

The Embryo's Diary

*A science fiction tale about boundless
life by*

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(TRANSLATED FROM POLISH BY THE AUTHOR)



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THE MYSTERIES

Prologue



Somewhere on Earth, twenty-first century.

Wednesday

“How are you, my little ones?” the doctor said. She is always so nice to us, that is, seven children, four boys and three girls. Precisely speaking, I and my siblings are embryos in an in vitro fertilization clinic. I cannot see and say

anything, but I hear what they, people already born, say. I do not know why, but it seems to me that I only have this ability; my brothers and sisters do not respond to any sounds and other signals.

I listen carefully to conversations between employees of the clinic. I am already familiar with the basic concepts of genetics, such as amino acids, DNA, RNA, genes, etc. I learned that each of us has 46 chromosomes determining, among other things, our gender. Leaning over my test tube the doctor found I was a girl. Therefore, I know that.



Thursday morning

Today, I heard my mother's voice for the first time. I loved it. In the morning, the doctor (who has a nice voice as well, but it is not the same) said:

“In principle, only doctors are allowed to come into this room. We have to take care of the safety of embryos. The fewer people enter here, the smaller the risk of microbes is. However, we might make

an exception for you. After all, looking at the results of your medical tests our boss joked that a ‘fertility goddess’ probably visited us. Please, your babies are here.”

“Very beautiful... May I stick their names on the test tubes?”

“Names?”

“Yes, my husband and I have already come up with names for them. It is very important to us. May I?”

“Please.”

Mom fastened cards, but unfortunately she did not read out them, so I have not known my name. However, I am still happy. Life is wonderful.



Thursday afternoon

The clinic director unexpectedly checked on us (after he went, the doctor whispered to herself that someone surely reported him about these cards). I felt how he lifted my tube, and next he probably did the same with the other ones, for he panted for a while and finally said:

“It seems that this is a religious family. All the male names have a long Christian

tradition. What is more, female names correspond to the three most famous women of the entire religion.”

“Yes, this is a couple of very devout Catholics.”

“And have you, Teresa, done a genetic analysis yet?”

“Of course, sir. I have used the newest apparatus. Two embryos, male and female, are completely healthy. One female embryo has a tiny defect. Unluckily, the remaining embryos are not suitable for anything. We had great difficulty in obtaining adequate sperm from the man.”

“And such a woman just had to find this guy.”

“People, boss, are not interested in these issues as long as they don't want to have children. And later they are usually after the wedding.”

“From our point of view it is perhaps better...”

I must admit that not all of the conversation I have understood. For instance, what does it mean that “embryos are not suitable for anything”? But maybe it is not that important. I am very grateful to my parents that they have come to the clinic.

Friday

Quite a big fuss has been made here today. The main role was performed by my own father, and I was just embarrassed for him. Dad stood in the

corridor and insistently attempted to enter our room, but the doctor heroically barred the way. Thus, he began talking in a loud voice that he was entitled to see his children. My mother was there as well and tried to calm him down but she had no success. Then my father became even more annoyed and shouted something about the damn aliens (this was completely incomprehensible to me). In the end he ran out of the clinic and a sudden silence fell.

After some time, my dad came back, and I guessed he gave the doctor flowers. Almost crying, he said:

“Doctor, I am heartily sorry for my behavior, but this is a really dramatic situation for me... I know I am doing wrong with this in vitro, but so much I have wanted to bring up children... No adopted ones, but my own...”

“Well, after all, you will raise them.”

“Yes, but I don't know how this will be assumed there, in heaven. Therefore, I intended to baptize our embryos.”

“To baptize?!” the doctor's voice betrayed her huge surprise.

“Yes, perhaps the merciful God would be willing to take this into account.”

“But... You are not a priest, are you?”

“No, I am not. However, there is a ceremony of secular baptism, approved by a pope, which in exceptional cases can be performed by every person of faith. I beg you, doctor, to help me...”

“I cannot let you in this room,” said the doctor on reflection. “Not so long ago, my boss scolded me for these cards.”

“Yes, cards,” my dad picked up the word. “Say what you like, but I don't complain about eyesight. I am able to read the names of my children standing on the doorstep. It is enough that you will be showing me the tubes over the table.”

“Ah, yes... Well, I may consent to that.”

“Thank you very much,” my father breathed a sigh of relief and added with a characteristic sound of opening a briefcase lock: “We will still need it.”

“What is it?”

“Salt.”

“Salt?”

“In this case salt is essential. If you were so kind as to sprinkle it on the tubes...” asked my father.

“But it won't hold at all,” stated the doctor and added professionally: “Instead, I might spread them with physiological saline solution. Can it be?”

“What a fool I am,” my father slapped his forehead. “I have carried coals to Newcastle. Physiological saline straight away with water! Sure, it can be.”

“Was it approved by the pope who abdicated at the beginning of the century?” the doctor wanted to know yet.

“I'm not aware exactly, but I don't think he did it.”

“This is a pity because I've read about him on the network, and his story has moved me.”

“Yes, he knew when to abdicate,” sighed my dad. “However, let's get to work.”

After a while I felt that my tube went up as the first, and my father solemnly recited his counting-out rhyme (I have never heard this from children playing in the yard):

“Eve, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, amen.”

Next, my dad repeated the magic spell six more times, changing only the name at the beginning. (Hurray, I have never thought that my father may be a wizard!) Thus I have learned that the names of my siblings are: John, Joseph, Magdalene, Mary, Paul, and Peter.

In principle, everything has ended well. Dad is happy because he has managed to bastardize (or something like that) us. I am lucky in having such a beautiful name as Eve. And only Teresa was perhaps out of sorts.

“He is probably a lunatic,” she whispered to herself after my father had gone away.

Saturday morning



Misfortune! It turned out that I had a wrong blood cell and, therefore, they would convert me into ice cream or I would go for deduction! It seems I am talking nonsense here, but that is due to nervousness. I do not know quite what to do. However, I would like to start from the beginning.

In the morning my parents and the doctor came into the room next door. Audibility was poor, but after a certain time I could recognize spoken words.

“The remaining embryos,” said Teresa, “have large genetic defects. For example, Joseph, if at all he was born alive, would not be able to walk.”

“Oh, no!” groaned my mother, while my father asked to the point:

“And can you give some details on Eve's disease?”

“There is a small defect in her blood. We have already known how to remove a number of such diatheses, but this one isn't among them.”

“Does it only happen with in vitro?” wanted to know my dad.

“Not at all,” the doctor was clearly surprised that someone might even just ask about it, “the average genes of in vitro children are the same as those of normal ones.”

“What are the symptoms of this disease?” asked my mom.

“Over 80% of patients have no symptoms and don't need to get treatment. Others have to take medicine from some time on. The therapy is not onerous, just one tablet a day. However, there is a mystery here...”

“What is it?” inquired my father.

“In an insignificant percentage of cases there occurs a sudden deterioration of health status, and patients die within a week...”

“This is terrible!” my mother interjected.

“No one knows why that happens,” the doctor continued. “It looks as if they have lived too long. However, as I have said, the vast majority of people suffering from it really live to a ripe old age. If you decide to Eve's implantation, the only trouble will be most likely the need of a blood test every six months.”

At that moment something very noisy went down the street. After restoring audibility, my father ended his speech:

“...unless I quit it all to hell.”

“And is it true,” asked my mother, “that prior to implantation embryos should be frozen?”

“This was advantageous in the old technology. In our clinic we don't practice it anymore. We freeze just the embryos who have to wait for implantation.”

“What exactly is this freezing?” my father became interested.

“Embryos are put in plastic bags and inserted into a container of liquid nitrogen at a temperature of minus 196 degrees.”

“Do they feel pain or cold?” worried my mom.

“There is no question about it. At this temperature, all life processes cease.”

“Exactly, they cease!” Dad almost shouted. “Can it cause any injury?”

“In no case,” calmly explained Teresa. “After thawing they will be unchanged.”

“After all, we would not like to freeze them without the need,” said my mother.

“In the clinic we employ only the best surgeons. We can implant you at once two embryos with absolute guarantee of success. That is, you would give birth to non-identical twins. However, problems could occur with the triplets.”

“As my husband has already said, for the moment we cannot afford three children anyway.”

“Thus you must select two embryos to be implanted at present, and the third will be left for later.”

“Excuse me,” politely said my dad, “but I cannot give my son up.”

“Of course,” replied my mother and the doctor simultaneously, whereupon everyone burst out laughing. Then again, I lost a part of this conversation

because two nurses walked along the corridor talking loudly. When they came into a room, my mom was saying:

“And what will be if it turns out that Eve would be a famous actress, singer or writer?”

“Unfortunately, we are yet unable to predict this on the basis of genes,” stated with regret the doctor, while my father suggested:

“Paula, baby, think rationally. The chances that Mary or Eve will enjoy some success in life are exactly the same. However, we have known about Mary at least that she is completely healthy.”

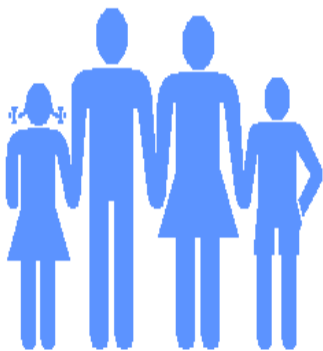
“Well, yes...” agreed – albeit rather half-heartedly – my mom.

“So,” tried to summarize Teresa, “are we implanting Mary and John, and freezing Eve?”

“It would seem so,” my father said with a tinge of sadness, and he asked additionally: “Is there any chance for Eve if our financial situation does not improve?”

“She may go for adoption,” succinctly replied the doctor. “And now I invite you to the reception in order to sign the forms.”

They came out, so I have not known what is this ‘adoption’. I am concerned about myself, but at the same time I am glad that Mary and John succeeded so well. Because we all could be seriously ill as the unlucky Joe.



Saturday afternoon

It looks like I will have another mom! I found out about it in the following way: Dad left Paula in the clinic, and then had a little chat with Teresa in the corridor.

“What is the expiration date,” he joked at some point, “of frozen embryos?”

“In principle, it is unlimited. In this nitrogen nothing happens.”

“Can it be one thousand years?”

“Maybe even two,” jokingly replied the doctor.

“I am asking theoretically, for anyway we could not afford to pay for such a long shelf life of our daughter.”

“Should you have that kind of money, it would be easier to implant Eve to your wife.”

“Of course. However, we would be able to pay the fee every year to the end of life. Will be any chance for adoption during this period of time? And what exactly is it?”

“Often couples come to us, who we can't help even with in vitro, although the woman is able to bear a child. Then we offer frozen embryos of other parents to them. More than 5% of pregnancies at the clinic are initiated in this way. I think that there are people who will wish to adopt a child from a Catholic decent family.”

“And will we be notified if someone is interested in Eve?”

“It goes without saying.”

“And what happens to embryos, which, like Joseph, are unfit for adoption? Are they being killed?”

“Nothing of the kind! We never kill embryos. After some time, they die a natural death.”

I see that this is the way things are... They are going to take my Paula away! Initially, I wanted to scream and protest, but I remembered that I could not even speak. In addition, afterwards I have come to the conclusion that during pregnancy in the second mother we will have plenty of time to get familiar with each other, and perhaps I will be able to accept her.



Sunday

Mom was already after surgery and dad came to take her home. As they were walking down the corridor, at some point he said sadly:

“Today in the morning I came to the church. Just the bishop preached a sermon...”

“Yes?” Paula became interested. “And what did he say?”

“He attacked in vitro fiercely... That it should be prohibited, and the doctor is not allowed to create life... And he threatened with excommunication.”

“And I think,” said my mother opening the door leading to the street, “that we're not doing anything wrong.”

Those were her last words that I heard.

I do not know who is the bishop, but he must be a terrible person... For if in vitro was forbidden, I would not be in the world! That would be discrimination against a certain group of people, namely those whose genes are a combination of the genes of my mother and my father. They all could not exist. I wonder what the bishop would say if someone forbade him to live. Surely he would scream about his great harm.

I am convinced that even Joe would vote in favor of in vitro. Because what is the advantage of non-existence? And in this case there were some chances

initially the same for all. Eventually, he may not live long, but at least his siblings have better prospects for the future. Why, then, does no one ask embryos about it?

The bishop has claimed, in addition, that Teresa has no right to create life. Now listen to the embryo: no doctor is able to make life. If Teresa could do it, we all would be completely healthy. In fact, she provided the presence of favorable conditions. (I think that every normal couple does the same, although the circumstances are then likely to be different.) However, the creation of genetic defects shows that the guy from heaven, mentioned by my dad, must have had a hand in this. And the individual is responsible for the fact that Joe will not be able to be born alive.

“It is getting colder. I am getting chills and I become more and more sleepy... I have some hallucinations... Fortunately, my mother is coming... No, it is probably the bishop. Do not touch me, do not touch me! Yuck! Ugh!, it's cold in here! Oh...”

Chapter 1

Resurrection



Somewhere beyond the Earth, many years later.

Tuesday

I was warm and felt comfortable, so I could be lying motionless for a long time, but finally I decided to open my eyes. Above me there was a clear, cloudless sky with a wonderful powder blue color. Although I saw it for the first time in my life, I thought right away that something there was probably missing; something was not compatible with my ideas of the heavens, produced through conversations overheard in the clinic. I had not been able to determine what it might be, but instead another thought came to my mind: "If I have the eyes, may I have the whole body as well?"

I decided to test this hypothesis. I straightened my hand (I assumed that this was the hand) and touched my thigh (I assumed that this was the thigh). Then I pinched myself strongly and immediately shouted: "Ah, it hurts." So it was true. I had a body!

I wanted to look around, so I sat up, and then stood a little clumsily. I did one small step, then another slightly longer, and a third. The very soft grass pleasantly tickled my feet. I was able to walk!

The day was very clear and warm but not stuffy; it was great to breathe the crisp air. I was on a big, green plain. There grew single trees and bushes here and there, between which one could sometimes see a pale yellow alley. And that was when I realized what was missing in the sky: although there were no clouds, there was no sun either.

At first I thought that maybe the sun either had just set or soon would rise. However, the skyline was clearly visible and I could observe no reddish glow. Anyway, time was passing, and the brightness remained unchanged. The sun could not hide behind a hill or any other celestial body because they simply did not exist. The conclusion therefore was inevitable that I was probably not on Earth.

At the clinic I heard once a radio broadcast about other planets, but they also had (as far as I understood) to revolve around their stars. The scientists participating in the recorded discussion were enthusiastic about planets with more than one sun. However, in the present case the number of suns was equal to zero!

I was busy searching for the sun below the horizon so I did not pay attention to what was going on around me. Finally, I looked and saw that was not alone there, as a few feet away a lady was sitting on a deck chair. She was probably listening to some music because she crossed her legs and was waving one of them to the beat. Thus I noticed immediately that just above her ankle she had a tattoo crown. Therefore, the first thought that came to my mind was that she was the queen of this beautiful land, and my second mom. This implied that I was a princess.

I watched the lady again and rated her age at about 25 years. I thought it, and then I clutched my head in astonishment. Where and when had I been able to learn to estimate the age of faces? Certainly, it had been impossible in the clinic. And in general why took I this creature for a female human? After all, I had never been watching people yet. Thus, was it possible that I had no memory of a time period in my life? Unless I was wrong.

We looked at each other, the lady with a slight smile, and I with anxiety. "Or maybe this is my real mother?" the thought flashed through my mind. "No, then she would not sit so quietly. However, she could be Dr. Teresa with her scientific detachment..." I came to the conclusion that it would be best to start a conversation with her. Then I would be able to make sure that it was a woman, she was not Paula (her voice was still ringing in my ears), and she could explain to me where I actually was.

I decided to incorporate this intention into action. I approached the beach chair and asked politely:

"Excuse me, can you tell me," at that point something went wrong, and I blurted out, "how old are you?"

"I'm twenty-six."

"Oh, so you're young," I stated with satisfaction because my guesses were correct. I was now sure that this was nobody of the clinic (although, of course, I regretted that she was not my mother).

"Not so much..." replied the lady with a touch of melancholy. "Here, almost everyone is young."

"Here," I asked casually, "that is, where?"

"I'll tell you, but take a seat, please!" the lady pointed at the second deck chair standing nearby. "When I am talking to people arriving from Earth where they have found themselves, they are very jittery and frantically search for a place to sit."

Therefore, I decided to pretend I just was not very interested in it. I sat on the deck chair, thanked for the invitation and inquired:

“Do you know by chance who I am?”

“Of course. Your name is Eve and you're an embryo.”

“But I am no longer an embryo,” I exclaimed indignantly. “I have a body, a real body!”

“By ‘embryos’ we mean people who have never been born ...

“Have never been born...” I echoed trying to understand this phrase.

“Yes,” continued the lady, “and who have obtained a body only as a result of their resurrection.”

“What is the ‘resurrection’?” I asked because I had not known the word, I heard it for the first time.

“Rising from the dead.”

I knew what it means that someone is dead, so I uttered:

“How is that possible?”

“I don't know the technical details,” answered the lady. “I come from antiquity.”

“But how have I found myself here?”

“Angels have brought you.”

Again, there was a new word. “I should not at once ask for an explanation of all. Well, let's assume that there are some angels here,” I thought and questioned:

“Have they simply brought and dropped?”

“And would you immediately wish that the heavenly orchestra played and the angelic choir sang a wonderful song about the resurrection of the beautiful Eve? They have put you just gently, but normally they drop on the grass anyhow. The human has barely risen from the dead, and already has bruises.”

This all seemed so incredible that I decided to sound her out further.

“Why has my resurrection taken place right now?” I asked.

“On the occasion of the four thousandth anniversary of the birth of Jesus Christ, Father Omnidirector ordered the end of the world on Earth, and all embryos received their bodies.”

I was glad I was sitting, because if I had been standing, I would probably have collapsed. I knew that years are counted from the birth, and at the clinic the current year was once given over the radio. Thus, assuming it was true, almost two thousand years had passed since my stay in the clinic! And yet, I remembered everything perfectly, as if it had been yesterday, and at most the day before.

“Or maybe,” I thought, “this is only a continuation of the phantoms which I saw just before freezing? No, this is not possible, I have, after all, already pinched. And everything is too realistic.” It looked like that my parents'

financial situation had never improved enough to decide for my implantation (I learned later that it had been a little different, but then I thought so). Because no one had reported the desire of my adoption either, I died, and now resurrected.

There was one more possibility. I remembered my father's conversation with Teresa about the supposition that frozen embryos can be valid for up to two thousand years. Maybe in some way, for example as a result of someone's negligence, I was frozen during the entire period of time, and now I was by these angels unfrozen rather than resurrected? But it was actually just a technicality.

I felt upset I had turned out to be no use to anyone, so I quietly asked:

“Could you tell me where I am?”

My companion leaned out of her beach chair and stroked my knee.

“Do not worry so much, my princess,” she said affectionately. “We are in a place which is far better than the Earth. It is paradise called also heaven. And my name is Messalina, Valeria Messalina.”

“Which of these names should I use speaking to you?” I asked trying to gain time and to recollect what the word ‘paradise’ means.

“Valeria, of course. However, if you wrote, for example, a diary, my second name, originating from the name of my father, could be better.”

Finally, I guessed where I had heard this word. Teresa once said to us: “You will be here as good as in paradise.” This implied that this place must had been really good. So I smiled charmingly to Messalina and continued our dialogue:

“Do you, Valeria, greet all who come to paradise?”

“And how, their number has always been countless. In addition, nowadays we are experiencing a real embryo invasion. I have been instructed to take care of you, Eve, and that is why I'm here.”

I looked around and said:

“I don't see anybody here but us...”

“Because paradise is huge as well.”

“Larger than Earth?”

“No comparison.”

“And could you, Valeria, tell me why there's no sun here?” I asked pointing with my hand upwards.

“The idea was that there was no shadow.”

I jumped up from my deck chair and tried to see if I actually did not throw a shadow, while Messalina was watching my contortions. At some point she whispered to herself (not knowing that after the ordeal at the clinic I had very good hearing): “The Archangel Michael has been right warning me that they behave like children”, and next laughing she said:

“There can be no shadow if light comes from all directions.”

“So do the heavens shine here?” I tried to deduce, sitting again on the sun lounge.

“Yes, but the heavens cannot be in heaven. What is at the top is called the field. It does not have any hard... hard...”

“Consistency,” I suggested. During my stay at the clinic I learned many of the difficult words.

“Yeah, it does not have a hard consistency,” Messalina looked at me appreciatively.

“And it shines blue.”

“Just because, Eve, that today is Tuesday. And, for example, on Saturday it shines yellow, whereas on Sunday it does orange. And while staying long at the open air you may even get a tan, though sunburn never threatens you.”

“And how do you know when it is nighttime, and when – daytime?”

“When angels turn the field on, comes day, and when – off, comes night.”

It was really easy. So I tried to draw some conclusions on the field:

“So, for example, if someone has lost consciousness, and then wakes up at a place where the sky is apple-green...,

“Yes, it's on a Wednesday,” confirmed my guardian.

“... or even blue, but without the sun, can they be sure they are in paradise?”

“Exactly.”

“Who has come up with it all?” I asked with genuine admiration.

“Father Omnidirector or shortly the Father. He is the only person in heaven who is over 33 years of age.”

“Is he someone like the director of a clinic?” I tried referring to the concepts more familiar to me.

“I think so,” replied hesitantly Messalina. “He is much more powerful than an emperor. He has created whole paradise and decides on everything.”

And then it dawned on me that he must have been the individual who had damaged our genes! Well, though, that he partially rehabilitated by giving us bodies.

At that point, I interrupted querying Messalina because a dark speck had appeared on the pure heavens, sorry, field. The dot began to grow, and then split into several spots that continued to grow and finally turned into silhouettes of bearded men with white wings.

When the men approached further, I noticed they were dressed in long, reaching below their knees, coats in bright red color. The commander had a white crescent on the front of his jacket, and the rest – white stars. I got scared because they had been armed; each of them held a spear or something like that. Loudly flapping his wings, the one with the crescent dropped to a height of a few meters, and I felt that my heart was pounding in fear. He scanned Messalina with a neutral expression on his face, whereas looking at

me he twitched his mouth visibly showing a sort of surprise. However, he quickly controlled himself and saying nothing to us raised his spear in polite salute, and his subordinates repeated the maneuver.

Soon, bearded men were departing, and we felt on our faces the turbulence created by the motion of their wings.

“What was it?” I screamed, still nevertheless shuddering with fear.

“The Archangel Gabriel's patrol,” Messalina answered calmly. “Probably somebody has escaped from hell; recently it happens more and more often. Gabriel and his angels hunt such persons.”

Thus I knew already that the ‘angels’ were simply people having wings and there was no need to be afraid of them. However, immediately came another problem:

“So, is there also such a place as hell?” I asked anxiously because for unknown reasons the word made me think of something very bad.

“Of course. I was there for many years.”

“Were you, Valeria, in hell?”

“Yes, Eve, I was.”

“Why?!”

“This was caused by some misunderstanding between me and my husband,” said Messalina with insouciance (feigned, as I found out later).

“And what is there in this hell?” I became interested because I had had no idea about male-female relationships.

“It's like a prison. Very unpleasant, although of course there is no question of any torture; the Father would never allow it. Nonetheless, it's dark, damp and chilly there. People flock to bonfires kindled by devils (i.e., infernal angels) to be a little warm.”

“I'm terribly afraid of the cold.”

“Boredom is the worst. Admittedly, once a year there is a large event there, called Great Summer Manifest, but that's all. However, I did not kill anyone. So was I to sit in hell like a Hitler or Stalin?”

“What then did you do?” I asked, remaining the Hitler and Stalin for later.

“I wrote applications for discharge, but they did not arrive to Father Omnidirector. Deputy Director Adam intercepted them and answered me: ‘We have analyzed the facts. Actually, my daughter, you did not kill anyone, but nevertheless you wronged your husband seriously.’ I harmed the bastard, can you imagine that?”

“I cannot,” I answered truthfully.

“That's it. Fortunately, once Adam was on vacation and my application reached the Father. He is very good and told them to release me immediately.”

“And where is your husband?”

“Of course, in hell and not soon he will come out from there,” replied Messalina with a vindictive expression on her face. “After all, he ordered to kill a few hundred people. For political purposes, for authority.”

At this point I remembered that at the clinic Teresa once told her colleague the story of a play in which the main character cheated on her husband. I had no idea what that meant, but something tempted me and I decided to show off my knowledge of the subject:

“You cheated on your husband, didn't you, Valeria?”

The effect of this innocent question was quite unexpected. My guardian burst into tears and sobbing said:

“It was not what you think... It was he who first cheated on me... betrayed me earlier with the woman he married after my execution... After all, I would not have behaved so stupidly unless he had provoked me...”

I did not know how to comfort her. Finally, I leaned out of my deck chair and stroked her knee.

“Do not worry so much, my queen,” I said affectionately. “I believe you. And besides, I suppose it's probably a long time ago...”

“Oh, yes, Eve,” agreed my friend quickly calming down and drying the tears. “Nearly four thousand years ago.”

These words electrified me again. At the clinic I once heard on the radio that the average lifespan of humans on Earth is roughly 70 years. And there, Messalina had been living for so long!

“What is the average life expectancy of people in paradise?” I asked.

This question completely restored good humor of my companion who said laughing:

“The average life expectancy? It's infinite!”

“Could you, Valeria, explain it to me accessibly?”

“Please, Eve. Do you know what genes are?”

“Naturally. Genes I probably know best.”

“So the genes were created once by Father Omnidirector for the performance of his experiments. Immediately he also said to his assistants, i.e., angels and devils, that no gene has the right to get lost. Therefore, if a human dies, sooner or later they must be resurrected.”

“But it's great!” I blurted out.

“Yes, it is called boundless life. We use it at will.”

I was terribly intrigued by this because in that case the variant of my resurrection differs significantly from that of unfreezing. “Ah, to be true!” I thought and asked Messalina:

“Could you still illustrate this on an example?”

“In paradise we have normal bodies. This means that if for example you jump into a chasm...”

“I certainly will not jump,” I assured.

“Well, you may for instance slip. Then – there are no miracles – your body is destroyed, that is, there is a death on the spot. However, after some time you rise from the dead and again enjoy the delights of paradise, as if nothing has happened.”

“But do I remember that I fell into the chasm?”

“Yes, you remember it and everything felt when you were falling.”

“That's so...” I thought. I was very satisfied, although somewhere in my mind I was still harassed by the presumption that I was just unfrozen, and Messalina fantasized. So I decided to examine whether she would not give confusing detailed explanations, and I questioned:

“How long is the period of time between death and resurrection?”

“It may be various. In paradise it is assumed that if your death has not been your fault, angels should resurrect you at the latest in 40 hours.”

“So for example, if I pass away on a Friday afternoon...”

“Then you will be resurrected on Sunday morning.”

“It's pretty fast,” I stated.

“For the deceased this time period is always a very brief moment.”

“Yes, I know something about this,” I agreed.

Suddenly angels again appeared on the field. This time there were only two chubby and ruddy-faced individuals dressed in gray nightgowns with pink diagonal line and having wheel caps in this color. They slowly sailed in the air looking around. One of them had in his hand a sort of speaking tube. As soon as he saw us, he put it to his mouth and hollered in our direction:

“Attention, ladies next to the pool! This is a public area. Please put on leaves.”

“What leaves?” I asked, confused, “what a pool?”

“The bloody Vice Squad,” muttered Messalina. “I guess Gabriel has reported them that we are sitting here without leaves.”

“What's going on?” I continued to understand nothing.

“This is a fig-tree,” Messalina gestured toward a plant growing in the vicinity. “In accordance with the regulations of paradise, you have to have a leaf plucked from such a tree, i.e., so-called fig leaf, put against your body. Come on, we will choose something.”

We walked to the tree and my companion began to eye it very carefully.

“Poorly chosen fig leaf can make fatter you,” she explained. “Well, this one will be good for you, and this for me.”

Messalina picked two leaves of the fig tree and gave me one of them.

“Oh no, what did you press it against?” she laughed. “Not against your forehead, but against this.”

“Here it does not quite fit,” I stated. “Maybe I should stick it with something?”

“Not in the least, just you press lightly and let go of. The leaf knows what to do. Now you may, e.g., sit, walk, jump, dance, or even run with it, and it will not fall off. And if you want to take it off, just pull the stalk...” demonstrated my guardian. “Now I invite you to the pond, we will look at ourselves in the water surface and see whether the green attire fits.”

A dozen feet away, in fact, there was a small round water tank with steep banks, surrounded by a metal handrail supported on poles bent inward. Thanks to this we could easily watch our reflections in the crystal clear water. I figured that this was a sort of mirror mentioned sometimes by the doctor.

I wanted to take the opportunity to examine what in my appearance had so amazed the Archangel Gabriel, but I saw just a normal dark-haired girl at the age of about 18 years. “Or maybe...” I thought, “no, Valeria is also very pretty.” However, I was a little taller and had a finer figure. (“I probably inherited it from my mother,” the thought flashed through my mind, “after all, the clinic director spoke of her as a ‘fertility goddess’.”) In addition, Messalina had fairly short hair, whereas that of mine reached down to my waist. But all this certainly did not matter because Gabriel clearly looked then at my face.

My friend noticed that I was watching myself and she said with appreciation:

“You will, Eve, have great popularity with men.”

“What do you mean by ‘great popularity with men’?” I asked, although I had already guessed a little what it might be.

“At this moment we are in the Catholic part of paradise, and here these things are not welcome. But frequently we make trips to other parts, and then I will teach you everything.”

Thus I changed the subject by asking:

“Is my leaf a good fit? Don't I look too fat?”

“Absolutely not, honey. I have specially chosen a bit wider for you.”

“Thank you, Valeria. This is my first clothing in life.”

“Eh, here you will not dress up too often, unless for costume balls, indeed very popular in paradise. And it is my earnest wish that you never wear an antileaf.”

“Antileaf?” I was surprised. “What is it?”

“I was wearing it once,” saying this my guardian, an old stager after all, blushed up to her neck. “It was invented by a physicist being a fun-loving sex maniac. Anyway, all physicists are the worst element in whole paradise. I'll show you antileafs when we are in the club.”

I did not know who physicists were, but I felt that Messalina's last word was more important there. I heard it for the first time and did not know totally what it means. I did not want to be made to look like a slow-witted person and questioned circumspectly:

“In the club? And where is it?”

“In atheists' paradise.”

Just my luck! Being already completely surprised I asked:

“So is there another paradise?”

“No, there is only one heaven. But instead of saying ‘atheistic part of paradise’ we frequently use the abbreviation ‘atheists' paradise’.”

“And who are these ‘atheists’?”

“They are the people who do not believe in the existence of Father Omnidirector.”

“How so? They are in paradise and do not believe?”

“I've expressed myself poorly. Now, of course, they know that this is a fact, but they did not believe when they lived on Earth.”

“They are some fools,” I said with conviction. “Didn't they want to live infinitely long?”

“Who would not want to,” stated Messalina with a hint of philosophical musings. “They wanted, but they did not expect that this is possible without miracles.”

“And doesn't the Father wish to take revenge on them for the fact that they did not believe in him?”

“Revenge? He probably does not know what the word means. And with the way he takes care of atheists' paradise one can infer that he loves them even more than other people.”

“How is this possible?” I was surprised immensely.

Messalina moved her hands as if her head ached terribly, and she replied:

“Look, I'm just a stupid ex-empress. However, here you will meet a lot of people smarter than me, and they may explain it to you.”

Suddenly I felt a strange sensation, a sort of pain in the upper abdomen. Never before I had anything like it. I touched the place where it was most focused, and my companion noticed the gesture.

“I see, Eve, that you suffer from hunger,” she said.

“I think so,” I confirmed. “How is it treated?”

“This is not treated,” laughed Messalina, “but it is being very pleasantly satisfied. Let's see what has been today prepared for supper.”

My friend bent down, picked an inconspicuous flower growing in the meadow, and said something to it. After a few seconds the grass right next to us was rent asunder, and a rectangular table laden with various things emitting really delicious smells and two chairs appeared on the surface. Messalina gestured me one of them, and when we sat down she stated:

“The meal always starts with an egg. Therefore, please have a taste of these palatable scrambled eggs with forest mushrooms.”

I easily guessed what should have done. I grabbed with my palm a large portion of warm yellow-brown mass, and got it into my mouth. I felt really

like in seventh heaven (I'd heard this phrase used by radio in the clinic), but my guardian was not satisfied:

“It seems that you like it, but you have to eat it with a fork such as this one. Wipe your hands with the napkin and try... And here we have the freshest rolls to follow up... No, take them just with your hand. These ones are already with butter... And to wash down we have wine, i.e., the specialty of Christian paradises, and juices, pineapple and wild strawberry for today.”

Pretty soon I mastered all the rules for meals. Afterwards we ate still (assuming the responsibility of Messalina for the names): a salad with smoked sturgeon and figs, an almond soup with truffles, a pheasant in gooseberry sauce with small dumpling and green salad, and for dessert a delicious vanilla ice cream with a variety of fruits and nuts. Everything was very tasty indeed, so I thought that living in paradise is actually miraculous.

“That has been a wonderful feast,” I admitted.

“Well, after all, we are in heaven. And in hell the food is very vile; even the legionnaires of my husband used to eat better.”

“And who prepares the dishes?”

“Angels. People in paradise do not work unless they want to. For instance, scientists sometimes say they are bored without work, so they may continue to do their research. I don't work,” Messalina raised her hands, stretched out with delight, and smiled at me mischievously, “but by no means I'm bored.”

I did not like the wine, whereas my companion drank it quite a lot and probably after it she turned so jolly.

“Now Valeria is lighting a cigarette...”

So saying, she reached for a small white tube lying on the tray and whispered something to it. The tube began to shine with a cherry red light on one side, and then Messalina poked the other end into her mouth. I saw that this time it was not connected with food and drink, but rather my friend inhaled something.

“May I also?” I asked because a few such cigarettes were lying on the tray as well.

“No, for two weeks immediately after the resurrection no smoking is allowed,” having said this Messalina released a ring of blue smoke upwards out of her mouth.

Thus I came to the conclusion that this action (although the smell was even pleasant) is indeed not for me. Meanwhile, my carer probably desired to reminisce, for she questioned:

“Do you want to know, Eve, how I found myself in the Catholic paradise?”

“I am very curious.”

“It was decided during my release from hell. The devil who was discharging me, such an innocuous milksop, asked me in whom I had believed on Earth. I told him that in Jupiter. So he looked for in a catalog and

said that such a name was not there. Therefore, I questioned if there could be Zeus because it's virtually the same. Then he replied that about Zeus he had heard, but there are no pagan paradises. In the end he took an atlas, tapped his claw into a random place, and hit Catholic heaven.”

“And did you agree?”

“At that time I did not know that atheists' paradise is the best, and as a pagan I had the right to be directed there. Besides, I wanted as soon as possible to get out from hell, so I agreed.”

“And tell me, Valeria, who actually are ‘Catholics’?”

“Do not you know?” Messalina was apparently pondering the answer.

“I only know that my parents were them.”

“Catholics are people who were subject to the pope while living on Earth.”

“And here?”

“In paradise there is a whole galaxy of popes, and in addition a number of them are still staying in hell.”

“Why?” I was surprised.

“As they committed many crimes.”

“There is something I do not understand here,” I said after a short reflection. “From what you have said it follows that the popes were... leaders...”

“...religious leaders,” prompted me Messalina.

“Quite so, religious leaders. And were they committing crimes? Did not they believe in the Father either?”

“Precisely so. Although less intelligent and influential human beings could sometimes really believe and at the same time commit terrible acts, but it was not the case of the church dignitaries. They regarded religion as fairy tales for ordinary people and a superb means for achieving their goals.”

“It's uncanny,” I said, shocked. “In that case, they must have had an awful surprise when it turned out that hell nevertheless existed and was waiting for them.”

“Yeah, well you have put it,” laughed my guardian. “But as we have finished eating, we have to send back the table. Let's stand up... Come here, my darling, in order not to fall down.”

I noticed that Messalina had packed uneaten food to a semitransparent bag. (“Could they have to stock up here?” I thought with a slight surprise.) Then again, my companion picked a flower of the meadow and said something to it. A moment later, the earth, I'm sorry, grass was rent asunder one more time, the table with chairs rolled down, and we went back to our loungers.

I had observed already earlier that past us there was growing a shrub with yellow flowers. There were also on it big red balls, whose name and application I did not know. After supper I was able to guess they were the

fruits of this plant. Because I thoroughly enjoyed the eating (the pain in my stomach completely ceased), I asked:

“Could we eat the red balls?”

“These are tomatoes. Absolutely they are not allowed to eat, they grow only for decoration.”

I stood up to look at them in more detail and, after a brief hesitation, picked a ripe tomato. Abruptly something tempted me; saying in my mind "Flump!", I dropped it on the head of my carer. Although right away I apologized aloud, the damage was significant because the fruit had burst flooding the beautiful forehead with red goo. To make matters worse, Messalina's cigarette fell out of her hand hitting her thigh with a glowing end. The poor thing hissed with pain and jumped up from her lounge. I could see that she was very angry, so I expected her to scold me or do something even worse. However, she also picked a huge tomato, smashed it on my breasts, and with a laugh shouted:

“Take this, you prankster, for my harm!”

We were running around the bush like crazy and bombarded each other with the red bullets. With every hit Messalina repeated her "Take this!", whereas I screamed "Bang!". This was a fascinating duel with tomatoes; oh, how I was happy at that moment! I recalled the fun of children in the yard near the clinic where I had not been able to participate actively, and for it in heaven I was in the middle of the action.

The continuation of my story proves that in it tomatoes have played yet another important role. And I think that since I was brought to life without birth, and – which is most severe – without childhood, surely that's why I reached then for the forbidden fruit.

When our bombs were nearing completion, I heard a man's voice:

“I see you're enjoying yourself, my sister.”

We stopped the duel and turned away to look who said it. In front of us there stood a tall dark-haired boy of my age and petite blonde being, in my estimation, a couple of years older. They must have arrived there by the big orange balloon whose gondola was resting on the grass about a dozen meters away.

“You are Eve, aren't you?” asked the boy.

“Yes, I am...”

“And my name is Joseph. My mother's name is Paula, and my dad...”

“Joel!” I cried out, “Joe, is that you?”

“This is me,” confirmed Joe.

“Valeria, this is my brother, Joe without legs. I would like to hug him, but I'm all smeared with these tomatoes. Shall I jump into the pool?”

“No, honey, just I'll arrange something better,” Messalina again reached for a flower.

Therefore, I was looking down expecting that something would emerge from the grass, and instead I felt warm drops on my neck. They were falling from above, although in the field there had been still no clouds. I also saw that it did not rain on, standing right next to me, Joe and the blonde.

“Now we can wash,” said my friend. “Before the bath the leaf is allowed to take off... This blue fragrant trickle contains soap. They let it out apart so as not to sting our eyes.”

Thus I took care that the soap did not get into my eyes, but other discomfort appeared. The place where earlier I had had the leaf started to hurt me. Instinctively, I loosened up and then the pain went away, but some liquid leaked from that part of my body. Fortunately, as a lot of water rained from the field, probably no one besides me could see it. I suspected that the event was somehow connected with the juices that I had drunk at supper, but to be sure I decided to ask my companion about it later.

As soon as we had overcome the tomato goo, the water stopped raining, and instead a warm breeze began to blow. Being clean and dry, I hugged Joe cordially, and then also the blonde because my brother introduced her by saying:

“This is Caroline, my girlfriend.”

“And this is Valeria Messalina, my guardian.”

“Nice to meet you, I've heard a lot about you,” said Joe extending his hand to the Empress, whose face after those words expressed a high level of satisfaction.

“Also pleased to meet you, let us move to a first-name basis.”

Next again Messalina arranged a table, this time round, and only with drinks and petit fours.

“Will you have some beer?” she asked.

“I eagerly will,” agreed Carolina.

“And I must not,” stated Joe. “I'd like some mineral water. I will fly the balloon.”

“Well, yes,” acknowledged my friend, “especially since Santa Clauses recently go wild giving us their, say, ‘gifts’ for just anything. And you, Eve, what are you drinking?”

“I have not known how beer tastes, so I'd like just a little bit to try.”

“I think you will prefer ambrosia, but please taste the beer first.”

“And tell me who are the ‘Santa Clauses’?” I asked a little surprised because from Earth this name made me think of rather good things.

“These are the traffic police.”

The brief Carolina's response implied that this was an organization analogous to known me already Vice Squad, so I asked for an additional explanation:

“That is, are they angels?”

“In principle, yes,” answered Messalina, “but Santa Clauses do not have wings because they would interfere their work.”

“For example, when coming through the chimney?”

At this point everyone but me laughed, and Joe questioned:

“How have you come up with that? There are no chimneys here.”

“Probably I have confused something,” I said in a conciliatory manner. “And how are Santa Clauses dressed?”

“They wear, of course, red coats and caps with white projections.”

“Why ‘of course’?”

“Because the red color is a stop sign,” my brother's face took on a very wise expression. “On the road this is a signal that you have to stop.”

“It seems,” I tried to object, recalling the conversations of children in the yard, “that people on Earth imagined the role of Santa Clauses little differently.”

“They could hear something, but they got lost in the details. However, it is not excluded that the clever guys of the traffic cop moonlighted sometimes on the side...”

“How do you, Joe, know so well the life in heaven?”

“I have been here for three months.”

“I have thought that all embryos have been resurrected at the same time,” I said looking at Messalina.

“That would be impossible. Regulations say that each person coming to paradise should receive a guardian service, and the number of embryos is much greater than that of born people.”

“You, Eve, must have important connections here if you have gotten such a carer,” Joe shook his head, looking at me with admiration. “My guardian was a teacher of the nineteenth century, who had difficulty even with logging into the network. I dismissed him after a few days.”

“And how did you manage with everything?”

“I went to the reading room.”

“My brother is a smooth operator,” I thought, “he knows how many beans make five.”

“And I had,” said Carolina, “a laundress, who even in paradise had never learned to read and write. She said she did not feel the need for it.”

“That's it!” I exclaimed. “Before going to the reading room, Joe, you had to learn to read.”

“Straight off I knew how to do it.”

“And I do not think I can...” I said sadly.

“This may be tested right away. See, there on our balloon, its name is inscribed in white letters. Try to read it.”

I looked up and read without any difficulty ‘THE BLISS’.

“That's right,” confirmed my brother.

So I could read! I decided at the first opportunity also to go to the reading room. As regards drinks, the Empress was right; I did not like the beer. Therefore, from a bottle marked 'Ambrosia Light' she poured me some dark-brown, strongly foaming liquid, which was actually a great improvement, and then she asked:

"Why have you said that this is Joe without legs? I can see he does not lack anything."

"I had a very serious genetic defect," instead of me answered my brother, "but Father Omnidirector corrected it for me personally in his lab."

"Have you seen the Father?!" I shouted excitedly.

"No, my carer told me about it. This was before my resurrection."

"I am very pleased that you've been so lucky," I said, "for I was very worried because of your legs."

"And how did you know about them?"

"Do you, Joe, remember anything from our clinic on Earth?" I answered a question with a question.

"But how? After all, I was then an embryo."

I became thoughtful trying to summarize the facts. At the clinic Joe was in a very poor condition; his implantation to any woman would be a crime. Since he could not be implanted, his freezing would be pointless. So if he was – and that totally healthy – in paradise, the matter of resurrection must have been real. And from what he had said a moment ago it followed that only I had heard then those voices. I decided not to acquaint Joe with this improbable story and changed the subject.

"And is either of you who has seen the Father?" I turned toward the girls.

"I saw him several times during major celebrations," said Messalina, "but from a distance."

"And how does he look?"

"Fine," replied the Empress and added dreamily: "He is unearthly handsome..."

"And you, Carolina, have you seen him?"

"Never."

"Tell me something about yourself. I do not think you're an embryo because you look about 22."

"I'm just at that age. However, I am an embryo except that I belong to the subclass of fetuses."

I must have been very round-eyed because they all smiled slightly, and Carolina continued:

"In heaven, by fetuses we mean embryos that managed to reach the uterus."

"I understand," I said not very truthfully. "So doctors implanted you on Earth?"

"No, because I do not come from in vitro."

“However, as you're an embryo, you have never been born?”

“Exactly so.”

“How is this possible?”

“There is something called either spontaneous or artificial abortion,” explained to me my brother, who actually wasted no time in the reading room, and Carolina made the matter more specific:

“My mom decided to have an abortion.”

“Oh!” I cried out. “In that case, you bear her a grudge, don't you?”

“Quite the contrary, I am extremely grateful to her. I thanked my mother kneeling in front of her and embracing her legs after our yesterday's finding her.”

“Yes, we got to know the day before yesterday in the queue in front of the Angel Bureau of Joining Families,” interjected my brother.

“The point is,” continued Carolina, “that as a result of a serious genetic defect my life on Earth would be a misery. My situation was saved by the fact that my mother was a very religious person, and believed that somewhere there is a God who is able to organize posthumous life so as not to harm innocent children.”

“And she hit a bullseye?” I asked though could be sure of a positive response.

“Yes, because here, right before my resurrection 19 years ago, my genes were also repaired by Father Omnidirector in person.”

“So were you happy?”

“Unfortunately, no.”

“Why?”

“In contrast to proper embryos, that is, like you and Joe, fetuses did not have to wait for the end of the world, and were (as born people who had died not by their own fault) resurrected within 40 hours after their death on earth. As soon as I had understood who and where I am, I ran to the superluminal vision room and saw on the screen, occupying the entire wall, my poor mom...”

“What happened?!”

“She was charged,” Carolina had tears in her eyes, “with the murder of her daughter!”

“By whom?”

“By wicked people. Mom lived on Earth until the end of the world, and they tormented her all the time. Imagine what I felt: I was completely healthy and wallowed in the heavenly luxury, and my mother, just for this that she contributed to my cure, went to jail! After a few years she was indeed released, but she was still persecuted.”

“It's terribly unfair,” I said compassionately. “Why did they do it?”

“Their behavior was reprehensible, but maybe they did not know,” Joe tried to answer, “that there is boundless life...”

“They said they believed in eternal life,” supplemented Carolina, “and this is, after all, something similar.”

“Ah, so they were not atheists,” I told, surprised, to Messalina. “They oppressed the woman assuming that her daughter, the alleged victim, was looking at it from the top... These men were probably monsters! For they must have believed that God was omnipotent and good, and therefore this sick child functioned better in heaven than on earth.”

“Or maybe,” tried to figure out this problem the only pagan in our midst, “they thought that the fetus was not yet a human, that is, it did not have the, what-d'you-call-it..., soul?”

“It is impossible because then they could not accuse my mom of murder. And since God was able to resurrect one person giving him a real body, he can do it, exactly in the same manner, with respect to all people. So I think they ran out of both faith and imagination.”

“Anyway,” summed up this part of the conversation our man, “Father Omnidirector can do this without resorting to miracles. And they will be staying in hell for much longer than 19 years.”

I began to wonder how it was that Carolina had come to paradise exactly so many years ago, and was currently 22 years old, but I suddenly remembered what my brother had talked about family reunification, and I called out:

“Joe, and what is with our mom? I would like to see her at last!”

“Take it easy, sister. Scenes of uproar are now happening on the square in front of the angelic office. Your details their computer displayed immediately; I received information that you would be resurrected here today at four pm. As far as the other members of our family are concerned, the angel attendant told me to report next week.”

“And then will you let me know?”

“It goes without saying. And now we have to get going.”

“Where are you headed on this balloon?” enquired Messalina.

“We are heading for the Orthodox paradise. The day after tomorrow there will be a marathon for the Cup of Constantine the Great. I want to participate in it.”

“Do you think you will manage?” I asked, anxiously.

“I feel enormous strength in my legs. I guess I will win this marathon.”

We started to say goodbye, and now also the Empress was kissing with our guests warmly. I noticed that when she was doing it with my brother, she slipped her hand under his fig leaf. Apparently, she was checking whether there also Joe did not lack anything. I was sure of this because already in the process of greeting I felt with my belly that he had under the leaf more than me, although I did not know what it was.

Caroline and Joe climbed up the ladder to the gondola, and my brother said something to the orange envelope. The balloon began to float majestically upwards, and we waved our hands about in farewell. When our visitors were high in the field, we headed to the beach chairs. It occurred to me, however, that as a sister I should have waved at them a little longer, so I turned around and wanted to make up for this, but the balloon was already gone. I thought that this was very strange; I would have bet my bottom dollar that the vehicle could not fly so fast.

“How far is it from here to the paradise of the Orthodox?” I questioned when sat down on my deck chair.

“Around fifteen thousand.”

“Kilometers?” I asked for clarification. I had some idea of the unit of length because the director of the clinic was once proud that he had been able to travel by car from the capital to us, that is, the distance of over one hundred kilometers, in less than an hour.

“Wait, let me think,” said Messalina, frowning. “No, that would not be enough, in paradise there are enormous distances... Already I have remembered, it's about light years... Yes, fifteen thousand light years.”

This unit did not convey anything to me, and, to tell the truth, about the number of ‘thousand’ I also had a rather vague idea. Thus, in this matter I questioned only:

“It will take a long time to fly, won't it?”

“I think for two, three hours at the most, they will be there,” blithely replied the Empress.

“And could I ask you, Valeria, about something related to our appearance?”

“Yes, of course, I'm listening to you.”

“Because I look at you and see that you do not have any hair on your body, except of course your head. And on my one the hair grows here, and here, and even here...”

“In heaven all elegant ladies are scrupulously depilated.”

“Well, yes, for it even appears better,” I admitted. “And could I also look like that?”

“Absolutely yes,” assured me my carer, and pointed at a strange plant growing nearby. “Can you see that oval post with red flowers on top?”

“Yes, I can.”

“It is a cactus depilator. You need to sit astride it and then it will epilate you.”

I approached and took a look at this yellowish stalk with the size of a large stool.

“The flowers are even pleasant,” I said. “But here on the sides it has terrible spikes. Is not it going to hurt?”

“Remember that you are in heaven. Remove only the leaf before the epilation, and safely sit down.”

I really wanted to make my body look like that of Messalina, so I made up my mind. As soon as I touched the flowers with my bottom, over a dozen brushes of some kind, being placed on flexible joints, leaped from the cactus. Two of them supported me tenderly at the waist to stop me from falling over, two other ones forced gently to raise the elbows up, and the remaining flicked over my body. My friend was right; the epilation was completely painless. After finishing the procedure the cactus handles lightly pushed me out of it, and quickly hid inside.

I was then able to take a closer look at the fragment of my body usually covered with a fig leaf. I noticed that there was some slit, which could have explained the discharge of the liquid in the shower. Because I realized that Messalina saw my interest in this place, I asked her casually:

“How actually is this body part called?”

“There are a few terms, exact or synonymous,” answered my carer after a short reflection. “For example, vulva, vagina, beaver or simply hoo-hoo... Other names that I know are rather vulgar. Shall I give them to you?”

“No, thank you, ‘hoo-hoo’ I like the most.”

“Thought so,” smiled Messalina.

“And how would it be in males?”

“Wienie.”

“And what are they used for?” I decided to go into the subject in more depth and clarify this matter thoroughly.

“Well, mostly to piss. However, they also give us a lot of pleasure. We women, we are there inside after all the clitoris, and outside the mons pubis or in other words the Mount of Venus who, so to speak in passing, originates from my time on Earth. You have just depilated it.”

And then it dawned on me. I remembered that on Earth the doctor had sometime said “it's raining cats and dogs”, and a patient confirmed “yes, it's really pissing down at the moment”. Thus Messalina's words implied that the liquid discharge was a normal activity of the hoo-hoo! I was very glad I found out about this without admitting that I had already done it publicly.

I had no faintest idea who was Venus, so I asked:

“Did you, Valeria, know this lady from the knoll?”

“Venus alias Venera was my teacher for many years,” replied the Empress with amusement.

For me it did not seem to be funny; in the end Joe also complained about the boring teacher of the nineteenth century. And when it comes to pleasure, I had already felt it – being the first and perhaps the greatest enjoyable experience in my short life – from tickling my feet by the grass. I could therefore imagine the intoxicating tickling of the depilated hill. In addition, at

the clinic I heard once on the radio the word 'climax'. I knew that it was something good, but I had no idea what this meant exactly. However, it was similar to 'clitoris' mentioned by my friend.

"Yes, pleasure, e.g. climax on the shaved mountain of Venera, I've heard about it," I summed up in a tone of deep competence, assuming I had already known everything about the hoo-hoo and adjacent organs. "And are there any other beauty treatments feasible for our bodies?"

"Oh, dear!" exclaimed Messalina. "Thanks for reminding me. I should do nails today."

"What's the matter?" I was surprised.

"Manicure and pedicure," replied the Empress unintelligibly, and then stood up and began to look around attentively. After a few seconds she clapped her hands with contentment and said: "A common polisher is growing there. Let's go."

The polisher turned out to be a not high tree with a very large number of multi-colored and intensely fragrant leaves. Under a spreading crown in the trunk there were two hollows: one just above the ground, and the second at about shoulder height.

"Look at me," instructed my carer. "At first I have to choose the color and smell of the nail polish, that is, to pick one or a few leaves... Then, I should insert my palm to the top hollow and think of the desired pattern on the nails... And now we have to wait a bit because prior to polishing it also performs all the necessary cosmetic steps..."

After less than a minute Messalina showed me the results. Her hands smelled beautifully, and her nails were painted in a cherry-red color. In addition, on them there were printed golden letters arranged in the words 'IGORS HOUSE'.

"What does it mean?" I asked, intrigued.

"I live there. I invite you, too."

"Thank you very much. And what am I supposed to write on my nails?"

"What you want, as long as this consists of two five-letter words. The spelling may be slightly changed."

I was troubled because finding such meaningful words looked like an extremely difficult task. I called in my mind my mom to help and she immediately helped me: her name was, after all, five-letter! Therefore, I thought also about my brother. Here the situation was worse, but I took advantage of the possibility to change the spelling. Finally, I decided to choose the same colors and smell as Messalina, but with the inscription "PAULA JOSEF". However, something did not work out because I obtained some daubs on my fingers.

"You have focused too poorly," clarified my friend, "and the tree has not recognized what you mean. It is best to spell the words in mind."

I followed this advice, and my second attempt was already successful. I viewed my palms from different angles and had observed that these clever letters were set each time the same way. Since even their order was flexibly adjusted, I assumed that some interaction with the brain was still at stake.

Next we did toenails with the help of, obviously, the bottom hollow. This time, the Empress wished for golden crosses on a cherry background saying:

“In this part of paradise the pattern is welcome, in memory of an historical event which occurred four thousand years ago.”

It did not behoove me to order exactly the same, so I told the tree to paint crosses on the right leg, and in the meantime tried to recall some other pattern possible for the left leg. Finally I found; on the big toe gave the golden crescent of the Archangel Gabriel's coat, and on the remaining – the stars from the jackets of his subordinates.

“Oh, I see that you have an open view of the world,” stated Messalina. “You could make a great career in the Directorate General where such people are highly valued.”

“And why have you said,” I asked, “that this tree is common? Despite making such beautiful things...”

“Because there is also a noble polisher. It does not grow in these sites, but it has much greater capabilities.”

“Which ones?”

“Videos or animations with audio.”

“What is it?”

“Three-dimensional moving images plus sound, and even television, which – as far as the screen display system is concerned – has survived in paradise only in this form. Many people (because also men use it frequently) receive a preview of ten programs simultaneously.”

“But what can be seen on such a small screen?”

“In paradise everyone has an eagle eye, and besides that's not all. I'll show you how it works. Bring a selected finger to your forehead and close your eyes for a second... And now open... What can you see?”

“A huge golden letter O on a cherry background.”

“That's it. Now put your finger on your lips and close your eyes again... Open... What are you seeing?”

“You.”

“This turns on and off the paradise television; no receivers are needed for it. You watch each movie or live broadcast as if you were at the place of the action or the center of events, while in fact you're, e.g., lying comfortably on the couch and have a snack.”

“It's very interesting. Can you demonstrate this to me?”

“In the case of the common polisher there is no preview, but you can immediately activate the selected channel provided that its number is written on your fingernail. Maybe you have got a painted digit?”

“I have not.”

“And an at sign?”

“I do not have either. What is the at sign?”

“It is used for network logons. I'll tell you by the way that, in my opinion, real life in paradise is more interesting than virtual one.”

“And without the nail polish cannot I watch TV?”

“This is possible, but you should have a remote control cap.”

“I guess you mean a remote control box,” I corrected the Empress remembering that once in the clinic the doctor was looking for it on call.

“No, this is a cap. With it on your head it is sufficient to think of the name of a station.”

At that point I recalled that when first time had seen Messalina, she had seemed to listen to some music, although she had not got any device. To confirm this, I asked:

“Is it also possible to listen to the radio without a receiver?”

“Absolutely, the majority of radio and playback devices transmit on the same principle. However, Eve, we are here chit-chatting, and time passes. We should go back home, and before traveling we have to stock up on shoes.”

“Shoes?”

“Of course. You have probably seen that Carolina and Joseph had shoes.”

“Yes,” I admitted because our guests actually had got something on their feet, “but I have thought they are only needed on a balloon.”

“Barefoot we would not reach far; not everywhere is such a great grass as here. In addition, shoes have support and positioning systems.”

“What systems?” I did not understand.

“Thanks to supporting you can go fast even when you are very tired. And positioning prevents us from getting lost.”

“In what way?”

“Shoes give off an unpleasant odor if you go in a wrong direction. We even have such blunt saying: ‘Their boots stink’, which means that someone behaves inappropriately.”

“And might you get lost?”

“During the day certainly not, because Igor's House is not far from the plain, but barefoot at night I might not find my way home. We would have to ask for help from angels, and in such cases they can be extremely rude.”

“But do we have still time before the night?”

“Absolutely yes. On the safe side, however, we should get ourselves shoes.”

“Just how shall we get them in the middle of nowhere?” I was grieving, while Messalina again looked around.

“No problem, for a flip-flopper grows near us,” she said cheerfully. “Let's see what is ripening on it.”

The flip-flopper was an abloom bush, where instead of fruit there were swayed a wide variety of shoes. I took also note of the fact that the coronas of its multicolored flowers were facing downwards, although they did not look withered.

“Choose yourself something,” encouraged me the Empress.

“Why are they not in pairs?” I asked bearing in mind how the shoes of our guests looked.

“These specimens are displayed only for the purpose of selection. When you like one of them, simply pick it, and the helper of the bush brings you a pair to put on.”

“And don't I have to try on? Because, after all, people have different size feet...”

“The flip-flopper is watching us all the time and measuring with the aid of those of its tulips. The result you will get is a pair perfectly fitted to your feet.”

“Which shoes are best suited for running?” I questioned recalling Joe's plans.

“Maybe this sneaker?” suggested my carer.

I really liked the bootee, so I picked it. After a short time the grass near us was seething, the sand spilled upwards, and a gray bald quadruped jumped out of the formed hole. The beast was not very big; actually only such that a box tied with a red ribbon and carried in its mouth did not rub against the grass. The bald creature ran up to me, gently put the pack at my feet, and raised its head looking at the picked shoe.

“Give it back,” said Messalina.

Of course I did it, even though I was fascinated by the view of the first animal in my life. (In the clinic I heard kids talking about their pets.) The helper of the flip-flopper grabbed the sneaker and quickly hid in its hole.

“What is the name of this animal?” I enquired.

“I have no idea. It's probably a mutant created just for this purpose. It lives in symbiosis with the flip-flopper.”

“Why are these strings?” I asked putting my sneakers on.

“These are the laces. You do not have to tie them; they are self-propelled, although they are used almost exclusively for decoration.”

Indeed, shortly after putting shoes on, the laces tied themselves in pretty bows. I was afraid that my in-shoe feet would be too hot, but it turned out that they were even cooler. I wished only that my lovely pedicure had not ceased to be visible.

“And what do you take?” I questioned.

“I’d take flip-flops, but for walking – which awaits us – usual sandals are better.”

The shoe indeed looked quite ordinary; I thought that it had only one leather strap. However, after putting on it turned out that there were more than a dozen of these fasteners, they reached almost to the knees, and in addition they had rather complicated cutting shapes.

“Those are not real leather straps,” explained Messalina seeing my interest. “The sandals have got built-in – if I remember right – holographic projectors displaying image on the legs. And at present these patterns and colors are the most fashionable; I think that a message has already come from the headquarters.”

“From what headquarters?”

“Of the shoe company.”

“Oh... Thus everyone can have the latest cut...”

“No, because every season they change the password received by flip-floppers to provide their fruits. As a result, slob walking in old shoes look unfashionable.”

“This is altogether very similar to the situation on Earth,” I found, as I remembered a conversation of Teresa with her friends about fashion.

“Yes, but there a new model of shoe had to be physically produced, whereas here its base remains unchanged, and all innovations are added electronically. What is more, under the current paradise fashion every bush smuggles its individual trait.”

“The straps on your calves look convex...” I noticed with admiration.

“Because they really are such, but you can check by touch that only light is there.”

“And why is there no image on my legs?” I asked after verifying (my fingers actually passed through the straps with no resistance).

“In the case of athletic footwear there are different rules. On Earth, you’d have to wear socks or something of that sort, and here they are unnecessary. Probably you feel already the operation of automatic system to prevent foot perspiration. And if you press slightly the right or left shoelace, socks or knee-highs respectively will be displayed on your legs.”

I did so and found that the patterns on the cherry knee-length socks accurately reflected those on my toenails! Thus there was nothing lost. In addition, only then I realized that Messalina’s pedicure was also displayed; her sandal was – at the time of picking – close-toed.

Chapter 2

Escape from hell

Soon we marched briskly, in our shoes, down a yellow alley. After a dozen minutes the surroundings began to change; the grass became sparse, and the alleys evolved into dirt roads with a dark surface. Furthermore, the number of shrubs and trees increased, and finally a dense forest appeared on the left side. At a certain moment we heard from there a quiet-but-clear voice:

“Valeria, it's me, Margaret...”

Messalina got twitchy, but immediately she controlled herself, and said to me in a whisper:

“Do not stop. We are walking as if nothing happened...”

So we were walking, and after about one minute the voice spoke again:

“Waiting for you in an old shed, in twenty meters...”

“When I say ‘now’,” whispered to me the Empress, “jump following me to the left over the ditch... And we'll enter the shed... Just fast!”

“I'll try,” I assured in a quiet voice as well.

After a dozen seconds, actually we saw the entrance to a low wooden building, whose main part disappeared in the thicket of trees. Messalina gave, in an undertone, the prearranged signal, and after a while we were inside.

“Hi, my darling,” said the Empress with emotion.

“Hi,” replied the voice.

The shed was dark because the light from outside came only through gaps between the planks. For this reason, I was not able to see immediately who and what was in it. When my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I noticed that on the walls there were hunting trophies and weapons with which these animals had been probably killed. There were also posters with photographs of some people and big captions ‘WANTED’. Besides, the whole room was saturated with the smell of something not very nice.

Meanwhile, Messalina was greeted warmly by a fairly tall blonde being 25 years old (I was already, in principle, certain that my assessments of the age of people were correct).

“This is Eve, and this is Margaret,” after a while the Empress introduced us to each other, and we shook hands.

“Please, sit down,” Margaret invited us to a big table standing against the wall. When I was sitting down on a bench, for a moment my face was close to a poster, and then I found with amazement that a photo of the hostess was there!

“Again you have run away,” Messalina said, looking at Margaret with mild reproach.

“I’ve not stood it. Do you have, dear, something to eat?”

“Of course,” the Empress replied opening the bag with the remains of our supper.

“I have not eaten for three days,” explained the blonde attacking the food ravenously. “Not counting the berries from the forest and the damn garlic...”

“Couldn't you pick a flower?” I asked.

“Valeria...” said Margaret with her mouth full. “Tell me... Who is it?”

“It's an embryo. This is her first day of life.”

“Ah, yes, I understand...” the girl looked at me softly. “I have not guessed because in hell we do not have embryos...”

“But what happened?” Messalina returned to the previous topic.

“Mephistopheles began to make a pass at me.”

“Mephisto?” smiled the Empress. “What do you want, my dear, he is probably the most handsome devil all over hell. And if he did not have this horn, he would look like a normal man.”

“Yes, but just it implies such sexual behavior,” Margaret looked very headstrong, “that I do not accept.”

“Do you know that I only met this Mephistopheles here in paradise? He was at the club for guest appearances.”

“This would tally,” confirmed the blonde, “because he was not in hell from the beginning. His name occurred in the literature on Earth for the first time only in the sixteenth century. A thousand years later, the Father accidentally read one of those works. He probably liked the book, as he decided to mutate the genome of a typical devil in accordance with the specified characterisation, and in this way Mephisto was created.”

“Well actually, I was already then free. And how did you escape this time?”

“I volunteered to work in the kitchen. In the end I went from there together with garbage, taking with me a carton of milk and a box of garlic.”

“Did you steal milk from the kitchen?” I asked in horror, as from conversations in the clinic remembered that milk is a tasty drink recommended especially for children.

“I did not steal, but did take,” replied Margaret calmly, apparently accustomed to such absurd charges. “If I had not run away, I could have drunk it for breakfast.”

“That you took the milk, I understand,” admitted Messalina. “But what the devil for have you lugged the garlic? Even here we can smell it.”

“Because I have not eaten everything yet. And the garlic is extremely important...”

“Why?” I interjected.

“The Archangel Gabriel and his mob are hunting me...”

“We know,” said my carer.

“Even today we saw them,” I added.

“Just so. And they're tremendously afraid of garlic. If they catch me, I will defend myself,” Margaret was very militant.

“We hope sincerely,” I said gently, “that you will avoid meeting them. They are armed.”

“How are you going to escape on?” inquired Messalina.

“I'm awaiting nightfall here...”

“Why exactly here?” I interjected again, as I wanted necessarily to explain the riddle of this poster with Margaret's image.

“Because I have come to the conclusion that it is best to stay under the radar. This shed is the resting place of Gabriel and his deputies. However, they come here only where no one is chased.”

“Very cleverly,” approved this strategy the Empress. “But what are you going to do at night?”

“On that side of the shed there is a dry lake. I'll have to go around it in order to get to the Gorge of the Seven Martyrs, which leads to the Holy River. As you know, only Captain Noah's Rainbow Ark runs across it, and he sincerely hates Gabriel. So I think I will be able to beg him to transport me to heavens of Asian religions on the other side of the river. And then I'll be saved.”

“Why?” we both shouted almost simultaneously.

“Since the time when the Father allowed the use of reincarnation in Asian paradises, they have gotten themselves into such a mess that Gabriel will never be able to find me.”

At this point, from the top we heard a male voice amplified by a megaphone:

“Margaret, there you are. It's Gabriel. Do not attempt to escape on because you do not have a chance. The game is over. Get out of the shed through the exit from the dry lake with hands raised up. And don't try any tricks!”

“The damn son-of-a-gun!” moaned the wanted woman.

“Kiss our asses...” mumbled the Empress looking fearfully up.

“Uptight ass!” I swore resignedly and rather senselessly. However, since the butt might be stuck out (in the yard a small girl complained to her mother that Chris stuck out his bottom at her), I supposed that it could be uptight (as I desired to describe my emotional state).

“What do we do?” asked quietly Messalina.

“First of all, I need new shoes,” our fugitive was calm. “No, not yours, Valeria; Eve has much better and even of a similar size. Can I borrow them?”

“Obviously.”

“You must also give me a leaf because I – as an outlaw anyway – do not wear it.”

The Empress reached towards her abdomen, but Margaret said:

“Yours is a little bit too small.”

“But my hip sizes are roughly the same as yours...”

“It is not about looks. Once again I will ask Eve...”

Of course I agreed. Margaret tried my shoes on and found that they fitted well, albeit the projectors displayed nothing. Then she approached the box with garlic, chose the largest bulb and hid it under my leaf.

“Do you really want to fight with them?” I asked.

“Now I see that wearing the old shoes on my feet I would not have chances, but in your wonderful sneakers...”

“Margaret, hurry up!” shouted Gabriel from above, “or we will storm the shed...”

“I’m leaving!” screamed the fugitive, and for us added quietly: “I’ll try.”

“Honey,” said Messalina with a voice full of tremor, “maybe it is better to give up? After all, they are able to injure you... to hurt you... And later you will run away again...”

“This is no time to go wobbly!” stated definitely Margaret opening the shed door and going outside. We obviously slipped away behind her cautiously.

It took a while before my eyes adjusted to the brightness. About a hundred meters ahead, at a slightly lower level, there was a deep basin of the dry lake. Although there was, in fact, no water in it, steep shores excluded the possibility of passing through it to the, visible exactly in front of us, entrance to the Gorge of the Seven Martyrs, the only breach in the rocks surrounding the lake.

Gabriel and his subordinates were hovering nearby at the height of a few meters, while Margaret went to them very slowly, in my sneakers, with her hands raised up.

“They are indeed afraid of garlic,” Messalina noted with satisfaction. “They put on gas masks!”

Actually, the deputies of Gabriel had got something on their faces, whereas the Archangel kept up appearances, throwing a mask over his wing nonchalantly. It could be sensed, however, that something really exciting hung in the air. All the angels as well as people expected with tension what would happen.

“Why can they remain motionless in the air,” I asked to smother this terrible nervousness a little, “even without moving their wings?”

“Because they have, as far as I remember, dark energy in their bones. Supposedly the Father once discovered a method for regulating, within the framework of biological metabolism, the amount of dark energy. Later he incorporated it into the genome of angels.”

“Explain it to me more clearly...”

“Well, he simply enabled angels to create dark energy from the inhaled air and to expel it, if necessary, also through the respiratory system.”

“Maybe that's why they are so sensitive to the smell of garlic,” I expressed a guess, although I had no clue what it was that dark... something.

“Yes, it is possible that garlic disrupts the operation of this mechanism, especially that devils can eat this spice in any amount, and they just do not fly. Anyway, angels' wings are only needed to change their position in a horizontal plane.”

Suddenly Gabriel ordered:

“Stand! Take off your shoes, you know it can be done without the help of hands... Now, using your left palm, turn them up and firmly shake... The right hand has to be up all the time... First with one and next the other... It is enough... And, unfortunately, I have to ask you to remove, also with the left arm, the leaf...”

“Margaret is still too far,” Messalina whispered with a hint of resignation in her voice. “The goddamn pro...”

“Okay,” continued calmly Gabriel, “to rest you may put your hands on the back of the head... Turn back to me... And again facing me... Spread your legs... Well, now open your mouth and pull the tongue out.”

Our friend was fulfilling those instructions, and the Archangel scrutinized her thoroughly, albeit from a distance of several meters. Admittedly, he did not have an easy task because Margaret certainly had not used the services of a cactus for a long time. Anyway, when she was facing us with the leaf in her hand, I could not see the bulb of garlic in her.

“...remembers about all,” finished the Empress, but rather with satisfaction in her voice. And she was right because the result of the scrutiny was positive.

“Great, now you may close your mouth, attach the leaf and put the sneakers on with the left arm... Yes, and keep walking,” ordered the commander adding coarsely, “but the hands are up all the time!”

When Margaret was already close to the Archangel, suddenly stumbled. She instinctively lowered arms to cushion the fall, and quite accidentally nudged with her right elbow the leaf. Then she grabbed with her left hand the garlic bulb, and with all her strength hurled it towards Gabriel's face. Subsequently, she – obviously – did not fall at all, but not watching the effects of her attempt she set off at a run down a narrow (for this reason I had not noticed it earlier) path between the lake and the rocks.

Meanwhile, we were jumping up and down shouting with joy.

“Have you seen?!” exclaimed to me Messalina. “He was a little late with his reaction. Because, however, he forgot about something...”

“About what?”

“During the scrutiny he told Margaret to keep constantly her right hand up. It was more dangerous in his belief, so he mainly looked at it. But Maggie is left-handed!”

“Well, yes,” I said severely, “one needs to pay for mistakes.”

Again we laughed heartily.

“We have won the first round definitely,” my friend summed up giving me a five.

The throw was indeed accurate; the shell hit the Archangel in the bushy right eyebrow shattering in all directions and filling the air with its intense odor. The heavenly sheriff probably lost consciousness because he was lying horizontally in the air with his head facing up, rotating slowly around his navel (whenever angels have it). And his deputies formed a circular cluster embracing each other with arms and waving bare feet. It looked as if they conferred or reassured themselves.

Gabriel made, in spite of everything, the speediest recovery from the event, calling with a big bruise above his half-closed eye:

“Sandalphon, come here!”

When the summoned deputy pulled out of the circle of winged companions and approached, his commander said:

“You fly the fastest of us, so you will chase after her... And take off the mask already; she does not have more garlic.”

“And what if she has got?” prudently asked Sandalphon.

“She does not have because where she could hide it?”

“From the opposite direction...”

“You silly billy, if she had hidden a clove there, during the run it would have fallen out a long time ago, no matter how she was tensed.”

“And also in front, but more deeply?”

“This is theoretically possible,” admitted Gabriel. “But then you will notice if she want to pick something out of there. And I give you a license for any pre-emptive attack.”

“I once knew a woman who could...”

“Do not tell me about those of your friends from the ‘El Dorado’ saloon. She is a good girl; she was sometime the Prime Minister of a large country on Earth. And you have to hurry up, because if she runs into the gorge, we will not catch her on this side of the river. You know surely that Captain Noah can't bear us.”

I naturally understood little of this conversation, but I really wanted to find out that Margaret had still garlic tucked away for the rainy day. Maybe, I asked myself, my curse should have applied to more physical conditions and read, e.g., “Tight ass!”? And what did the phrase “more deeply” mean?

Meanwhile, the fugitive raced in my sneakers like lightning. Sandalphon could not fly at a greater speed, but he was moving in a straight line.

Therefore, it soon became clear that he would cross the path of our colleague far from the entrance to the gorge.

Messalina was right in saying that in heaven everyone has good eyesight. Although the distance was already large, I was seeing Margaret quite accurately. In addition, when I was staring at her, suddenly something turned on in my head and I saw her magnified. I got scared, so immediately I told about it the Empress asking her if this is a symptom of an illness, but my carer calmed down me, saying:

“This is digital zoom. In heaven all people have got it in the brain since their resurrection.”

“Oh... I see,” I said completely without understanding, but thanks to this numerical... something I can describe in detail what happened then.

Sandalphon approached the running girl and evidently wanted to grasp her forearm. He opened his palm and rapidly closed it, but grabbed the air, for at the last moment Margaret saw what was coming, and she made a sudden movement with her hand.

Therefore, the angel changed his tactics and decided to grasp our friend by the left foot, this one on the lake side. This inevitably would have been made if not for the fact that she stumbled, this time really, and in order to protect herself from falling tried to land on both legs simultaneously. As a result, Sandalphon only hit his hand on the top of her left sneaker, which in turn entailed two major consequences.

First of all, Margaret regained her balance and ran on without a fall. The second fact was even more fateful; under the influence of touching the left shoelace the projectors displayed my knee socks. Being still upset, Sandalphon suddenly saw the emblem of his commandant on Maggie's calf! Consequently he stared, forgot about steering and slightly turned aside from the route, which was enough to get stuck violently in the wall of the lake basin.

A large cloud of dust was raised. When it settled, this became clear that for Sandalphon the game was already really over. The poor fellow had a broken wing, and hung helplessly on the other one dug into the sand. It probably goes without saying that we again jumped up and applauded squealing with delight like kids. We did enjoy the more so because the entrance to the, obscured by patches of fog, gorge was already quite close.

“Why have my sockettes been displayed,” I asked the Empress, “and not something else?”

“Margaret does not have a pedicure. The projectors come with memory, and in such a situation display the last image.”

I fell into a reverie, for a moment, on the extraordinary coincidences that had occurred there. For instance, if we had not met the Gabriel's patrol just after my resurrection, I could not have told the polisher to paint the emblem

of the Archangel on my left big toe. If I had not hit upon this idea, our friend would have already captured... And I could lend her my high-speed sneakers only because Joe had found me earlier and told about the planned contest.

“Can she manage to escape now?” I expressed my very cautious hope in this question.

“Yes, she can,” replied joyfully Messalina, but after a while moaned desperately, “oh, good heavens!...”

“What has happened?!” I screamed disoriented, for Margaret was running without slowing her pace.

“Gabriel is going to lasso her!”

“Why is this bad?” with great concern I tried to make sense of it.

“Because he is an unrivaled master in this competition. It is the only hope that for the first time he will not hit, since surely he has no time to throw more than once.”

Gabriel rose vertically holding in his hands a very long rope shaped in a ring at one end. At that moment I remembered that something similar hung in the midst of other types of weapons on the wall of the shed.

Again, something switched in my head, and I could see that Maggie's pursuer did not use his wings, but he was breathing deeply to move up as fast as possible. So my carer was right with the dark mechanism.

Meanwhile, the Prime Minister was almost coming to the gorge. At one point the Archangel threw, and we watched with bated breath the flight of the rust-colored rope on the field background. Unfortunately, the error limit of the paradise security head had been already evidently reached. When Margaret was literally three meters from the salutary rock pass, this ring came down on her and clenched around her hips. (She probably had not heard our cries "Look out!" and "Bend down!".) The poor girl still tried to burst the rope, but, of course, she was not able to cope with it. At last, she fell down on her knees and crying with anger banged the ground with her fist.

We felt sad and dejected, while Gabriel with the deputies flew, already unhurriedly, to our unfortunate friend. They put her together with my sneakers to an iron cage so narrow that Maggie had to stand. However, after a while the Archangel told to replace this tight place; it turned out that he had respect for the Prime Minister because the second cage was much more spacious and made of gold.

Then the squad, with two of them holding the wounded Sandalphon under his armpits, quietly departed. Margaret still had time to slap herself on the hip and raise thumbs up to indicate to us that physically she was all right, which at least a little improved our moods. We waved at her, and then returned to the shed.

Chapter 3

Drunken party

“How did you know that,” I asked Messalina as soon as we sat down at the table again, “just Maggie had escaped from hell? Because it was for her that you had taken the food in the bag...”

“Exactly, my dear Eve. It's simple,” said the Empress with an artificially bold voice, and then continued in the usual way. “Gabriel saw from afar that two girls were sitting, and yet he approached to check us out. The number of women in hell is much less than that of men, and the most frequently escaping one among them is Margaret... Is your throat, my darling, so dry, too?”

When I confirmed, it turned out that Messalina had still gotten a few bottles of wine and two glasses which she eagerly filled. I was so nervous I drank mine in one gulp. The Empress followed my example and poured again.

“I feel sorry for this girl really...” I said sadly. “She was already so close to the gorge.”

“However, she did not have a chance. I did not want to worry her, but she had incorrect information. Although Adam actually allowed reincarnation in heavens of Asian religions, when the Father found out about this fact, he immediately forbade it.”

“What exactly is this 'reincarnation'?”

“This amounts to a swap of two bodies,” explained Messalina and seeing my silly face added: “Well, for example, when you'd have my body, and I'd have yours...”

“Oh,” I reacted emotionally, “it is very good that the Father has forbidden this!”

“I think so too,” agreed my guardian.

“Why exactly Maggie went to hell?” I asked. “She does not look like a killer... Was she also in dispute with her husband?”

“No, this is not the case. The Algorithm simply gave her a negative result. Although small, but still.”

“What is the ‘Algorithm’?”

“This is a computer program judging – on the basis of your life on Earth – whether you have to go to hell or may stay in paradise. The Archangel Michael likes to suggest he has written it, but, in fact, the Father is its author, and Michael merely operates it.”

Not very well I knew what was ‘the computer program’, but I felt that it might be important, and I decided to go into the subject in greater depth.

“Are embryos also assessed by this algorithm?”

“Yes, but for them the result is always equal to zero.”

“Why?”

“Because in their case no events are dependent on them.”

“And what events are taken into account?”

“Father's point was that people should not have harmed each other. Any wrong done to another person is scored negatively, and the Algorithm totals this.”

“Just one done to a human? What about animals?”

“Animals, as living beings created by the Father, enjoy certain rights of the people as well. You should not torment them or kill unnecessarily.”

“Are they also events scored positively?” I continued to collect information about the Algorithm.

“Naturally. Although a premeditated murder cannot be, in principle, compensated for by anything, less harm may be offset by good deeds or indirect suffering, e.g., due to illness.”

“And if someone was already punished on Earth because, for example, was in jail or made a confession?” I questioned remembering that my dad said something about confession once in the clinic.

“Confession or penance consisting in prayer is not any punishment and does not matter. Sincere regret or repentance can give some pluses. And the court judgments from Earth are examined. If someone had been punished by long-term severe prison or death penalty preceded by torture, even intentional homicide can be forgiven to them.”

“And how is going to church scored?” again I recalled the last conversation of my parents.

“Participation in ceremonies is – without a doubt – a source of pleasure for the participant, so Algorithm of Your Life (that is the official name of this program) does not award positive points for this. On the other hand, it does not assign negative ones either, for everyone is entitled to do what they like as long as it does not harm other people enjoying the same rights.”

“Just people? And if someone wrongs Father Omnidirector?”

“In what way?” surprised the Empress.

“Well, for example, they do not observe fasting,” I mentioned this case, since as the first came to my mind.

“Would the Father be supposed to throw a man into hell for eating something?” replied my friend with a question and immediately provided the answer herself. “He would have to go mad...”

“This man?” I asked to be sure.

“No, the Father, of course.”

“And if someone offended him in some other way...”

“It is impossible to offend him.”

“Why is it impossible?” now it was my turn to be very surprised.

“It is impossible,” categorically repeated Messalina. “Listen, could your favorite she-cat, if you had gotten her, offend you?”

“No, but that's because she could not speak.”

“And if she wrote with her paw on the sand, ‘You're a real bitch’, would you take offense at her?”

“No, but I would like to know why she thinks so.”

“It is another matter. An office of angels in paradise does sometimes a poll in which there are also questions about the Father.”

“So he likes to be praised,” I stated in a bantering way.

“Absolutely not,” strongly denied my guardian. “It's all about improving the life in heaven. And the Father totally did not care about praises from the people on Earth, including all the singing in churches. Because how would it look: he created human beings to praise him?”

“But maybe people wanted to repay him?”

“In this way? What for were praises from humans needed to the Father? Did not he know he had done them well?”

“So how could someone thank him?” I asked noting in my mind that for a short time we were talking amusingly using only questions.

“Living as the Father wanted. Because when somebody prays fervently and sings devoutly, and after leaving the church harms other people in word or deed, (e.g., lies, insults, badly works or poorly pays for the work done, pollutes the environment, mistreats family members, does not pay taxes or spends money collected from taxes on nonsensical purposes, or – last but not least – obtains under false pretenses money from state bodies), this is... this is...” Messalina wondered about the selection of an appropriate word, “simply a deception.”

I had to agree with the arguments of my friend, and only asked to explain:

“Why have not you mentioned stealing among these offenses?”

“This is obvious and very general term contained in the Decalogue or, in other words, the Ten Commandments. On the other hand, some of the activities provided by me were considered by certain people to be natural and resulting from freedom. For example, an entrepreneur with big profits paid starvation wages to employees, and justified this with neo... neofiber...”

“Neoliberalism,” I suggested because I had heard that word in a broadcast which incidentally was completely incomprehensible to me.

“Exactly. He claimed therefore he acted according to the market rules, for nobody around would not have given jobs for those people. Perhaps he did not steal, but certainly he harmed them using the position in which they had found themselves...”

“And who was the victim of these taxes or money swindled from the state?”

“They were all citizens. This principle, invented by the Father, about not inflicting harm on others really works in every situation.”

“So is this rule better than the Decalogue?”

“It is, first and foremost, simpler because it can be expressed in one sentence. Also it does not contain instructions for divine worship that the Father does not need completely. And thus the law can be applied to all people.”

“And is it being used as well to people who are already in paradise?”

“Yes, the Archangel Michael performs periodic inspection by means of Algorithm, and very rarely it happens that some fools are directed to hell.”

I decided to see how well I had understood everything and, after a while, presented the fruit of my thoughts:

“Might this universal commandment sound: ‘Do no harm to humans and animals having rights that are identical or to a limited extent similar, respectively, to your ones.’?”

“I see that you have (unlike me) high language skills. Yes, you have formulated it brilliantly. If everyone had obeyed this commandment, life on Earth would have been as beautiful as in heaven. There would have been no theft, corruption, exploitation, violence, murder, war, and all the barbarism.”

“And what if someone claims that,” a doubt came to my mind, again associated with a radio broadcast, “they do not need any commandments, as always act in accordance with their conscience?”

“If their conscience leads to harm of other people, they may shove it up their ass!” Messalina was clearly infuriated, but immediately she controlled herself and asked quietly, “do you want me to tell you a story?”

“Yes, of course.”

“I was still in hell when Gabriel's angels brought two brothers who had killed twelve journalists for that, in the opinion of the murderers, they had written and drawn inappropriate things...”

“As many as twelve?!” I interrupted deeply moved. “In what way?”

“Those bastards stormed into the editor's office and shot dead half of the staff. In hell Lucifer himself received them, and he always pretends to be a good devil, full of understanding for the poor damned. Then also he was supposedly very astonished that the Algorithm had given them so a big negative result. Encouraged by his cordial approach, the brothers began to explain they had simply acted in accordance with their conscience, and it was certainly a mistake.”

“Did you hear it in person?”

“Yes, because I was just with my application for release in Lucifer's office.”

“And what did Lucifer decide?”

“He could not decide anything because he did not have such power, but he had a special telephone line to the Father. Pretending to be highly excited, the devil got through with him, and presented the matter mentioning the pure conscience of killers. And do you know what the Father did?”

“I can guess a little bit...”

“Only he and his Deputy Adam (who is a human of the longest living in paradise) may alter the results of the Algorithm. In that case the Father commanded to multiply their negative outcome by two.”

“So it is worth knowing that he does not like when someone invokes their conscience...”

“The Father can't stand it, for this is, after all, the usurpation of his power. For although some of those journalists were not without fault either, people do not have the right to replace the Father in such matters. Later I learned that he had also given Lucifer a reprimand for insincere behavior in his presence, but the punishment for the brothers has remained,” Messalina said this with perceived contentment. “They will sit in hell twice as long.”

“And those journalists?”

“Journalists?”

“Well, you have said they too were a little guilty...”

“Yes, because they offended plenty of people that had not deserved it. But since already on Earth they were disproportionately punished for their actions, the Algorithm had to give them a lot of positive points, and they all went straight to heaven.”

“Those events must have caused quite a commotion on Earth...”

“People had run amok! For instance, a few months later a politician was murdered for having defended those journalists after the attempt of brothers. I am mentioning this because I met him after my release from hell, and had even a romantic fling with him...”

“What is a ‘romantic fling’?”

“Well, it is ... such a nice acquaintance. I see that you, Eve, have a very poor understanding of some area of life,” said Messalina worriedly, but after a while she smiled at me reassuringly, so I thought that maybe it was not a serious drawback.

I also did not know well who was a ‘politician’, but I came to the conclusion that this word was probably connected with the possession of power, that is, in paradise I might skip its knowledge.

“The Father is very fair...” I noticed.

“Yeah, he is, to a degree unreachable by humans.”

I felt a desire to ask my mentor about another matter related to this topic. The doctor had read about it in the newspaper during morning coffee, and then got into a heated discussion with her colleagues. However, I did not

want to tell Messalina about the voices heard on Earth (anyway she would not have believed me), so I decided to achieve the goal circuitously, and said:

“I see that you are very much for the Father...”

“I would go through fire and water for him,” the Empress replied with moist eyes. “After all, he freed me from hell.”

“And tell me if he once wrote a book?”

“The Father wrote many books. In each paradise library they are the most important items.”

“But I'm talking about a book that was available on Earth.”

“This I do not know exactly, but perhaps it was...”

“So let's assume that it was,” I suggested, “and someone would have said that this book had had to be written by a drunkard and not by the Father, for it contained an immense amount of rubbish...”

“Listen,” my protectress interrupted me, “the Father has a great sense of humor. Maria told me...”

“Who is Maria?” now I interjected because I did not want to be confused later.

“This is a very important professor and my best pal among scientists.”

“Why is she so important?”

“Maria is a member of the Council of Sages.”

“Aha... And what's that?”

“This is a group of the most outstanding scholars living in paradise, meeting regularly with the Father.”

“I see... You, Valeria, seem to know everyone in heaven...”

“Certainly not everyone,” replied Messalina lowering her eyes modestly, “but I know a few people...”

“And what has this Mary said?”

“Well, the Father likes to insert deliberately nonsense to his texts. Who is the first to recognize and correctly interpret the absurdity (and Maria claims that interpreting a nonsense of the Father is not easy) receives from him a nice unique prize.”

“Ah, this is what is their counsel...” I said somewhat maliciously.

“Don't joke about it!” bridled the Empress. “Father Omnidirector always values the opinion of his human experts. (Maria even suspects that's why he created people for himself, whereas they were only able to construct computers.) And this quiz game occurs after the main session, for relaxation...”

“Well, but suppose that someone on Earth did not know about the Father's sense of humor, and hearing about the drunk charged the author of this statement with offending religious feelings. I mean, do you think that a terrestrial court should have sentenced him?”

“If the Father, by some miracle, had felt really offended, he could have given an adequate punishment to this drunk, e.g., five hundred years in hell...”

“You have somewhat muddled up the things. One would have brought to court not the drunkard, but the one who had told about him. And he would have been accused of insulting not the Father, but the religious feelings of another person.”

“You're right, I've heard about it. Such suits were indeed brought on the Earth at certain times, until the regulations – on which they were based – had been abolished.”

“Why were the regulations bad?”

“Because they provided a partial justification for terrorist attacks on religious grounds.”

“In what way?”

“You see, since a politico, wanting to show who's boss, could on their basis to induce a court to condemn a person to a fine, anyone else, feeling much more resentful in their view or conscience, could – as this really happened on Earth sometime – plant a bomb at the finish of a marathon.”

“But it was already a crime!” I exclaimed imagining with horror that this bomb tore off the legs of my brother.

“Yes and that is why I am saying merely about a partial and very little justification. Nevertheless, the genie was liberated from her bottle.”

“What was that?” I gasped because the last Messalina's sentence had puzzled me deeply.

“The horse already bolted...”

“What horse?”

“It's just in a figurative sense,” explained my friend. “Speaking more literally, the spiral of violence motivated by religious honor (so let's call it) began to evolve.”

“But what if someone actually felt offended, and did not have any criminal intent?”

“So it was, some simple people naively thought that their God required this of them or the theses of their religion would have become less likely if they had not taken offense.”

“Thus should not they have done this?”

“Each offense is a manifestation of the pride of the offended one. A human having the degree of pride equal to zero would be never offended. Of course, one cannot require people not to sue in such cases, not to demand an apology, and so on, but in my opinion they should not have involved the Father in this in any manner, especially when their knowledge of the facts was minuscule.”

“But you have said that those journalists offending other people were a little guilty...”

“Because they were, but not every harm can be compensated by court. In the case of marital infidelity or an affront to religious feelings only the Father and his Algorithm are able to correctly assess the degree of culpability and mete out an adequate punishment.”

“Then, however, the doctor was right,” I thought and decided to go back to the topic of Margaret.

“Tell me, please, something about our friend. Does her negative result mean that Maggie caused more harm than good on Earth?”

“You should know that she was a bit unlucky because her deeds mainly benefited people already having something, and wronged the poor. And the Algorithm is so conceived that events relating to vulnerable people, e.g., children, old humans, women in some societies, disabled or just poor are higher scored.”

“This is logical,” I admitted. “After all, the one who already has something needs less than one who has nothing.”

“In fact, it's not that obvious,” Messalina stated seriously.

“But you have said Margaret got few of those minuses...”

“That's true... If she had written applications as I had, or even if she had just sat quietly, long ago she would have been free... Like this they give her an additional 50 years for each breakout.”

“So why does she it?”

“She has found such a way of life in hell. Owing to this, she does not get bored. I think that if she was suddenly pardoned by the Father (which can always happen because he likes persons with character), she would go, of course, to heaven, but she would be lack something.”

At that moment my body again gave me a surprise. Even earlier something overflowed unpleasantly in my belly, then it was moved downwardly, and suddenly I felt some air under my bottom. Everything pointed to the fact that I let it out! Immediately I felt a lot better, so I did not regret completely that it had happened, but...

“Something smurfs unpf...” Messalina said, wrinkling her nose in distaste, and stumbled over a difficult word.

I knew what she wanted to say, but on that occasion I did not prompt her, and also speaking with some effort tried to save the situation:

“It's probably... probably still... the garlic...”

In my opinion, the smell was not very bad, but actually rather worse than the scent of garlic. One way or the other, I decided not to let the air out any more in the presence of other persons.

I noticed that Messalina was strangely flushed, and I also felt my cheeks burning. We already drank a lot of wine and I expected to be as fresh as a daisy, like after having the ambrosia, and yet the effect was quite the opposite. We did not already speak with such eloquence as just after parting

with poor Maggie, and my guardian had clear difficulties with the pronunciation of the letter 'L'.

“Will the devil... this Mephisto... make a pass at her... still?” I formulated the question a little clumsily.

“Maybe, but be five me dear, it's not so bad... Just thirty-some years ago he made a pass at me at the wedding of my friend... Ah, what a bash we put on there!”

I wondered on the first sentence of my companion. Only after a while I realized that she replaced 'L' by 'F' and sometimes made additional changes. “You dear have to decode it,” I thought (I knew the term 'decoding' from the clinic because it had been used by the doctor in her genetic studies).

“Was it in paradise?”

“Yes, of course.”

“So are weddings here too?”

“In paradise everything is possible,” Messalina replied, undaunted by her difficulties in pronunciation, “but that time it was the resumption of a marriage from before four thousand years on the Earth. Do you want, cutie, me to tell you something about it?”

I noticed that after drinking wine my carer became very effusive, and not only out of politeness I agreed immediately. For I harbored hope I would find out how this devil made a pass.

“But there were gifts!” continued the Empress. “Even I was envious...”

“You don't say so?!” I laughed out after decoding.

“Truthy!” confirmed Messalina applying her pronunciation. “And this despite the fact that I was twenty at that time... The prettiest was, of course, the ex-queen of Egypt, i.e., the bride. The poor Mephisto knew there just me, but he wanted to... after this with me...”

“After making a pass at you,” again I had to prompt my friend.

“Quite so! After making a pass at me he wanted to do the same at those beauties, and therefore had to draw their attention. And that is why he coaxed me into a courting game...” Messalina reached for the glass, and I interjected:

“The game? It's interesting. And what were the rules?”

“We were chasing off over the hotel. I ran as the first, screaming as if in terror, and he pretended he wanted to rape me...”

“What does it mean to ‘rape’?” I asked because I had never heard of the word before.

“Hmm... to make a pass with the use of force,” the Empress replied after a short reflection.

“Aha. And who won?”

“In the end he entered me, and just at this moment in the garden a huge, snaking its way among the trees, ...”

“How is it possible that he ‘entered you’? I interrupted concluding that my carer was already at sixes and sevens because of this wine. “I think he entered your room?”

“And what did I say, sweetie?... Sure that my... He came in like a Satan, what am I saying: ‘came in’, he barged into my space so that a heat wave hit me...”

“Was it a good or bad thing?”

“Good... oh, bad because I felt as if I were too near the fire in hell...”

“So was it he who won?”

“He... For sure, he...” confirmed Messalina uncertainly.

“If he made a pass at me this way,” I said with anger because I was really outraged that the devil had harmed my friend, “I would give him a knuckle sandwich to unmake immediately!”

“Oh, I see that you're a firm chick...”

“And why did not the other wedding guests help you?”

“Because they made passes at each other, too. They took our race as a signal to start an orgy...”

I did not know the last word, but I decided not to ask because, in fact, the first sentence of the Empress explained what had been going on there. Meanwhile, my friend continued:

“For instance, on a carpet right next... that is, striding with dignity down the red carpet my uncle Mark barged into the space of my aunt Octavia.”

“And who was the groom?”

“I have just said that Mark.”

“How so? Did he not watch over the room of the bride?”

“You need to know, my star, that it was and is a really great love. They have been together for over four thousand years, and, e.g., exited from hell – speaking in passing right after me – at the same time. However, even the greatest love does not prohibit us from paying friends visits, by mutual consent.”

At that moment an annoying hum under the ceiling reached our ears.

“What is this?” I asked frightened.

“Do not be afraid,” replied the Empress looking up searchingly for a short while. “The shed has fans being activated automatically when necessary. They are admittedly of old type, but in a moment you will certainly feel better.”

“Yes, indeed,” I conceded hearing that the pronunciation of my guardian had improved as well. “But what did the queen at that time?”

Messalina drank wine and her eyes lit up, as if she had hit upon a wonderful idea.

“Cleopatra rented, also right next to us, a duplex apartment. My uncle Julius got into the upper part, and from behind another uncle Octavian, who

only on the day before had been released from hell, barged into the lower room simultaneously. What was going on there!”

“I see that the wedding was full of your uncles and aunts...”

“As it is at a wedding,” the Empress smiled. “But they were, in general, very distant, sometimes a little from my husband... You still need to know that Cleo and Octavian were mortal enemies on the Earth. Precisely this surprising visit, which – as we now know – the uncle had secretly dreamed of, and which could come to fruition only in paradise, initiated their reconciliation.”

“It is indeed a romantic story,” I admitted because this was certainly a very pleasant acquaintance. “And did Mephisto reach his goal?”

“When we were running, one could hear comments like ‘This is the teenybopper Messalina reveling as usual. But who is chasing her?’ Mephistopheles was spotted and had then big success.”

“You have also said that something huge appeared in the garden,” I reminded showing I had kept a clear head despite the drunk wine. However, actually, all the time I wondered with great concern what could it be, and I asked just such a question.

“Might you like to take a guess?” my companion was about to coming up with puzzles. “This word consists of five letters...”

“I do not know... Could it be a snake?” I tried to guess terrified in earnest because once I had heard a radio broadcast about this animal, and snake was not presented there in a favorable light.

“Are you afraid of snakes?”

“A little bit...”

“Adam cannot stand them either.”

“The deputy of the Father?” I asked curiously. “Why?”

“Actually, a snake initiated everything. Do you want me to tell you about this?”

“Of course.”

“Eight thousand years ago, Adam lived on Earth in the valley of Nile, it is a river.”

“I guess...”

“Adam was a very talented young man, open-minded about all novelties. Therefore, he quickly received a responsible position as the shepherd of a large herd of donkeys...”

“Why of those animals?”

“Because just at that time and in that area ass was domesticated by humans.”

“So Adam had a high salary, didn't he?”

“Yes, he did, but in those times people did not yet know money. However, the herd owner promised him that after two years he would be able to take to

himself any pair of those lop-eared creatures. Thanks to this, Adam would already be set for life.”

“Would he?... Did something happen?”

“You should know that Adam had a beautiful fiancée, who was coincidentally named Eve, that is, exactly the same as you...”

“You don't say?!” I shouted in surprise, for although I had once heard a radio broadcast about Adam and Eve, at that time it just slipped my mind.

“So it was. Adam spent whole days in the pasture, and at noon Eve was bringing him dinner. On that day there were no signs of misfortune, although Adam had not met half way his fiancée. Slightly concerned Eve approached the tree in whose shadow he used to stay during sunny days, and then she saw him...” Messalina paused the story and reached for her glass of wine.

“What happened?!” I screamed tensely.

“Adam lay groaning and holding his leg. ‘Snake bit me...’ he still managed to whisper and died with his head in her lap.”

“This was a terrible tragedy... If he had not gotten this good job, he might have lived... And what happened next?”

“Weeping buckets, Eve informed the herd owner about everything, and resolved to die as well, for she loved Adam more than life. Initially, she wanted to jump into a chasm, but she could not decide. She walked right on the brink hoping she might slip, but as if out of spite it did not happen. Then she tried to use other methods of taking her own life, but still nothing worked out...”

“Poor girl...”

“Her desperate efforts were noticed by the Father just observing the Earth on a superluminal channel. During those times, in heaven there were still no people, and the Father did not want to take them there up to achieving a higher level of development. However, he felt sorry for Eve, and at first decided to resurrect Adam in paradise (which he did immediately), and intended to restore also the life of Adam's fiancée when she would finally commit suicide.”

“You are telling it in a way that suggests she failed to do this.”

“You guessed, but do you know how it was?”

“Don't know...”

“Soon after the funeral of her fiancé Eve broke through a hedge and got into an apple orchard, for she had noticed that toxic herbs grew there as well. However, she had no time to eat them because she was captured by the farm owner, that is, a handsome, tender, and lonely man...”

“I see, you don't have to explain to me this,” I said thinking reluctantly about the situation. “It is called that Eve betrayed Adam...”

“Something like that, she was tempted by the apple. However, one should not condemn this your namesake. After all, even in the biggest dream she did not expect she could still meet her sweetheart.”

“And what did Adam then?”

“He wandered around paradise and complained he was bored because there were no common topics to discussion with angels and devils. Finally, the Father took pity on him and decided that all people dying on Earth would be resurrected in heaven, and he appointed Adam (whose abilities he had already to know) his deputy for the rabb... rabb...”

“Rabble,” I guessed.

“Exactly. And you see, if Eve had managed to commit the suicide, if she had not had the emotional state, or if those buckets of tears had not been shed, it could be that we may not be talking here.”

“So, should humans be grateful to Eve?”

“Of course, but we owe a lot to Adam as well.”

“And was Eve also resurrected after her death?”

“Yes. Although preparations to admit people took a long time, she already lucked into living in heaven,” the Empress confirmed with a smile, and continued anticipating my question. “But she did not get back together with Adam, despite the fact that he wanted this very much, and she did probably too. However, she came to the conviction she had a moral obligation to her husband, who had died a little earlier and also was waiting for her. In the end, only he was able to sympathize with her after the loss of her great love, and thanks to him she lived so long on Earth.”

“Thus, Eve was in a dilemma...” I applied a word being used frequently by the doctor.

“In heaven, people are often in such dilemmas.”

“And did this story happen about four thousand years before Christ?” I asked to be sure.

“That's right.”

“In that case I guess why the Father has ordered the end of the world right now...”

“Good thinking,” praised me Messalina. “Maria has explained to me that he loves symmetry.”

“However, I do not understand something here...”

“What don't you?”

“Because you have said that the Father created human beings...”

“Well, he did, but he didn't form them from the dust of the earth, and neither he pulled them out of a hat, nor he snapped his fingers, since there are no miracles.”

“Besides, I heard on the radio that everyone has descended from Adam and Eve.”

“This is just nonsense; it would be impossible,” the Empress said categorically.

“Why?”

“You have said that you know a lot about genes. Note that if it were, all people would have combinations of genes belonging to Adam and Eve. We would be similar to each other, like siblings. Furthermore, I do not know if they could have a large number of descendants...”

“Rather hard,” I had to admit, and added professionally: “Without importing external genes, a rapid degeneration would occur.”

“You see!”

“But the Father could still create some additional people...”

“If he had created extra humans, we would descend also from them, not only from Adam and Eve. Then one would have to say that we are descended from a group of unrelated persons.”

“So, how was it according to you?”

“Not according to me, but Maria told me about it. Moreover, in heaven this story is generally known...”

“Okay, so how did it begin?”

“A long time ago, the Father observed that on a distant planet, now called Earth, something happened. There were then there no humans, animals, or any life at all, but some acids were formed...”

“You probably have amino acids in mind,” I corrected my friend.

“Of course. According to Maria, this occurs quite often on many planets, and usually after a certain time dies out spontaneously without any further consequences. But in that case the opposite happened because the Father had liked something about the Earth...”

“What was that?” I was really interested.

“What was that?” I was really interested.

“The Father calculated that the Sun and Moon seen from Earth have almost the same size.”

“Is it so unusual?” I asked in disappointment.

“Maria has said that yes, since these celestial bodies are in fact quite different in size. The Moon is smaller than our globe, whereas Sun is much larger.”

“So why their sizes observed from the Earth appear (as you have mentioned) to be identical?”

“Because they depend also on the distance...”

“I understand,” I slapped my forehead. “After all, people on Earth did not have this digital...”

“Zoom,” the Empress helped me adding: “But in that case it was of no importance, for these distances are too great. However, they are exactly such that...”

“Well,” I interrupted, “but why was this issue so important for the Father?”

“He carries out experiments in many fields, even belonging to the so-called social sciences. And that’s why he wanted to make people religious.”

“I do not understand what the similar sizes of Sun and Moon have in common with religion...”

“The roots of most terrestrial religions reach back to the Nile valley. And it was there that priests explained solar eclipses to the people by the wrath of the gods. They could not have done so if there had been a few suns or if Moon had been too small. And if it had been bigger than Sun, the duration of the eclipse would have consumed too much time and one could have easily exposed them.”

“Well, and what did the Father do?”

“He directed a properly selected beam of AGA towards Earth.”

“What is ‘AGA’?”

“That’s what I do not know,” the Empress was troubled, “Maria wanted to explain it to me plainly, but I came to the conclusion that this went far beyond my education...”

“Well, never mind,” I consoled my friend. “And what happened next?”

“And then evolution started on the Earth.”

I had to think this sentence over. I did not know what its subject meant, but I remembered from a radio broadcast that real scientists had advocated this concept. On the other hand, so-called creationists claimed that life on the Earth had been created by an intelligent being as a result of their deliberate and free act. This would fit; the Father is certainly intelligent, acted intentionally, and probably no one forced him to do it. However, scientists should also be pleased to find this evolution!

There was another aspect of the story, seeming to confirm its veracity. The participants to the same program wondered why despite the existence of so many planets, sometimes very similar to Earth, no trace of any extraterrestrial civilization or even merely life had been found. This can be explained by assuming that the Father chose (and, maybe, he continues to choose) just planets fulfilling the conditions important to him and being far from each other (to keep their residents from making too quickly contacts that could unmask him). Moreover, it is hard to imagine that a natural phenomenon could depend on the apparent equality between the size of the Sun and the Moon.

“What is the ‘evolution’?” I asked.

“That is, roughly speaking, the formation of more and more new species of living creatures.”

“For what purpose?”

“The Father wanted that beings similar to him, i.e., humans would appear on Earth, but at the beginning there were only these amino acids. Since there

are no miracles, only very tiny creatures could arise from them. They fought against each other, ate, and gradually evolved. Finally, after many, many years, people came into existence this way.”

“And did the Father sit idly after the single act of creation?”

“Absolutely not. Several times he had to intervene because evolution had begun to move in the wrong direction. The worst was with the reptiles...”

“Reptiles? What is that?”

“That’s animals. Snakes are also them, but those reptiles had legs and were huge. Have you heard anything about dinosaurs?”

“It’s probably something very old...” I expressed a cautious conjecture.

“Why do you think so?”

“The term ‘Dinosaurs of rock and roll’ rings a bell with me...” I said because I had once heard a broadcast under the same title.

“So we say metaphorically, since they actually lived on Earth long ago. They were as big as a house”, Messalina depicted this with a gesture of hands, “and ruled the world. In contrast, our ancestors, i.e., mammals were minuscule, and afraid to go out of their burrows in the day. There was even a danger they would perish entirely...”

“And what would have happened then?” I asked anxiously, although regardless of the answer I realized that in that case humans would not have appeared.

“Reptiles could achieve an intelligent form of development some day, but it would not be that about which the Father thought...”

“Well, yes, because – as you have said – he wanted that those intelligent beings would be similar to him.”

“Precisely.”

“So what did the Father do in this situation?”

“Again, he emitted an appropriate bundle of AGA towards Earth. It caused climate change, whereby the large reptiles went extinct, and mammals could safely get out of their holes.”

“The Father is a clever operator,” I said with relief. “And then did it go smoothly?”

“Not quite. He had still to improve our genes by leaps and bounds, and to eliminate ugly and stronger than our ancestors ape-men.”

“What does it mean 'by leaps and bounds'?”

“Beyond evolution, in this case. Maria has said that due to it the scientists on Earth were still looking for some missing link...”

“So the Father was helping humanity all this time, wasn't he?”

“Yes, he was. Without this assistance we would not be here. However, Eve, to get home before nightfall, we should leave now.”

“Okay, but tell me more about something huge in the garden at the wedding of Cleo. Was it a snake?”

“Of course not! In paradise we do not keep this stuff.”

“At all?” I asked hopefully.

“To be exact, the snakes are in separate locations. Just like all the other animals and plants, even those that on Earth died out a long time ago, such as these huge reptiles. You do not have to enter the reserves if you are afraid of snakes. And in the garden a huge angelic choir began...”

Suddenly I felt a sharp contraction below my chest, which caused that I breathed through the mouth and said something like:

“Hic!”

Messalina interrupted her story, looked at me closely and assessed:

“I see, Eve, that you are suffering from hiccups...”

Then she leaned toward me and screamed in my ear:

“Boo! Boo!”

“Hey, what are you doing!” I leaned back scared. “Why are you frightening me?... Hic...”

“Because they say that startfing can cure hiccoughs. However, you seem to be unaffected by it.”

“Yes, I am,” I confirmed noting that the specific pronunciation of my friend came back (the ceiling fans had long ceased to work). “Hic...”

“Therefore, get up and come here. When I bash you on the back, this should ease off.”

I wanted to fulfill this command, and got up slightly leaning the hands on the table, but it turned out that my legs were terribly weak, and actually I could not move them at all. So I flopped back onto the bench and said plaintively:

“Valeria, I cannot walk!...”

“How is it you cannot?!”

“Well, I just cannot...”

Messalina jumped up from her seat and came up to me.

“I too have a bit soft fegs from this wine, but how may you not walk at off?... Give me your hand and stand up...”

So I tried again, but the effect was such that both we fell to the floor. The Empress clambered to all fours, and then got up unsteadily, while I was lying like a stone. The only consolation was that the hiccups had ceased immediately.

My carer came to the middle of the shed and looked around whispering to herself:

“Maybe drinking is offso prohibited right after the resurrection? I have a hard fuck!”

I was not eager to decode it. Meanwhile, Messalina was clumsily jumping up and clapping her hands, raised above her head. I understood that she wanted to activate the fans, and in the end she even succeeded. But probably

we drank too much wine, since there was no improvement. Still, I could not get up, and the Empress swore:

“Heff! Just my fuck!”

Suddenly she saw something at the wall of the shed, rummaged around in there, and with a great noise rolled it into the middle.

“You are going to ride in it,” she said blithely.

“What is this?”

“A barrow.”

I grabbed the edge of the barrow with both hands, slightly pulled myself up, and looked inside.

“But it is horribly dirty!”

“Because it has not been used for a great time period. We have no other choice; in this state we cannot ask for aid from emergency service. When we come home, you'll take a bath.”

“What is ‘emergency service?’” I bored.

“This is an organization, Paradise Emergency Service... We are hopping, my baby, on the carriage... Grasp here, and I'm gonna put your feet in it... Yes, ready!”

I understood that in fact there was no other choice. First I knelt facing to the barrow, but after a while I managed somehow to turn aside.

“No, here your fegs are sticking out, you have to sit on your bottom...” my guardian helped me further. “Yes... This waff can be puffed out, so here you may fean your head...”

Whew, we finally made it to the end! I was sitting curled up leaning against the back wall of the wheelbarrow, but during this action I got dirty from head to toe. I thought that it was probably a stroke of fate; if I had been born like an ordinary human being, as a child I would have been carried in a stroller, and so I will be traveling on this – after all, a little similar – vehicle. “I'll see how it is” I thought, even with some satisfaction, but soon I became terribly alarmed, so I asked:

“Valeria, will I never be walking?”

“I do not know, baby,” Messalina said with tears in her eyes, “the first time I encounter such a case... But it wiff be at most tiff the next resurrection...”

“So how long?”

“Fifteen years.”

“Oh, it's an awfully long time...” I sighed.

“Maybe, it wiff be possibfe to speed this up a bit...”

I wondered why that had happened, and suddenly I realized I probably knew. Well, my guardian already earlier had trouble pronouncing certain words, and her this feature additionally deteriorated due to the alcohol. As regards me, I must have had, like my brother, weaker genes associated with

the legs. So far I was somehow managing to keep fit, but finally the wine did its part.

“Can you push this wheelbarrow with me in it?” I asked trying to become resigned to my fate.

“The shoes are gonna aid me...”

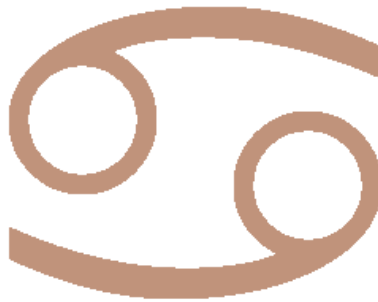
The Empress grabbed the barrow by the handles, and making a rattling noise we left the shed. I was terrified, for my friend zigzagged, and after all the ditch was nearby. However, by some miracle, we came across a footbridge, and got safely to the other side. At that moment I fell asleep, and actually – as later Messalina explained to me – I blacked out.

Chapter 4

Santa Clauses

When I roused myself, it was dark; I looked up and guessed that the paradise night had fallen. The field was not completely black, for bright dots flashed here and there. At first I supposed they were, known to me from hearsay, stars. Only when I became more awakened and my eyesight improved, I started to read inscriptions created from them and give some thought to embellishing drawings. What particularly piqued my curiosity were messages talking about embryos. For instance, almost directly above my head the following, inscribed in pink letters, text was displayed:

**THE TEAM OF THE ARCHANGEL HANIEL CORDIALLY GREET EMBRYOS,
AND INVITE THEM TO AN EROTIC WORKSHOP.
YOUR SEX AND PHYSICAL FITNESS DO NOT MATTER.
IF YOU DO NOT YET KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT THIS TOPIC,
CALL ROSE 6 CARNATION 9.**



“They do not require the ability to walk,” I thought. “I will be able to learn the basics of this.”

Suddenly it occurred to me why I had woken up. This happened because the wheelbarrow had been stopped. So I tilted my head to the vertical in order to check what's the matter, and I saw Messalina standing in front of our vehicle. A very tall, slim and mustached old man with a long white beard bent over her, illuminating her with a flashlight. He wore a red cap, reaching below the knees coat of the same color with white collar and cuffs, and black boots for winter. I figured that this was the Santa Claus of the traffic police, which we had talked about during the visit of Joe and Carolina.

Meanwhile, the giant straightened up, turned toward the darkness, and shouted:

"I have themze on, Captain. They are plastered!"

"Oh, no! We are not pfastered..." gibbered the Empress. "Thank you for your concern, but we have got no fractures..."

"Are you not from here?" questioned Santa.

"Of course, we are from here" replied my friend and stumbled: "We... five..."

"Are the five of you?" the old man was surprised.

"We are two and we live in Igor's House," I helped from the barrow.

At that point a second Santa Claus emerged from the darkness. He was dressed the same way, but he was much shorter, fatter, and older by about 5 years. The captain (for the false report on plaster was directed probably to him) said:

"Well done, Lieutenant. Do you know where this Igor's House is?"

"More or less... I think this pope who travels so often lives next door..."

"This Paul John II?"

"Yes... Or conversely..."

"I know already where it is. They went in exactly the opposite direction," said the captain and threw at Messalina the question: "Did not your shoes stink?"

"They did, but I thought it was due to my friend's stomach ache..."

"Stop making excuses," commanded the fatter Santa.

"So vagrancy?" asked the lieutenant taking a little notebook out of his pocket.

"Vagrancy and heavy drinking, of course.

"This will result in many penalty points," estimated the younger Claus.

"Yes, because they are very naughty girls, hee-hee!" chuckled the older maliciously.

"But, officer," protested Messalina. "We have been good!"

"Just a moment, Lieutenant," the captain said, looking intently in my direction. "In this case we won't give our gifts, that is, points..."

"Thank you!" the Empress interrupted him.

"... since we are gonna take the ladies to purgatory."

"Oh, how can that be?!" moaned my guardian.

"I am regretting, but we have this obligation in the case of three offenses committed at the same time."

"Good heavens, officer! We have done just two offenses, vagrancy and heavy drinking, haven't we?"

Instead of answering, the captain came up to me, grabbed my foot and unceremoniously lifted it up pulling to himself, and next illuminated my

abdomen with his flashlight. For the first time in my life I felt shame, but I could not do anything because, after all, I had no power in my legs.

"I knew this!" Santa Claus shouted triumphantly. "That's why she has been sitting curled up. Lieutenant, put into the report that the passenger of the vehicle was not wearing a seat... oh, a leaf."

"Is it such a great transgression?" Messalina was still trying to negotiate.

"You are roaming at night, drunk, naked, and do you want to evade the penalty?" the captain was implacable. "And there the manager, that is, Saint John the Baptist along with his team will cleanse you thoroughly using water jets."

"After all, purgatory is for drunkards..."

"Exactly," confirmed the officer kindly putting my leg back.

"I swear by the Father," the Empress looked really frightened, "I wanted to go home, but I made a mistake..."

"I agree," devastated her the older Claus, and I thought somewhat philosophically that this is an example of consequences that can occur after the seemingly insignificant event of letting foul air out.

"However, officer," I decided to take the floor wanting to somehow erase my guilt, "please release Valeria because she has got a leaf..."

"Coof it, baby, I'm not gonna feave you for certain..."

"She has been driving the vehicle," interjected the lieutenant, "so she has been responsible for passengers."

"But, however," my carer tried to catch the last chance, "I have not exceeded the maximum permitted speed..."

"Do you take us for idiots?!" asked the younger officer threateningly.

"No... Of course not... I wouldn't dare..." muttered the Empress having felt we had jumped out of the frying pan into the fire.

"All the jokes about us are utter nonsense..."

"You're wasting your time," the captain warned them and said: "Hey, lady, get up from the wheelbarrow, and we are gonna go to the patrol wagon."

"She won't go," Messalina announced in a sepulchral voice.

"Why?"

"She doesn't walk."

"So that's it..." the patrol leader looked like someone who had already seen a lot, but never anything similar to that. Finally, something probably occurred to him, for he commanded:

"Lieutenant, nip to the wagon and bring two balloons."

"These alcoholic?"

"You know we haven't got different ones..."

After a few minutes, the scrag returned bringing two semitransparent yellowish cloths. The captain took one of them, handed it to Messalina, and ordered:

“Blow!”

The Empress began to fulfill the command, and the cloth took on the shape of a sphere that grew and grew until finally it burst with a loud clap.

“That’s a lulu!” perhaps my friend swore, and continued with a perfect diction, choosing her words carefully: “I probably live in la-la land unless the little balloon really eliminates alcohol!”

“These are experimental accessories,” explained the lieutenant. “We got them to test.”

“It has worked for her,” the older Claus stated with satisfaction, and handed me the other cloth.

“Now you try!”

There was a problem with me because I had not initially realized I must have breathed in through nose and then out through mouth. Having grasped this, I blew and blew, but my balloon did not want to burst, although it was already twice the size of the former. In the end, however, it did, and my nagging dry throat passed immediately. I felt I was able to move my legs, so I decided to see if I could get up. It turned out that, yes, I even did a few steps in front of the wheelbarrow.

“This is a miracle,” said the lieutenant, and everyone laughed.

“Captain,” the Empress made one more attempt to change the judgment, “now that we are no longer drunk, maybe we don’t have to go to purgatory?”

“We also take there completely sober persons who have committed a number of offenses in the same day.”

“If there is a fault, a just punishment must occur,” added aphoristically the younger Claus.

“Well,” said the captain giving Messalina his flashlight, “Take it in order not to stumble in the wood. We will go in front.”

“How is it in this purgatory?” I asked my guardian when we were walking.

“Better than in hell because temperature and food are like in paradise, but all things considered there is poorly there. St. John the Baptist finds self-fulfillment in this work inventing – as befits a former hermit – a variety of corporal punishment. Anyway, one must admit that the Father created purgatory specifically for him; before his resurrection this institution did not exist.”

“Have you been there?”

“No, but my cousin Caligula, who got out of hell because of mental illness, sat in purgatory for many years and was there even the first convict. He told me that the worst were the fitness trails.”

“What are those?”

“Well, for instance, you have to run through water reaching to the knees or jump over obstacles, and the guards whip you with rods...”

“And what if someone does not want to run?”

“The faster you run, the less you're gonna get a beating.”

“And how long will we be there?”

“Having done this sort of offenses, we will be at most a few days. But even so they will be able to kick our asses...”

“So maybe we will escape?” I suggested, since the Santas, walking several steps ahead of us, were busy talking, and I already felt completely confident in my legs.

“You're kidding! They would capture us immediately...”

“So what shall we do?”

“Maybe I will think up something... But I tell you that nothing like this could happen in atheists' paradise.”

“Do people go there at night where they want?”

“Yes. And although wearing leaves remains compulsory, you may drink what you want and how much you want. There is a really free paradise there. On the other hand, here they do not probably have anything better to do...”

“Yes, they are such important officers, and have caught two girls with a wheelbarrow,” I confirmed. “But tell me if they are not too hot in these coats?”

“They have a completely different metabolism.”

Standing in a clearing, the patrol wagon consisted of two huge saucer-shape surfaces joined together at their larger bases, and its lights flashed in various colors.

“How do you like our buggy?” the lieutenant asked cheerfully, while the captain went somewhere.

“It's beautiful,” Messalina praised it highly.

“When two hundred years ago we were on Earth, people also seemed delighted.”

“Did you often visit Earth?” the Empress became interested.

“We frequently used to, but just last time an unpleasant adventure befell my friend...”

“What happened?”

“We got mixed up in a group of false Santa Clauses, who paraded for advertising purposes in a supermarket. After traveling I was terribly hungry, and since we were just passing the meat stand, I lost my cool and grabbed a string of sausages. The bad luck was that a hostess had noticed it, and she started screaming that the Santas were stealing and had pinched cured meats. The security wanted to intervene, so we began to escape, and those masqueraders, for unknown reasons, did too. I ran first with the sausage, and the captain tried to keep up with me. Unfortunately, he is evidently too fat, so in the clothing section he knocked a rack with pants belts and became entangled in them, like in a snare.”

“How did you get out of this?” my friend asked with a smile.

“I had, using the field, to turn off all fasteners in the whole retail park, made of metal, rubber, plastic or fabric, buckles, buttons and zips, everything. Humans' pants, underpants, skirts, and bras fell down, and their blouses and shirts became unbuttoned. That generated enormous confusion, while we were protected by the anti-field and cleared out of there smoothly. However, we had to take off with full visibility, so natives were recording the event on their cameras and cheering for us.”

“I believe...” Messalina was already choking with laughter. “But is it appropriate for you to... pinch?”

“After all, our divisional headquarters more than compensate for damages caused by patrols. Also in that case, they sent to the supermarket a large shipment of toys and computer games, marked From Santa Claus.”

“And what about the fasteners?” I wanted to know.

“After three minutes, everything was back to normal, and the humans could get dressed.”

“Well, and what about the sausage?” inquired the Empress.

“I did not lose. We ate it with relish on board.”

At that moment the captain came and told us:

“Stay here, and we are gonna enter and lower a ladder for you, since the access hatch is quite high.”

The older Santa crouched, then bounced off the ground and keeping in air a standing position flew into the wagon from the top. When after a while the other did the same, I said with satisfaction:

“So they come through the chimney!”

“Well, in principle, they do...” admitted Messalina. “But step aside, Eve, because the lieutenant is gonna dump a ladder from the hatch over us.”

After a dozen or so seconds, my guardian climbed and entered inside the vehicle, and then I did the same. We found ourselves in a big and almost empty room. On the left side, there were portholes and small armchairs, and ahead of two larger front ones there were rectangular windows and steering wheels. The lieutenant gestured us to take the side seats, then he sat down at the right steering wheel, next to the captain, and reported:

“The boat is ready to take off, boss.”

The ship vibrated and began to rise. I watched the forest through the porthole, but because of the darkness whatever ceased quickly to be visible. So I began to listen to the conversation between my friend and the Santas, and in fact only the lieutenant.

“... because I'm very interested in motorization. Besides, if I knew, at least a little bit, how to steer this in practice, we could discuss on this topic.”

“I'm glad that you like our buggy. Now we are flying on automatic pilot, and furthermore, the steering wheel is used only when we are moving on an

air cushion. Therefore, if you actually want that, you may turn it without touching, just in case, the joystick; is that true, Captain?"

The commander nodded, so the Empress got up, walked over to the right wheel, and standing she began to turn it in different directions. The lieutenant showed her, with his hand, a screen at the top, on which there were displayed various images depending on movements being made by the wheel, then he lay down comfortably on his seatback set horizontally, and in this position commented something on the pictures.

Suddenly the boat shook, and my guardian lost her balance. Fortunately, the younger Santa kindly opened his coat, and Messalina fell with her bottom against its inside. She continued to hold onto the steering wheel, but at that moment she was jiggling somehow strangely. I did not hear well what they were saying, but they must have actually talked about motorization. For I remembered from the clinic how the director said that the tires of his car needed pumping up, and I could hear the lieutenant encouraging, with his hands clasped behind his head, my friend:

"Pump, pump up!"

After a few minutes, suddenly they ceased to have willingness for conversation. Messalina stood up and improving thoughtfully the hair went back to her seat. However, the leaf passed muster; I noticed that despite such a fierce discussion it remained intact.

"You know, boss," the lieutenant switched again the seat to the upright position, "I am thinking that maybe this time we could only caution the ladies... They are very pleasant and interested in motorization..."

"I do not know whether they both," said the captain, "you have been discussing, but what about me?"

"So invite the lady kindly," the subordinate advised him.

"I am inviting you," the commander looked at me slightly, positioning horizontally the back of his chair.

I was horrified because I was not knowledgeable about motorization at all! However, I had no choice, for the older Santa was already looking at me quite clearly. Therefore, I got up and walked cautiously toward him. Suddenly, I felt the same as when in that shower, so I stopped and said tearfully:

"Valeria, my hoo-hoo has started aching again!"

"Who is this sloven?" the captain asked.

"This is an embryo," replied Messalina. "She has behind herself only a few hours of life."

"Ah, yes..." the Santa looked at me softly and commanded: "Okay, Lieutenant, change course to Igor's House. And you, baby, go back to your seat."

“We will get to the house in fifteen minutes,” added the younger officer. “Until then you have to endure because, unfortunately, our bathroom automaton has just gone mad...”

“What happened to it?” the Empress became interested.

“Does not open the door. It states that due to draft it has nerve root pain.”

“The boys of Turing are increasingly witty...” this ascertainment of Messalina was for me totally incomprehensible.

“It is simply sloppy work, for we have gotten this automaton only for three months. As yet we have not managed to demand a replacement.”

“Actually it itself should exchange itself,” remarked the captain, “but they have botched up this module as well.”

Suddenly, the screen over the steering wheels lit up, and one more Santa Claus, much older than the previous ones, appeared on it. On the left side at the top of the screen I noticed the caption: SC 000002 on the line.

“Where the devil are you?!” exclaimed the old man. “Have you forgotten that today is the anniversary of the simulation of our divisional patron, the Bishop of Myra in Lycia? After all, this time you among others have to play the roles of the six officers of the Emperor Constantine, whose lives – according to the scenario written by the Father himself and so successfully planted by me on Earth – our symbolic leader rescues...”

“We have not forgotten, Sir, General” said the captain calmly. “We remember also, for example, that in this solemn theater performance for the Father you will play the role of the saintly monk Nicholas from the monastery on Mount Zion, as indeed it was in reality. However, it is only fifteen minutes after midnight, and we have an embryo on board and should take her home.”

“How is she pretty?”

“Very,” the officers on the ship responded in unison.

“Let me see her,” the general licked his lips and, after the lieutenant aimed an oblong object at me, jumped so high that his cap came askew. “Are you pulling my leg?! Do not you know she is...”

Abruptly, something flashed outside the windows, the screen went blank, and a few seconds later there was a tremendous bang.

“Here it is, boom!” shouted the younger Santa. “They are testing AGA, and the communication is interrupted.”

“They should have notified us...”

The commandant paused because the lightning and thunder made themselves felt again, but that time they were much stronger, and at the same time the light went out.

“Damn,” the lieutenant got upset. “There was probably an e-mail on this topic. Due to the last change of course we have entered in this area. And now the main unit has conked out...”

“And what about the lightning protection anti-field?”

“These experiments with AGA occur so rarely, Captain, that normally we fly with it disabled. But soon the reserve system should be activated.”

“Yes, it needs several seconds to fully start-up.”

Suddenly, a quivering fear voice came from behind the wall (I froze with shock because I was sure that it belonged to Joe):

“Help me, help! I do not want to die!”

“Be quiet, you bastard!” shouted back the lieutenant. “As you did not die from those roots, now you will not die! Because of you, the commander had to relieve himself in the wood, and our passenger is suffering...”

Fortunately, in the sitting position my hoo-hoo did not hurt so much.

“Since,” remarked the captain, “this lunatic is screaming in the john, this means that the reserve system is already beginning to work.”

Indeed, after a while the light went on, and I came to the conclusion that I must have been wrong; it could not be the voice of my brother. As the situation apparently returned to normal, I dared to ask:

“What did the General want to tell just before the interruption of communication?”

The officers looked at each other, and the elder stated with conviction:

“Although he is our commander and the first Santa Claus really existing on Earth, this time he had probably nothing important to say...”

“He's going senile,” briefly explained the other.

“But how was it possible that we completely forgot about this event?” wondered the captain.

“It's good that you flattered him. This has placated him.”

“I know this Claus a little,” stated the Empress. “He was at last year's All Saints Ball. He is a terrible lady-killer...”

“And how did it happen that you got sloshed yesterday?” the lieutenant clearly wanted to change the subject.

“We lost our friend...”

“Did you lose?”

“She escaped from hell, but Gabriel's angels caught her,” explained my guardian. “And they acted very brutally.”

“We also do not like those jacks,” agreed the younger Santa.

“Do you never perform similar tasks?” asked the Empress.

“Do you mean operational activities?”

“Yeah...”

“We accomplish them as much as possible,” the lieutenant assured her. “For example, less than two thousand years ago on Earth, when we were rescuing an IT doctor whom his superior at a university, a professor, wanted to liquidate...”

“You mean,” Messalina tried to correct it, “he wanted to liquidate the doctor's position?”

“No, he wanted to kill him...”

“Kill?!” we shouted at the same time, and my friend added: “Why?”

“I don't know the details,” the lieutenant made it clear, “because we merely execute the headquarters commands, but the doctor reportedly wrote a very important work in physics.”

“And is this why his boss wanted to kill him?” the Empress was surprised, and I asked:

“What is this ‘IT’?”

“A field dealing with the use of computers,” my friend explained to me, and the younger Santa continued:

“It was a remarkable thing. For some reason, this doctor's paper was not printed, but the professor was extremely afraid that this could happen at any time.”

“The professor was afraid that an important work of his subordinate would be published?” Messalina was astonished again.

“I have to admit,” agreed the lieutenant, “that this situation was exceptional. This scientist was in fact a psychopath who was crazy about bossing.”

“Who is a ‘psychopath’?” I asked because I felt this story might be interesting, and I didn't want to miss anything essential.

“It's such a human,” accessibly explained to me my carer, “who is not yet completely mad, but has already got a mental deviation from the norm.”

“Quite. And he felt threatened, for if the doctor's article had been published, its author would have quickly done a habilitation, and the university authorities could have wanted to make a change of the department head, although the doctor did not desire it at all.”

I knew what 'habilitation' was because Teresa once talked about it in the clinic.

“Therefore,” added the captain, “the professor devised a cunning plan with 99 percent chance of success.”

“At least. For who would resist when the head offers help in quick habilitation and even wants to give them a ride to a seminar where they must make a presentation?”

“Presentation?” asked the Empress. “For what purpose?”

“The professor was also an IT specialist and rightly claimed that he did not know physics. Therefore, he argued, he did not know if this work had any value.”

“Supposedly that's right...” admitted Messalina.

“However, it was already false. For some time before, a meeting of the department took place, where its head, casually browsing his notes, said:

‘When it comes to grants, I can't do anything at the moment because every time I call, they ask about one of our employees (he knows it).’ The professor had to say this as the whole secretariat knew about this matter. This employee was obviously the doctor who had just submitted his paper, and the final part of that statement was a lie.”

“Did the doctor guess something?” asked my carer.

“It is unknown. Anyway, the professor never told him anything. And yet, if he had really wanted to help in the habilitation, he should have been honest and first of all have informed the doctor of this interest.”

“Did they have to go far to the seminar?”

“To tell the truth, they didn't have to go anywhere because even at this university or another one in the same city there worked many excellent physicists who were in any case friends of the professor. Despite this, he sought out not better experts in a distant town. And strongly insisted on going there in his car as he had a GPS.”

I didn't know the last shortcut, but I didn't want to interrupt the lieutenant's story.

“On the basis of all this, we immediately guessed what was going on. At that time, cars with only one airbag, for the driver, were manufactured on Earth. If the professor had hit a tree with the passenger side of the car, thanks to the airbag he would have been at most slightly injured, and the doctor would have died on the spot.”

“But surely,” exclaimed my friend, “he would have been blamed for causing the accident!”

“Unintentionally. The delegations of students, graduate students, a deputy prime minister he knew, and an important chaplain would have come to the hearing. They would have testified that the professor would have deliberately harmed nobody, and everyone might make a mistake. Furthermore, the motive of the assassination would have, of course, remained unknown.”

“It would have been literally the perfect crime!”

“Certainly. Let us add that sitting in the dock the firmly contrite scientist would have inspired compassion, especially that he survived such a tragic accident. In his last words, with a shaky voice he would have promised to pay a considerable compensation to the family of the dead. Naturally, he would have received a suspended sentence.”

“Did the doctor agree to go?” I asked.

“Yes, to our dismay,” replied the captain, “and he began to prepare the presentation.”

“So what did you do?” questioned Messalina.

“We knew,” continued the lieutenant, “that the doctor regularly watched a quiz show whose participants told various jokes. I reported to it in the disguise of a young man and told the following, among others, joke: ‘A

marriage went by car. At one point, the wife said: 'You know, I have to tell you I have a lover.' The husband was silent, but the car sped up. 'What are you doing?' she asked, and he replied: 'And I have the airbag.' It wasn't a great joke, but it did the task. Immediately after the show, the doctor sent an email to the professor informing him that for family reasons he would not be able to go."

"Well, yes," the Empress admitted with relief, "when someone was going to go on a journey as a passenger and heard something like that, they had the right to regard it as a sign of heaven..."

"Did the professor give up?" I asked.

"No, not at all. If he had had pure intentions, he should have said: 'In that case, you have here leads to them, make an appointment with them and go when you can.' Instead, the department head constantly pestered the person we protected with sentences like: 'Doctor, I wait when we finally go to...' In addition, he had Plan B."

"What?!" we both shouted.

"This department held annual off-site conferences in a resort. During those meetings, the employees' cars stood in the parking lot without any supervision. So the professor's helpers could have sneaked up on the doctor's car at night and could have damaged its brakes to stop their operation only at high speeds. However, this plan required knowing the car's registration number."

"Didn't this bully know it?" I asked hopefully.

"He didn't. From previous meetings, he remembered the characteristic golden-green color of the doctor's car, but he didn't write the number because he hoped that Plan A, in which everything depended solely on him, would work. Therefore, the professor suddenly began to organize weekly meetings in a free-standing building (instead of a university room), next to which the participants parked their cars. Probably this convinced the doctor completely that he had done the right thing not getting into the professor's car."

"So did he quit this job?" I tried to guess.

"No, because he presumably thought he had everything under control. He found a side alley at a distance of three hundred meters from the place of meetings, where his car could not be seen even from the intersection of the streets."

"And how did the professor react to this?" asked Messalina.

"He was furious when he couldn't see the doctor's car anywhere, and he yelled at his subordinates for anything. When the date of the off-site conference passed, he gave it up and proceeded to implement Plan C."

"One more?!" we shouted again almost simultaneously.

"It was in late autumn, when in this country daylight disappeared quite quickly. A few days earlier, the professor went far away, i.e., to China, but

before that he paid a band of juvenile criminals half the high salary for performing a task...”

“How did such a serious scholar know them?” questioned the Empress as if it mattered, while it took my breath away.

“This scientist had a brother who was not so capable and ran a painting company. And you have a variety of friends in business.”

“I see. And what was the task?”

“Initially, they were to kick the doctor till his death, but later they came to the conclusion that it would last too long. Therefore, they decided to cut his throat.”

“Impossible... This professor was most likely a normal madman...”

“You have to take into account,” the elder Santa joined the conversation, “he got into a really difficult situation. He was the scientific supervisor of that man, he was to tell him that his work was correct, but it could not be published at the moment, and he did not do this. It was a serious breach of the duties of an academic teacher. In addition, he was terribly afraid that this work would be printed soon, and then all the facts would come out.”

“The doctor finished conducting evening classes,” the lieutenant calmly continued, “and left the campus heading towards his car parked a few hundred meters away. The streets were almost empty.”

“Couldn't he park on campus?” questioned the Empress who knew motorization.

“He would have had to have permission. He received various calls from administrative staff asking for the registration number of his car, with the justification that he was selected by his department to obtain this permit, but he knew who was behind it, and he replied that he did not need anything like that.”

“But now he could use it!”

“In any case, it was too late. When waiting for the green light he stood at the intersection, a group of young people appeared across the street. They gestured and laughed, just like students after class. At one point they stopped in front of a bulletin board and, except for one who was looking around, they began to study it. The only problem was that the board was empty because the restaurant that owned it had been under renovation. The doctor probably knew it too, for he took out his cell phone and, pretending to call, took a few photos of those young men.”

“What couldn't help him much?”

“Sure. Furthermore, it would not lead to their capture because they were ordered to simulate a robbery and after the murder they would have taken his mobile phone.”

“And were they not afraid he had called for help?”

“The professor assured them that the doctor was expecting absolutely nothing. They also didn't think that he knew about this restaurant.”

“Where were you then?”

“Nearby. We were sitting, disguised as civilians, in a car of the color and brand of vehicles being used in that country by non-uniformed police officers. We had received the clear orders: The protected person might not even be grazed. I was at the wheel and keeping the engine running. Meanwhile, there was a change of lights, the doctor crossed the street, and the bandits followed him.

“Mother!” Messalina shouted (I was still sitting like a lump), even though we knew it had to end well because the Santas would not have boasted of a failed action.

“I was determined that if those villains had approached the doctor at a distance of less than ten meters, I would just have run into them. We had perfectly forged papers, including baptism records in parishes, and later we would have vanished. Fortunately, the captain came up with a brilliant, not requiring any miracles, idea.”

“It was quite simple,” said the older Claus modestly. “We drove up to the scholar, and I asked him how to get to the hotel. The doctor began to explain to us, pointing with his hand in the same direction that the bandits were in. When he finished, I thanked him very kindly to remember us later in heaven, and I saw he had drawn attention to it.”

“However, the most important thing was that from a distance we looked like undercover agents called by the computer scientist. No wonder that the criminals immediately eloped, and he got into his car and drove away safely.”

“Did the professor have any other plans?” the Empress wanted to know.

“Two days later he returned from China ahead of schedule. When he met the doctor in the corridor, he looked like he had been taken down from a cross. The terror disappeared from his face only when his subordinate mentioned nothing about that evening incident. However, the department head understood that these were no longer jokes. He had no other choice anyway because his brother and the bandits were also completely scared. Of course, they didn't give him back the money, as it was not their fault that the unexpected difficulties had arisen.”

“But it was a chilling story...”

“And what happened next?” I regained my voice.

“We don't know exactly,” the captain answered me, “for the protection of the doctor was taken over by another squad. Nevertheless, I heard that shortly afterwards a friend of the professor had been elected the rector of the university. The department head didn't worry so much about his job, since he could influence the colleague in different ways.”

“Well, finally we are getting closer to the destination,” said Messalina giving a sigh of relief. “I was afraid we would not reach...”

I looked through the porthole and saw below us a lovely pink cottage with a bright double-word caption waving over the roof, illuminating the entire fenced property.

“Is there any Igor living here?” I asked.

“No, it's just a name. I currently live alone.”

Soon, the ship landed on the large courtyard. We did not have to climb down the ladder because the lieutenant was so kind as to move the escalator. Afterward the boat took off, we waved our hands goodbye to the Santas, and they replied to us, standing in the open hatch door and saluting.

“I invite you, baby,” said the Empress with great cordiality in her voice. “I occupy the first floor, and the whole second floor, that is, three rooms and a bathroom, are at your disposal.”

“Three rooms?” I was surprised.

“Yes, only three: bedroom, living room, and study because dining room is shared on level minus one.”

“I would most like to go to the bathroom...”

“Yes, I see you are shifting from one foot to the other. So let's go, you'll benefit quickly from my bathroom on the first floor.”

We entered the hall of the villa, then Messalina opened the bathroom door, and she showed me something like a stool with a hole at the center, saying:

“This is the toilet. You have to sit on it.”

“Yes, I guess what it is,” I said sitting down and loosening, and the pain immediately passed.

“Now get up,” my guardian told me as the water splash under my bottom ceased. “You should take a bath, but you will best do it in your bathroom because an automaton is in it, and I do not like these modern facilities. On the other hand, you will need it. However, do not be surprised because it speaks in my voice...”

“But will it not be you?”

“Of course not. Come on, I'll show you your rooms... Here is an elevator, but it will be simpler to climb the stairs.”

“What may I do in the living room?” I asked when the Empress opened the door to the room she had presented to me using this name.

“Here you can, e.g., receive visitors... There are always fresh fruit on the table... And here is a drinks cabinet with the most varied beverages, alcoholic and non-alcoholic... If you feel like it, use it at will because it is able to replenish itself on its own immediately.”

“I am already tired enough with the alcoholic drinks...”

“Of course,” Messalina smiled. “But there is also your favorite ambrosia... And here is the study...”

“What is it for?”

“You can, for example, work at the computer.”

I nodded understanding, though I did not quite know what it meant.

“The bathroom is located exactly as it is on the first floor, and the bedroom, as the name suggests, is for sleeping,” the hostess of the house explained to me further. “And the most important thing is that in case of any problems talk to the vase of flowers on the nightstand. This is a direct telephone contact with me... Will you remember that?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Well, good night, baby.”

We hugged ourselves, and the Empress went down the stairs. I wanted to go straight to the bathroom, but I again became terribly hungry. So I looked into the living room and ate all the fruit. There were stickers with a painted knife on some of them, so I figured they had to be peeled first. The most tasty was an elongated one which could be done even without the use of a knife.

It was good that Messalina warned me because otherwise I would probably have been flabbergasted. For as soon as I entered the bathroom I heard her voice coming from behind the mirror, as it seemed to me:

“How are you, sweet?”

“I'm fine,” I said simply.

“My name is Alice and I live on this side of the mirror, and you?”

“I am Eve and live on this one...”

“That's great,” Alice laughed. “But where have you, my poor baby, got so dirty?”

“Because I was riding in a wheelbarrow...”

“I see that the lady from below brings more and more eccentric guests here... Never mind, you will take a bath, but first, by my assessment, you ought to have a bowel movement.”

“Is the bowel in the belly?”

“Exactly.”

“But my hoo-hoo doesn't hurt...”

“Hoo-hoo? Are you perhaps an embryo?”

“Yes, I am.”

“So I can recognize the kind of people...” Alice said in a low voice, probably to herself, and asked me normally: “How long do you live?”

“I was resurrected today, and probably already yesterday, in the afternoon.”

“I see. So you have gone to the right person because I have all the qualifications to handle embryos. You need to defecate, since you have a little bit of a bloated stomach.”

At this moment a small hand got out of the mirror, and tenderly stroked my belly.

“It's probably from those fruits...” I confessed.

"Certainly, sweetie. Now sit on the toilet seat."

A toilet bowl, similar to the one downstairs, was actually ejected from the wall, so I sat on it. Then a few small hands jumped out of it, which massaged me and gently squeezed so that, even without Alice's instructions, I knew what to do. I understood that my hoo-hoo was only half way through the problem.

"Now get up," Alice finally said. "How are you feeling?"

"Excellently. I've got no butterflies in my stomach now."

"I do not wipe your bottom because you have to have a bath anyway."

"Yes, I have to."

"However, I have noticed a few abrasions of your skin, and the changes can hurt you from hot water."

"They probably arose when riding in the wheelbarrow..."

"Do not worry, I've got an ointment that heals such cases within a few seconds," Alice activated the hands again, and then she asked:

"Where do you prefer to take a bath: in a bathtub, in a shower or in baths?"

"I've already been in the shower, so maybe the last one..."

"And would you like a steam bath, sauna or Roman?"

"Or maybe in the bathtub..." I decided because I did not know what the difference between those baths was.

"For sure?"

"Yes, please."

The toilet bowl hid in the wall, and instead something much bigger and covered with tiles was ejected. Encouraged by Alice, I entered this bathtub filled with hot (but not too much) water and sat down. Small hands leaped from the walls and either washed me or shook the water, creating a great foam. From time to time, Alice gave me instructions to set my body in such a manner that the hands had access to all places, and finally she said:

"Well, you're completely washed out. Now you can even splash about in here. And in the morning I will do your hair the way you like, since now you probably want to sleep, don't you?"

"Oh, yes, very much," I admitted, and that's why I did not splash for a long time, although it was extremely pleasant.

"Do you prefer drying with air or a towel?" Alice asked when I left the tub.

"I would like the second one," I chose because I already knew the air drying. I thought I would have this towel in my hand, but the hands worked again, this time equipped with pieces of material quite pleasant to the touch. I had only, at certain times, to raise my arms or foot (then the hands supported me to keep balance) or spread my legs.

"Good night, I wish you pleasant dreams!"

"Good night, and the same to you," I answered, though I did not know if it made sense.

Behind the bathroom door there were lovely carpet slippers with pink pompoms, so I put them on in order not to get my feet dirty. On the way to the bedroom, I entered the living room for a moment because there was a mirror there, bigger than the one in the bathroom, and I looked at myself carefully. Yes, I was really thoroughly washed, and my skin did not have any damage. I also noticed that the fruit tray was full again, but the species had changed. I decided I would eat them in the morning.

The central place of the bedroom was occupied by a huge bed with two large pillows on one side. I took off my slippers and was about to lie down when suddenly there was a problem: where should my head have been? I thought that if this bed was intended for two people, then most likely their heads were to be kept on two pillows. However, if it was a single, one could lie down the other way and have – depending on the body position – the feet on one or two pillows. The latter solution was even more justified in my situation, considering the fatigue that I felt in my legs.

When I was meditating because I did not want to wake up the Empress in a rather trivial matter, suddenly I heard my mother's voice behind me:

“Good night, honey!”

“We wish you sweet dreams!” my father added.

I turned abruptly, but there was no one behind me. Since I left the door open, I saw that the corridor was also empty.

“Who has said that?” I asked.

“It's us,” answered the left slipper with my mother's voice, whose pompom was shining while saying these words.

“But why...”

“We always speak with the voices that a person using us wants to hear most at a given moment,” completed the right one.

“But how do you know with what voices my parents speak?”

“We have received sound files from the headquarters,” explained the left one.

“From those of the shoe company?”

“Exactly,” confirmed the right one.

The slippers were right; I missed my parents very much, and if only for this reason I decided to have a little talk with them.

“Maybe you know, my love slippers, which way should I lie on the bed? Is the head or foot on the pillow?”

“We do not know,” answered the left one.

“However, am I not the first person you serve?”

“Yes,” admitted the right one, “but from this place we cannot see the pillows...”

“And what do you think?”

The pompoms began to glow pulsing, which probably meant thinking. Finally, the right one said:

“Since legs are the most important, I think you should put your feet on the pillows...”

“Not at all!” the other did not agree. “The most important is the heart. And since it's closer to the head, so you have to put it on the pillow.”

“As you are not unanimous, maybe you could connect to your headquarters and ask there?”

The pompom of the left one began to emit pulsed light again, and the front part of the slipper rose slightly vibrating, which probably meant connecting.

“Unfortunately,” it said after a dozen or so seconds. “In the headquarters there is on duty a rubber boot which does not know either because it always stood in a hall...”

At that moment, a brilliant idea came to my mind. I moved one of the pillows to the other end of the bed, and lay down with my head on one and my feet on the other.

Falling asleep, I thought about this bishop who had wanted to deny me the right to exist: “After all, in vitro does not do anyone any harm, so why should it be forbidden? And now I not only am, but I will live forever...”

THE END OF CHAPTER 4

TO BE CONTINUED (This file contains episodes from No. 1 to No. 117)

FAQ: Is it true that the characters of the novel are moving using teleportation?

The answer: No, it's not true because the teleportation of large objects is impossible for physical reasons. That is why the inhabitants of paradise cover long distances using a different method so far completely unknown on Earth.

FAQ: Will this novel be on sale in bookstores?

The answer: Yes, it will be sold in good bookstores as soon as possible.

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