

## **Beagle's Nose**

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Fred boarded the southbound train at Fourth Street Station, storm front gusting at his back. Pivoting as he grabbed the steel rail, he hauled himself into the narrow upper deck of the commuter train.

Settling into the hard plastic seat, he stared out of the window while the train gathered speed. He liked inspecting the walls of India Basin Containment Area minutely, looking for signs of disintegration, wondering how people on the other side were doing.

This however, was not why he was onboard. The subject of today's outing was the partitioned snack-machine area enclosing a smaller smoking area wrapped in thick impact-resistant plastic by the train's doors. He had to allow rumor-mongers time to accumulate before slipping in unassumingly and doing his 'thing'.

After South City a half-dozen passengers moved to the smoking room on cue. Fred waited a few minutes and joined, pulling an Ecuadorian vape-stick out of a pocket as he slid the snack-room door aside.

Smokers were chatting in the room, but as he walked in an older man lifted his arm in an elongated loop, took a drag, and asked: "- and how about the those Warriors, huh? Anybody remember them?"

Fred knew from repeat visits that this was a signal to change the subject and the others would play along.

A round of chuckles. An older woman standing across from him, leaning against a wall countered with "Okay, Boomer!"

Loud laughter.

"Didn't they used to try to get people to stop smoking nicotine, back in the day?"

"Back when they cared?"

Chuckles.

Fred smiled, arched his eyebrows knowingly then turned his attention to the train window, pretending to tune them out.

This was his 'thing'; getting there, delivering his neural-net payload to the appointed time and place, getting people to relax and be themselves in his presence. This was his fifth trip with them. They'd let down their guard enough. They couldn't help it. That's why talking about the old days was malicious disinformation. People remembered that other time. People relaxed a little into that other time. People slipped up. They couldn't help it. And now, there was nothing to figure out anymore. He just followed the prompts. Case-files opened the minute he was in proximity. The rest was just sticking around long-enough to back-door, scan and download whatever it was Beagle was taking a longer than average time getting.

Fred took a measured set of drags from his stick. He returned to his seat at the soft chime announcing the next station, thinking about how little it took to change the course of a life.

*Moments, memories, reflexes... that's what we have. That's it.*

Two stops later, it was Fred's turn to get out and face the first wave of torrential rain.

*Not a drop for ten months and now storm-cells daisy-chained all the way across the Pacific, streaming right at us. Great.*

Fred expected traffic hell, even with self-drivers. The combination of struggling AI, surging tides and collapsing infrastructure does not make for an ideal driving experience.

A red eight-seat electric van – unmarked, scuffed and unremarkable - pulled up to the curb as he reached it. As the passenger door slid open Fred noticed a particular shade of red hair on a woman huddled away from the wind and rain. Carefully, he sat down in a seat where he could see her. The door scraped closed. The woman straightened up, saw him and her eyes twitched.

“Hi Trish” Fred began simply.

“Hello” she answered calmly.

The door clicked shut. The van groaned away from the curb, navigated the jumble of other vehicles also picking up passengers, and accelerated somewhat into the slow trudge of traffic.

Fred took a deep breath “So, I guess I'll break the first taboo: where were you today?”

“Out by Dublin”

“Never-ever hear about Dublin anymore, or Livermore for that matter. By the way; when was the last time there was any news out of Florida?”

Trish chuckled. Fred smiled.

“Um, I think back when we knew president's names?”

They laughed.

*I miss this! Why did we ever...?*

“And, remember when the internet was like having the whole world at your fingertips?” More laughter.

“Holy *crap* Fred! Needed that!” Trish said.

“You still think that humans at Beagle monitor the vans?” Trish asked, smirking.

“Um, *yeah*... no. Probably not. Also; I don't think there are ‘vans’ anymore. Think it's down to just this one they keep for us. Any folks left in the women's dorm?”

“Only executive security, and they’re on lock-down until a gark makes an appearance. After that it’s back to the kennel”.

“How are we still...”

“.. *around?*” Trish smirked, finishing his sentence. “Because were *special*. We’re -”

“Beagle’s Nose!” they yelled in unison, laughing manically, baying comically.

“Goddamn, those were *such* stupid ads!” Trish sighed.

“Trish, I missed this”.

“Missed what?”

“Us talking about stuff”.

“Why?”

“We used to talk about all kinds of stuff. That’s what I miss most”.

“Well, maybe it’s for the best” Trish said.

“Okay, I’ll bite. Why is that Trish?”

“Because there’s no point.”

“Why not?”

“Researching, forming your little personal opinions, making ‘observations’ only makes sense if you can do something with them. Nobody can do anything about anything now. Not even the people in charge. Opinions don’t matter because we don’t matter”.

“Well... I guess I miss mattering then” Fred said quietly.

“You know what I don’t miss?”

“Are you going to say: “this?”

“Yep”.

“Do you have anything you *do* like to chat about now, Trish?”

“I like to think about being happy. There’s so many things we aren’t in control of, but we *can* decide to be happy and actually *be* happy. You should try it”.

*Wow. She must be hitting The Affirmations pretty hard.*

“Hmm, interesting idea. Well, I guess it could work. I mean; pets are happy, right? Remember *Myron*, Trish? Myron was one happy little pet.”

Trish froze, then shifted her entire body away from him. Her posture assumed a semi-fetal position facing her window.

Fred sank into his seat, resignedly.

*Here we go. Just like always. Never getting off this merry-go-round.*

The van rolled through the remaining distance in silence. When the door slid open in front of Women’s Dorm Trish un-kinked herself and scrambled to the curb.

“Just fuck off from now on, Fred”.

The door clicked shut while Fred stared ahead.

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Taking another gulp of beer, Fred appreciated the way the silvery twilit bay washed around the skeletal remnants of the old MugTome HQ.

The place was doomed from the start, as Fred saw it. Global corporations that never had to show profit didn’t need a future, or any legacy other than a swollen bank account.

*It was never about that anyway...*

Gulp.

*Time flies!*

His ‘welcome home’ ambient track started bridging into something up-beat.

*Holy Crap! Here comes another assignment. And I’ve been home for what? Twenty minutes?*

Fred focused on finishing his beer. The moment it hit the waste chute Beagle HQ’s mission-offer flashed into his visual cortex.

*Wow. Fully jacked into me just to tell me this. Must be really important.*

He read it reflexively, intimately familiar with the corporate AI’s communication style which was – after all – customized for him anyway. When he was done he sat down.

*Pack for transportation? To Modifications? And then...?*

Fred took deep breath. What could he do about it anyway? He could refuse. They’d tell him to pack, and without warning, they’d drop him and his baggage off at a Navigation Center, where somebody desperate to keep their own life-saving job would pretend to help him, while he struggled to keep his few remaining possessions from pilferage.

*Then; Quarantine. They always find something. Off to the Other Side of The Wall...* Fred knew. He'd been inside all the regional Navigation Centers on business.

Another deep breath and let it out, longer & slower than the inhale. Fred willed himself to relax and sink into his only chair.

*Goddamn! I only volunteered to get rigged up with a neural net because it was the only way to qualify for the healthcare plan!*

*Fred snorted in the disgust.*

“The healthcare plan!” he said to no one, sarcastically.

*Where the fuck are they sending me?*

Minutes crawled by.

*I'm alive because I volunteered and I never ask questions. They got me. They know it. I know it.*

Fred felt his weight crushing down, down, down. His breath was almost nonexistent now.

*Oh man, am I going to miss this chair.*

Fred tried not to think about anything at all. His ambient track bridged back to his calming after hours music.

*What am I hanging on for, anyway?*

The one and only reason to stick around regularly told him to “fuck-off”.

*Maybe 'The Universe' is trying to tell me something...*

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The words “Lunar Mining Conglomerate Space Center” in gold letters written in German, Russian, Farsi and Chinese circled a furnace-red “LunaCong” logo visible from Earth orbit.

Fred watched his seat-back screen as it played their approach split-screened with local programming. It was old-school enough to trigger childhood memories - with different cultural references and a loose, improvisational feel. He tried not to look mesmerized.

It took nineteen months; rewiring his ras, medula, pons and Wernickes area of his brain in a way that left him speaking English with a permanent Serb accent, a string of work assignments with covertly owned Beagle subsidiaries to move him physically from West to East, across the Great Firewall, and into the employ of an ostensibly Serb Orthodox charity where he was ‘christened’ with a new legal name: Stefan Danilov. From that gig Fred/Stefan got a three-year contract as an environmental tech in a LunaCong settlement.

Fred was bewildered, behind his mask of professional indifference. Martian colonization was the only space colonization ever shown by Beagle, but it was never clear whether Mars had already been colonized or they were still just talking about it.

Fred was also scared. If he was connected to Beagle by anyone in any way, then... well.

In Belgrade they would've quickly sent him to prison for being an agent of a 'declared enemy terrorist' organization - but that didn't keep him from liking Belgrade. Here? He wasn't sure what they might do. LunaCong Oblast operated with considerable latitude, even compared to the rest of the EurAsian Bloc, which seemed a lot less stringent than Beagle's crushing paws.

And yet... and yet... it was all so exciting.

*Am I being put out to pasture, or put down?*

The lunar shuttle set them down with the slightest detectable bounce. Local passengers flew out of their seats, scrambling for the aisle before the unfasten seat-belt sign came on. Fred stayed in his seat and waited, finding their anarchic pettiness reassuring.

Strolling down the tunnel connecting customs inspection with the terminal Fred marveled at the diversity – not of ethnicity, which was a given – but facial expression. Adults didn't wear the mask of corporate neutrality, and they didn't switch to requesting tentatively with an elaborately 'non-threatening' pleading expression and a voice an octave higher when speaking to human vendors – so as to avoid being considered threatening.

Fred had researched LunaCong during his slack-time in the 'burbs of Belgrade. There was no social-credit/credit-rating system here. No pervasive threat-scan AI. Not a priority, apparently. LunaCong focused on growing. Local surveillance was "parametric" and "aggregate" - scanning for fires, depressurization, proactively against riots or stampedes, gunshots etc. – and not much else. They had better things to do.

Fred eyes tracked upward to a luminous sign: "WELCOME to LunaCong! Temperature: 20C, Pressure 0.82 atm, CO<sub>2</sub> 260ppm!"

The phone he bought in Belgrade buzzed. His surface-transportation was in Airlock Five, next to an Uzbek shashliq place. Walking past he smelled their food. They weren't roasting in the traditional way – just steaming, air-frying, microwaving – but it was different and made him hungry anyway. He found a "Luna Länder; diesen Weg" sign, got in line and tried not to think about food, being broke, or Trish.

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Fred knew the shuttle was taking the 'scenic route' when it made a fifth stop and spent ten minutes letting people move themselves and baggage through the pressurize surface crawler. On the plus side, there were virtual portholes to watch the scenery slide by, so that was educational.

Where Central LunaCong City was connected by arterial tunnels, hubs and residential clusters, the outskirts were an archipelago of villages and settlements, separate from the Moon's four-nation CoDominium by more than distance - as Fred learned by watching who and what got on and off, and where.

Erinnerung Station hove into sight over a ridge of regolith. The unearthly contrast between interstellar-black, unfiltered solar-white and the stippled grays of the lunar surface were traumatic for Fred - in good way - like mental dynamite. A gate lifted. They slid beneath the surface. The settlement outer airlock opened, cycled, opened again. They arrived.

Two duffel-bags – sum total residue of his earthly existence – swung easily in low gravity. Fred stacked them on a bench on the loading-dock to wait as instructed by Arno, his hiring manager and new supervisor.

“Stefan?”

Fred stood and shook hands with a large, amiable looking man in his late-forties.

“Arno” he announced.

“Face-to face!” They chuckled.

“Help with your bags?”

“Think I’m good. Pretty light up here.”

“Perks of low-grav’. The other is arthritis goes away. Today is going to be pretty simple. You are on the clock, but just to unpack, acclimate, study and we’ll check-in with Gretchen; Communication Manager”.

“Sounds good”. They passed through the blow-out baffle, entered the main-square. Fred stopped and took a breath. Arno paused with him and smiled.

“Like it?”

“Yes. Love it.”

“We like the comfy”.

The town square was contained in a beveled cubic space: a one hundred-meter high ceiling studded with solarium light diffusers, walls micro-terraced with vines and air-plants that had flocks of tiny birds swarming among them. To Fred’s eyes it looked beautiful, but something was missing.

“As mentioned in the briefing, we have the usual issues with hitchhikers; insects, arachnids and the like, so finches and geckos keep them in check. Of course, that’s not a perfect solution, but they’re safe enough, and we like having them around. Want some chai? We have excellent” Arno pointed to an Uzbek cafe much like the one he passed in LunaCong.

“Sure thing”.

*When was the last time I had hand-made chai?*

“Thanks Ruslan” Arno said to the apparently older of the two brother-owners of the cafe, gracefully accepting their cups and saucers. He passed one to Fred.

“Hungry?”

“I am!”

Arno swiftly outlined all the things that might impact Fred’s new job that weren’t discussed in the offer-letter; the three-year commitment was not optional – take it or leave it. Leaving it meant joining the LunaCong job-pool. “You’ll get a job, because there’s always a shortage – but, well...”

“Yeah, I get it.” Fred chuckled, finishing off an alligator-gar shish-kebab with relish.

There were certain civic duties that came with the job – since Arno was part of the settlement’s government. And there were perks: no rent or utility bills, no individualized taxes – the community paid a fixed quarterly ‘commitment’ to the CoDominium – and there was an automatic pension.

“And they don’t give a damn what we do in here. Just pay on time and don’t make trouble.” Arno concluded.

“AI monitoring?”

“Nope. Human, and at the station. That’s it. Joe – Security Manager – spends ninety-nine percent of his time doing public-relations with them. They haven’t been here since the pre-lease inspection.”

“Lease?”

“Forty-nine year lease granted to Doctor Bhairavananda – you’ve heard about him right?”

Fred nodded.

“Forty-nine years for the whole settlement site, plus two kilometer curtiledge. Plenty of room to grow”.

“Job for life?” Fred asked.

“You could say that. Any other immediate questions?”

“Just one; who’s your boss?”

“Council”.

“And who is that exactly?”

“Every adult. Direct democracy.”

Fred did a double-take. “Um, how does that work?”

“Great. Well, let’s go find you some quarters Stefan”. Arno stood up, beckoned and started walking across the square.



Stefan noticed a long line of dining and buffet tables was being set up.

“Special occasion?”

“Not particularly. We eat together twice a week.”

“For what? Religious reasons?”

“Nope. Just like to.” Arno smiled.

A sense of oddness remained. “How long have you folks been together? Everyone is so calm. I’ve seen zero awkwardness. LunaCong had hustle and bustle. Here there’s hustle, no bustle. Is that normal?”

Arno laughed. “When you’re up to speed you’ll see how it is”.

Striding through a door under a sign that said “Library” Arno held out his hand to a red-haired woman in her early forties. Fred caught up just as Gretchen shook Arno’s hand while looking Fred in the eyes. Fred stared back.

*Reminds me of... Whoa! Snap out of that!*

“Gretchen, I was thinking about sticking our new tech upstairs. Objections?”

“Nope. We are vacant in two and four. And I could use the company. Can you help close shop?” Gretchen asked, turning to Fred.

Her accent sounded ‘English’ to Fred, though he didn’t know which town or region. The erstwhile United Kingdom was a more ambiguous place after The Anarchy.

“Oh, yes. Of course.” Fred answered in his Serb-accented Americanized English. Gretchen smiled faintly, turning back to Arno “I’ll get him sorted and bring him to supper, then?”

“Good enough. Feel free to chat. Gretchen definitely knows whatever there is to know about Errinerung. That’s her job. See you tonight!” Arno strode out, leaving Fred waiting for Gretchen to show him where to unpack. Distracted, he glanced around at the rooms full of lounging visitors sipping beverages, touching old-fashioned, oddly improvised e-books & other devices.

*Wow! I didn’t know anybody did this anymore.*

“Yes, fascinating, isn’t it” Gretchen prompted with an amused expression, beckoning Fred to the stairs.

An hour later when the light in the square was sun-setting Gretchen asked: “do you like cafeterias?”

“I did”.

“Well then, you’ll love this. One big table” she said, gesturing at the gathering crowd in the town square.

After loading up at the buffet/potluck tables, they took a seat at the far end, nearest a section with no chairs, only a flock of crows eating and jostling against each other quietly along a line of trays.

“Uh-huh.”

“Oh! Noticed The Flock, did you?” Gretchen said with a grin.

“Okay, I have to ask; what’s the deal with all the crows? They have their own table?”

“Yes, they do. They work hard. Would you like a taste of our sunchoke brandy when you’re done?”

“Work? What do they do?”

“Tend gardens, vineyards, fields. Learn fast. Efficient.” Gretchen said, offhandedly.

“So; during the crossing, when they showed you the cold-sleep racks, were you terrified?”

Fred turned from the crows abruptly and laughed, “Yes, in spite of everything!”

Much later, sitting on a couch in the library after closing, sipping Gretchen’s brandy, sampling the local port and an odd collection of sweets; “So tell me Gretchen: how did you get here?”

“I was a class-A dissident offender at Belmarsh women’s annex. They broke us out during the early days of The Anarchy – or The *Glorious* Anarchy as some of us prefer. Went across the Channel. Kept moving. Met the late Doctor Bhai’ about the time he was starting to get somewhere with his alien artifacts, and he hired me. He created the working prototype. Rest is history.”

“Have you ever gone back?”

“Yes, I did. Not the same place. Different overall – and not in the best way.” Gretchen’s eyes seemed to look into some imaginal distance, frowning slightly.

“So let’s see; Doctor Bhairavanda started reverse-engineering wreckage from the Irkutsk crash after the US Navy published their official statement. So that was like, what? 2019?”

“Well, you couldn’t get funding for that kind of research until that happened, and then it took time to procure something to work on. I joined Doctor Bhai’ at the end of the Twenties. So yes, I’ve been around awhile, if that’s what you’re getting at. But as you can see, I’m fully regenerated - thank you very much, People’s Bureau of Lunar Medicine!” she said with a smile.

Fred blushed, slightly. “Hey! Why haven’t you talked about your library? What’s your content?”

“Everything. We want to remember the human legacy the oligarchs are deleting” Gretchen said over another sip of brandy.

“Size?”

“Petabytes, a lot of it research quality. Can’t say more though, darling Stefan. You’ll have to sign the NDA first. *However...* Library?”

“Yes?” Answered the voice of Christopher Walken.

“Music, Roy Orbison, *In Dreams*”.

Two minutes and forty-nine seconds later:

“Was that AI?”

“Not at all”.

“When did that come out?”

“1963; it was intensely appreciated in the UK then - back when they still called it ‘Great Britain’”.

“Where’s it been all this time?”

Gretchen gave Fred an appraising look. “Well, that depends. If you’ve only been in the historical United States of America until recently, you’d have to ask Beagle and it wouldn’t tell you because it finds human memories awkward. Last thing it wants to do is trigger any”.

Fred took finished his brandy, chased that with a dash of ice water and let that sink in.

Gretchen calmly studied him. Turning toward him with her legs crossed, she slipped an arm around his shoulders, elaborating: “It’s not just *you* Stefan. By any objective measure ‘In Dreams’ is splendid. Orbison is from decades before AI culture-creation. He had a three octave vocal range. His music was stronger, more complex than typical rock-n-roll. Roy was not just ‘good’ but *fuck-ing good*” She said, accentuating her accent comically.

Fred, turned to her; “I really do enjoy this”.

“This what?” She replied with a smirk.

“Talking face-to-face with a human about human Stuff. Gretchen, what the hell *happened* to us?”

“Meaning? Stefan?”

“*US*. Our way of life. Humanity. The ‘Free World’, ‘Freedom of Information’. Information wanting to be ‘free’ and all that?”

Gretchen took a gulp from her glass.

“Matter of values, if you ask me. When money is all that’s valued, humans aren’t. We’re just...” she waved her hand “...in the way”...

“Why was it?”

Gretchen looked at him with amusement “Why was ‘it’ what?”

“Why was ‘In Dreams’ so “intensely appreciated” in the UK?”

She chuckled. “Cultural resonance. There he was; singing like some tragic, chinless god about longing, loss, love unrequited. They saw themselves in him probably.”

“How so?”

“Oh, it was just a bit *too* British really: you never felt worthy, you were better acquainted with rejection, so you didn’t pursue love. Too much to hope for. If you did find it you screwed it up straight-away by withholding.”

“You said all that in the past-tense.”

“Well, it’s gone now. That old “UK” – save for the odd enclave. As I mentioned; when money is all that matters, kiss culture goodbye. Mammon will be eating it’s “*balls for breakfast*” she smirked, imitating a once-famous actor.

Fred quietly gasped. “Damn! That is fucking *dark!*”

“No darling, that is just fucking *gark*”

Their eyes locked now.

“Gretchen”, Fred felt Gretchen’s fingers lightly brushing the nape of his neck. Fred finished his wine.

“Gretchen, I don’t know if...”

“If what... lovey?” Gretchen murmured, considerately.

Fred reflexively leaned into her just as he had so many times with Trish. He stopped himself abruptly, wondering if he’d made a horrible mistake. “I don’t know how I can ever leave here”.

Tapping his forehead with her index finger, Gretchen whispered: “I think you’d better not” the moment before their lips met.

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There was a note – on a scrap of actual, vintage paper – next to a carafe of chilled water on the nightstand when Fred woke up.

Taking a deep breath, he sat up, poured a glass of water and read: “welcome to stay”.

Finishing the cup of water he lay back down, relaxed, mind blank, staring at the ceiling in kaleidoscopic timelessness. Then a panicky thought occurred:

*Where are the prompts?*

Beagle was supposed to reactivate his neural surveillance set twelve hours after passing through LunaCong.

*What the hell?*

Fred sat up again.

*What do I do?*

*Get dressed, stay calm. Stay alert. Do not assume they know. Might be a glitch.*

Arno was waiting for Fred by the coffee-maker downstairs.

“Coffee? Tea or...?”

“Tea. Green if there is any”.

“Plenty. Kinda pressed for time though, so how do you feel about sticking a snack in your pocket and drinking it on our way? Gotta show you the turf”.

“Can do”.

“What I like to hear!”

Minutes later, on a self-driving cart trundling into the first of many ‘open-space’ agricultural tunnels, Arno tapered off the small-talk and moved onto the meat of the job’s requirements:

“Really you’d be interacting with Joe in Safety as well me. You’re on both RACI charts. The responsibilities you own are these tunnels, barometric pressure alarms, contagion. Hands-on safety inspections are legally required. The Flock will help you as they check crop rows and tunnels and tap a green status at the end of each. They’re better than we are at spotting changes from baseline and like doing it. Satisfies their urge to forage – which they also do. They eat pretty much anything they find that isn’t part of the human food-chain, minimizing pest-control measures. We never actually need inorganics.”

“Seems straight-forward”.

“It is. Pretty do-able job for a newcomer. Great way to get the lay of the land, so to speak. When you get the hang of that we can add responsibilities. You in?”

“Yes?”

“Okay then! Let’s formalize the contract tonight. But there’s still things I need you to see. Any questions, by the way?”

“Uh, yeah. The ‘Flock’? Are they normal crows, or ...?”

“They are not” the cart pulled off the track and parked them next to a long field of tall sunchoke flowers, tops gently rippling in a convection-current.

“The Flock are one of Doctor Bhairavananda’s legacies.”

“Are they intelligent?”

“Well, that’s the thing. Crows and the whole Corvid family in general are already ‘intelligent’ in that they can creatively problem-solve, socially learn, communicate, are self-aware, have a ‘theory of mind’ - I’m just quoting the doctor here – so he didn’t have to increase their intelligence, *individually*”.

“You stressed the word “individually”? Fred asked.

“Yes. Can we leave our cups on the cart? We’re going to do some access-tunnel scrambling, and it can get a bit snug in there”.

“Sure. So, are you going to finish telling me? You can’t just leave me hanging like that”.

Arno chuckled, “Okay. So the Doctor did increase their intelligence – *collectively*. How? By giving them something better than language to communicate with. They share *memories* transported by synthetic virions engineered by Doctor Bhai’. Since memories are how we store experiences – learning, trauma, etc. – The Flock share knowledge directly, and have a generally shared sense of self. For them it isn’t just *myself*, it’s also *ourself*. Result: dramatically reduced squabbling. Dramatically increased team-working. Kilo-for-kilo, they outwork a humans, and they’re getting better faster because they learn from their mistakes *collectively* – something we humans struggle with.”

He paused, clipped a toolkit to his pants, “Sorry to go into lecture-mode”.

Fred was standing still with a blank look on his face. He had goosebumps.

“Oh *chappy!* Sorry, was that a lot?” Arno chuckled.

“Uh-huh. Never heard anything like that before and it sounds like you’re totally serious.”

“Well, you wouldn’t. Knowledge suppression - not sharing - is the rule not exception down the gravity-well, which is now significantly behind us technologically, by the way. They spend so much time and energy micro-managing, butt-covering, taking credit, putting out fires, dodging blow-back they can’t get ahead. Different priorities up here though. Ready?”

Fred put on a hard-hat and followed Arno down a path through the foliage to the nearest tunnel wall, Arno pressed a panel, something clicked, a door appeared. Motion-sensor lamps revealed a dusty narrow passage-way.

“Whew! Someone needs to get in here and vacuum!”

“*Okay!* I get it!” Fred said.

Laughter.

“Okay, stay close. These convection tunnels are tricky, not entirely according to plan. There’s kilometers of them behind the walls and under the settlement. There was a tunnel collapse during construction, and we had to improvise.”

“Got it”.

“Good.”

Reaching a metal staircase spiraling up and down into darkness, Arno charged past three lower levels darting into a tunnel at the fourth, as Fred hurried behind.

*Is he trying to lose me?*

The light got dimmer while Fred’s eyes tracked Arno’s white helmet vigilantly. He felt a flutter of paranoia, switched to tracking his hands and fell behind further, cautiously.

“Okay, right through here!” Arno called back as he darted right into another unmarked tunnel. Fred turned the corner and found – nothing. Arno was gone. Fred went on for another fifty meters before turning around.

*He ditched me! Why?! Prank?*

Retracing his steps, Fred stood at the tunnel intersection for a moment rubbing the back of his head. He relaxed, as if something had just occurred to him. With habitual smoothness he turned, retracing a few steps in the direction he’d last seen Arno going.

His hand whipped out almost absentmindedly and slapped a section of the wall, a square section moved inward a half centimeter. There was tiny click. A large section of the wall pulled inward and slid aside. Fred stepped into the freight elevator, stopped at the correct level and retraced their steps to the cart.

Or, where the cart was. Arno was nice enough to leave his cup of tea on the ground next to the flowering, waving sunchokes. Fred picked up the cup and started walking.

He paused at the entrance to the main square, remembering the way he’d looked a day ago walking with his bags in hand like a newcomer - somewhat tentatively – not through his mind’s eye but those of Jasmine setting the long table, of Maruca snacking and stirring a pot, of Jordan pulling a cart of folding chairs, of Arno in glancing fragments and from Gretchen watching quietly from the shadows.

Fred reeled slightly. There was nowhere he laid his eyes that was not saturated with the color, texture, depth of manifold life experiences of every intimate stranger. He stepped forward, quietly placing one foot before the other. Friends in the square glanced at him sidelong, or full-on, smiled gently, continuing to process their day.

*And now we see Ourselves as we were, as we are.*

He crossed to the Uzbek cafe. Arno was sitting with the brothers at a table beside the square.

“Questions?”

Raucous laughter.

Fred’s mind reeled, seeing Gretchen in his mind’s eye with her memories and more; her familiar trails of thought, sense, sensation; her daily walk with the Flock in the Great Meadow; *memories of their*

*memories of the world as they saw it, as they did hers, and as she appeared in them. Now she felt them moving side by side, a companion species, knitting together by the shared Memory.*

Fred placed a hand on their table to steady himself.

“Um, not so much.”

More laughter.

Ruslan brought butter, jam, bread, tea.

“You just needed a little push. No real resistance at all. Good for you Stefan. You were so ready for this weren’t you?”

“Yes, but what about -” asked, in spite of everything.

“Beagle? Not to worry. They don’t know, or they wouldn’t have sent you or tried the rest of their nonsense. They will eventually though.”

“Elegant solution” Fred observed, nodded.

“It will be”.

Orid set two shots of chilled vodka and a dish of small dill pickles between them, hands flourishing slightly; *as he learned from his parents, as he’d tried to stop doing, as he’d given up trying to stop because old habits died hard and no one cared here because they knew what it meant to him anyway; that he cared about his work, that they were his guests, that it was understood between them, that it was good for all to eat and drink calmly together.*

Arno raised his glass just as he always did; *inviting but also challenging those he drank with to see that it was not enough to know that certain things were so, but that we must formally recognize it as such, in friendship, in goodwill, if only for a moment, because moments were all anyone had.*

Fred smiled and firmly said “yes, yes to all of it” raising his glass.

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