hmaurer@iicm.edu](mailto:hmaurer@iicm.edu) . If you want to find out more about me than you ever cared to read, consult [www.iicm.edu/maurer](http://www.iicm.edu/maurer) . I will answer all emails (nothing worse than being ignored) except if I am really down ☺ .

Note that although there is a thread through the books (some persons appear in each book) the novels are completely self-contained and can be read independently of each other in any order. Those marked bold are available as of 2004. I have arranged the book in more or less chronological order (according when they take place), so this might be an obvious order to read them. But, feel free to start with anyone that tickles you!

**“Xperts: The Telekinetic”:** In a way, this is the first book in the collection. The student of physics, Marcus, discovers that he has telekinetic and timewarping powers, and uses them to seduce girls, to make money, and to help people. He is also very much aware how dangerous this ‘parability’ can be for him. He is eventually captured by a para-military group of the European

Union with dubious motives, and manages to escape only with the help of his girl friend Maria, who will be his big love for life. They flee to New Zealand to start a new existence. Marcus and Maria (and other persons) are the thread that holds the Xperts Series together....

**“Xperts: The Paradopeganger”:** This is another novel involving Marcus and Maria. Their daughter Lena discovers a strange para-gifted person. In the process of trying to make him join the group the reader visits Brazil and Europe, and is drawn into historic mysteries, extending back in history even to the Egyptian pyramids. This novel also gives a glance at what future PCs and the Net might look like... a tribute to the fact that the Editor (and author of this book) is a computer science professor. However, don't get turned off: this is a novel not a scientific book!

**“Xperts: The Paracommunicator”** (by Jennifer Lennon): Aroha, a young Maori woman, finds half of an ancient device in the hills near Auckland, New Zealand. Herb, also of Maori origin, independently finds the other half. Their function, and that of the mysterious black ‘stones’, cannot be fully understood. However, on a dangerous mission in Africa (Namibia), given to them by Marcus, it is clear that neither Aroha nor Herb would have survived without the help of the strange artifact.

**“Xperts: The Parashield”** (by Sam Osborne): The West-Australian Ryan finds out, as he grows up, that he can shield himself and other persons nearby, by creating through mental powers an impenetrable shield of energy. If not for his girlfriend Hannah who has some awesome ‘parabilities’ his enemies would eliminate him before the team of Marcus can intervene. This novel is written with a South-Western Australian background and the suspense and complexity increases as it develops.

**“Xperts: E-Smog!”** (by Ann Backhaus): An Australian researcher, Mandi, discovers by a fluke the dangerous side-effect of elector magnetic fields, as emitted by just about any electric device. With the background of an authentic description of the Australian West, of Malaysia and Singapore, Mandi tries to put up an impossible fight against huge international companies, and



succeeds to some extent, due to Marcus' group and her brilliant negotiating skills (release planned for 2005)

**"Xperts: The Parawarriors":** We are in the year 2019. A nuclear war between Pakistan and India seems to be unavoidable. Marcus and his team try to avoid the worst, at horrific costs. All efforts seem to be in vain. Yet, after interludes in India, Bali and La Reunion some form of normality returns, only to be disturbed (or helped?) by super-computers from an ancient civilization millions of years ago, and a strange intelligent animal "The They" that remains a mystery for a long time.

**"Xperts: The Param@ils"** (by Peter Lechner): This novel gives a different twist to the Xperts Series: the economy is all that matters! A story of intrigues, human emotion and some strange emails capture the attention of the readers, with Marcus' group again playing a pivotal role in solving a complex scheme. (In preparation)

**"Xperts: The Paranet":** In 2080 the then existing network of computers breaks down completely, throwing the world into total chaos. This novel shows how dependent we are going to be on computers and computer networks, and how civilization will virtually cease to exist if such a total breakdown ever happens at a stage when mankind is 'Sufficiently networked'. Billions of people are about to die, is there any hope for them? Yes, by mounting a terrorist attack in the past!

**"Xperts: Supervision":** Big brother with cameras, flying cameras, intelligent databanks and total security is catching up on us. This is a chilling novel, with a bright line of hope shown on the horizon, if we just decide to act NOW. (In preparation)

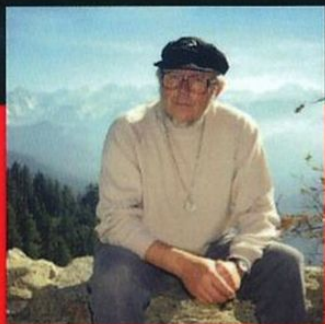
Check the Website [www.iicm.edu/Xperts](http://www.iicm.edu/Xperts) to stay up-to-date on all developments concerning books in the XPERTS Collection.

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***Hermann Maurer, Coordinator  
of The XPERTS Collection***

**We are in the year 2019. A nuclear war between Pakistan and India seems inevitable. Marcus and his team try to avoid the worst, at horrific costs. All efforts seem to be in vain. After interludes in India, Bali and La Reunion, matters are further disturbed (or helped?) by super-computers from an ancient civilization millions of years ago, and a strange intelligent animal "The We."**

**"What does the S stand for in this SF novel? I say: not just Science but also Suspense, Scenes from all over the world, and Sex. Amazing that one of the top German computer scientists is also capable of writing his third exciting book in the XPERTS Collection"**

**(Christoph Albert, FAZ, Frankfurt)**

**"A great book, starting with a realistic scenario, an emotional interlude, and genuine surprises, or should we say riddles, that obviously will also be important in other books"**

**(Frank Sommending, Regina, Canada)**

**"After reading "Xperts: The Telekinetic" and "Xperts: The Paradoppelgänger" I was looking forward to this book. I was in for many surprises: it is a must for readers interested in this genre."**

**(Arthur Tennenbaum, Vienna, Austria)**

